

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS RELATED TO HOMEWORK

The development of Calgary Catholic's Homework policy involved extensive collaborative consultation from a wide range of stakeholders as well as support from current research and professional leaders in the area of homework. Some of the key questions and information shared in the context of the development process is shared in the following questions and answers that emerged during this consultation process.

At the January 28, 2011 Parent/Trustee Forum, Dr. Cathy Vatterott followed up a district-wide professional development day delivered to staff with a session for School Council chairs and interested parents. Some of the information shared by Cathy in her presentation, including the follow up questions and answers is provided on the following pages.

What is the impact of homework as a contributing factor to student success?

Cooper's (2007) synthesis of studies reported correlations between time spent on homework and achievement from the perspective of the amount of time spent without an evaluation of the quality of the task indicated that:

Grades 3-5	.0	correlation
Grades 6-8	.07	correlation
Grades 9-12	.25	correlation

Canadian Research on homework from the Canadian Council on Learning further indicated that:

- "Active engagement" homework is more likely to be effective to support learning than rote repetition;
- Evidence does not suggest that homework benefits younger students;
- Lower achieving students appear to have the most to gain from homework; and
- Review for a test or quiz has benefits.

## Do all students need homework? (Cathy Vatterott)

The answer to the question “Do all students need homework?” depends on what one believes the purpose of homework is. If you believe the purpose is to reinforce learning or extend learning outside the classroom, then you probably believe that the child needs more challenging homework. If you believe the purpose of homework is to develop independent learners, then you probably believe the child should be able to create his/her own homework. If you believe the purpose of homework is to build the habit of doing homework, then you probably believe all children must have homework.

The idea that some children would not have homework makes many people very uncomfortable. Is it fair that they have less work than other students? But if you believe the purpose of homework is to help students master a set of standards for a grade level or course and the student has done that, then you may be quite comfortable with some students not doing homework.

In standards based systems, homework is often optional. If the student can pass the assessments, they have shown mastery—the homework is merely a tool for those who need it, much like in many college courses. If a student gets 100% on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade spelling test, that student doesn’t have spelling homework. And no, they don’t have extra homework in other subjects.

Most of us could see the logic of allowing an Olympic athlete or a gifted musician to succeed academically without doing homework, because they are honing a unique talent. But if other students are allowed to skip unnecessary homework, they may spend more time reading, learning Spanish or delving into their passion for history, science or art. And isn’t that what educating the whole child is all about?

Parental response at the January 28, 2011 Parent/Trustee Forum on Homework was highly positive. Following the January 28, 2011 Parent/Trustee Forum, Dr. Vatterott provided responses to the questions posed by parents during the session that are shared in the following questions:

***Is there a time or age when kids should have homework? Homework and study habits just get heavier as the kids get older.***

I think grade 3 to grade 4 is a good time to start building the habit of working at home preparing for school. But I don't believe that it is necessary to have work in all subjects to build the habit. I think most schools need to do more explicit teaching of organizational skills and study habits starting in upper elementary grades.

***What is the best way to go about "letting the teacher know" that the homework situation at home is challenging?***

See Bennett and Kalish's book "The case against homework" (listed in the handout). They give a method, specific scripts and sound bites for parents to use when talking to teachers.

***You place much responsibility on the parent. How does the single parent cope with this?***

Actually, I think your primary responsibility is to help your child figure out the best working conditions for doing homework (where, when) (see home study plan in handout). Then you need to stay out of it. (see other answers further down the list). If the child can't complete homework without your help, put a post-it note on it "Catlin doesn't understand this—please work with her and give her extra time to complete this" or something like that.

***What strategies do you have for parents so they are not involved in their child's homework?***

Be busy and bored. Leave the room. After the child has built the habit (by grade 5-7)—don't touch it, don't pack it.

***How do we use homework to develop self-disciplined work habits/better study habits/and learn to organize themselves? / What strategies can be implemented by parents for junior and senior high students?***

Stop making it your job! Detach—you may have to let them fail a course or two, but they must own it. I quit even asking if my son had homework in junior high school, but we set up the expectation that any D's or F's on progress reports or report cards had a consequence at home (loss of privileges etc). This forced him

to look at the bigger picture and worked well all the way through high school. (This was an extremely difficult for me the mom—like breaking an addiction!)

***Project work—how much is too much help and how much is not enough help?***

I think it is okay to help students space out work on long term projects, forcing them to work some each week—students often idealize the amount of time things take. I also think it is okay to help your child organize the project, locate materials or resources and compile materials. But I would also be asking the teacher to show the rubric for what learning the project is demonstrating. If at any time during the project work you are working and your child is not—you are doing too much.

***Is there research on the best time to do homework? Can kids really do math, creative writing with their iPod on?***

Like adults, every child is different. Some children work best right after school, others right after dinner. Have your child complete the home study plan in the handouts to decide the best plan for them. As to whether students can work with distraction, that is a matter of experimentation. For instance, a child may work well with the iPod when doing rote tasks, not so well with more complex tasks.

***How will we decide when a “push” is required to challenge vs. an over-expectation that lead to frustration?***

No magic answer here--only you know your child. I found it helpful to talk to my son’s teacher to find out what concepts he was struggling with. Sometimes the intensity of the frustration your child experiences is a good barometer—whining is not the same as a full blown meltdown.

***When is a meltdown not a diversion, but a sign that more help is needed?***

Again, only you know your child—but to me, a meltdown is always a sign that more help is needed or that the child is overworked. It is helpful to get feedback from your child about the tasks they are struggling with before they get too frustrated.

In addition to the questions posed to Dr. Vatterot during her parent session, the following feedback on two questions asked at the Parent/Trustee Forum in January 2011 is provided below as a reflection of the parental perspective that administrators and teachers may find helpful to consider in supporting effective homework processes that meet the needs of students and parents.

### **1. How does Cathy's research come alive in the new regulation?**

Cathy Vatterott's research supported the district regulation in the following ways:

- Most respondents indicated that the regulation was in line with Cathy Vatterott's research.
- Homework must be meaningful, developmentally appropriate and support student success.
- Homework should be done independently by students and teach them responsibility for their own work.
- Homework should be practice of already learned material and/or engage the students to go deeper into the subject.
- There should be some student choice in projects and other assignments.
- Communication between parents, their children and teachers is essential.
- It is important *not* to have homework on weekends and holidays so that quality family time is ensured.
- Differentiation and learning styles are addressed in this regulation.
- Concerns, questions or suggested changes to the draft regulation included the following:
  - Could the issue of grading be included in the regulation? (This issue is addressed in Exhibit 1)
  - If reading is assigned, it should be considered homework.
  - Could the timelines for homework be weekly rather than daily, especially for high school students?
  - The regulation appears to be contradictory with regard to projects.
  - Some parents feel that more practice is needed when their child is struggling.
  - French Immersion and Programs of Choice are not addressed in the regulation.
  - There was some concern about a limit of two hours of daily homework at the high school level.
  - One person indicated that the regulation was not in line with Cathy Vatterott's research.
  - The regulation continues to allow teachers a great deal of leeway in determining the value and relevance of homework.
  - Enrichment is not defined, allowing subjective decisions on the part of teachers.

## ***2. What are the next steps in your school?***

- Greater communication between parents and teachers through a variety of means.
- What does the district plan to do to support administration in implementing the regulation? How can this regulation be enforced?
- Details and decisions need to be made locally with regard to projects done at home.
- Teachers and administrators will review current practices in view of the regulation and then discuss with parents.
- The topic of homework will be addressed at a school council meeting.
- Implement a feedback mechanism/strategy.
- There must be consistency within grade levels.
- Education around the topic of homework for teachers, administrators, parents and students.
- Teachers need more understanding about students' learning styles and how to accommodate this in their classroom.

**Parent/Trustee Forum January 2010**  
**Discussion Topic: Homework**

The following parent perspectives and responses, collected during the January, 2010 Parent/Trustee Forum, reflect key ideas for consideration by administrators and teachers as they consider homework as a complement to student learning. The district regulation directly reflects many of these key concepts.

**Question 1:** If the best were to happen for your child in the area of homework, what would it look like?

Gems:

- All homework projects are outlined at beginning of unit so parents and students can prepare for individual timelines, needs, etc.
- Homework should complement the classroom studies, rather than be a supplement (i.e., unfinished project, review for exams)
- Homework should not be for PAT's
- Family life should be a focus for our children – after school is for relationships in our families (home is for family)
- Homework should be relevant, specific and enhance learning
- Homework should have flexible completion dates with adequate notice for large projects
- Cap the amount of homework for each grade. Maximum, not a quota.
- Create an environment at home conducive to learning.
- Reinforce the concepts from class.
- Nothing new that has never been seen or done in class.
- Learning how to study
  - No homework for sake of homework
- More coordination between teachers
- Homework skills are developed when they are needed and relevant
- Seen as value and may want to do rather than fighting to do it
- No homework in grades 1-3
- Homework guidelines must be communicated clearly to parents
- No homework on holidays

**Question 2:** What are the issues around timing and scheduling of homework, including weekends and holidays? What would you propose to include in the new homework regulation related to timing and scheduling?

Gems:

- No homework or projects on holidays and long weekends (4)
- Reasonable homework on weekends
- Advanced notice of due dates, assignments and tests so we can practice homework budgeting
- Longer time frames for homework or projects to be completed – teaches children about managing their time and responsibilities as well as allowing time for other activities and “down time”
- Do not assign homework over holidays or on Fridays and due on Monday.
- Need to communicate homework requirements with parents (what is the homework?)
- Teachers need to coordinate homework – amount of homework given, schedule evenly and combine projects across subjects (eg., science project that includes reading and writing).
- Time limit to homework clearly communicated from school to home so that if a certain time limit is reached, homework stops.
- Have the buddy or group work done in class under supervision of the teacher, not as homework.
- Have homework policy done in time to be placed in the agenda. Deadline tends to be the beginning of June.
- Is the homework necessary and purposeful? (2)
- Homework list should be given on a Monday (for example) and the assignments would be due anytime that week up until the following Tuesday. This maximizes the time that a family can help their child
- Using e-board technology to coordinate exams/projects at the school
- Performance evaluations should consider homework practices of teacher
- Homework is shared responsibility
- Flexible to meet learners’ needs and to accommodate families and learner outcomes



**Question 3:** Parents are the primary educators of their children, and as such, have important responsibilities regarding the personal and educational growth of their children. It is recognized that homework is one of the options parents have for inclusion in their child's personal and family time. Parents have a role to play supporting, encouraging, supervising and taking an interest in their child's education as they practice skills at home. What are your thoughts in regards to this description of the parents' role and what revisions would you recommend?

Gems:

- Agree that parents are the primary educators; however, how is it an option?
- Is homework meaningful and what is its purpose?
- The homework expectations surrounding this should be clearly articulated to parents
- There should be an emphasis on practicing skills and a statement that parents should NOT have to introduce new skills at home.
- Disagree with including homework as part of family time when homework is the antitheses, because it is negative family time
- The perception is that this model is based on a family structure that does not reflect the current reality of family structures today
- Support our kids any way possible.
- Parents need the "communication piece" – need to ask what and why of homework.
- Travel can lead to learning.
- Parents reinforce skills learned in school. Implement skills in the car, at the rink, at the store, at home, at the library, at the museum.
- Find a balance for use of and abuse of technology in the home.
- Homework should be individualized
- More quality, less quantity
- Child's personal time should be their own