

## Our Staff Inquiry into Homework led to New Learning

*In our January 2016 Wade King Newsletter, I shared with you the shift we are making from homework (focusing primarily on math, spelling and reading, and often taking the form of a weekly packet) to home learning that is open-ended and student- and family-led. Below, I share with you the specifics of our staff learning that has led us to embrace this change.*

*—Analisa Ficklin, Principal*

Our inquiry into homework began with questions raised by a variety of families and teachers. These questions about expectations and consistency led us to look at our practices across grade levels, and to ask ourselves how these practices aligned to our beliefs about learning, and to research-based best practices.

As we explored the research, several themes emerged. First and foremost, research has never demonstrated a positive link between homework at the elementary level and student growth and achievement. In other words, students who are assigned homework in elementary school do not, in the long run, demonstrate greater learning. In fact, some research has shown negative effects for children, including limiting time for children to engage in family activities and out-of-school learning, and solidifying misunderstandings through practice of skills not yet fully learned. One meta-analysis of research identified that homework in elementary school has about the same effect on learning as summer vacation! This compelled us to explore a change.

The information you shared with us via the homework survey confirmed our concern that homework, especially homework which takes the form of skills-based practice, is not proving effective for many of our students:

- 20% of families indicated that homework is highly frustrating for students, which may mean that it is too difficult. Some other families (approximately 8%) indicated in open-ended comments that children find math and spelling homework too easy.
- 40% of families indicated that homework causes conflict in their families.
- As we expected, opinions on homework vary – some families prefer skills-based homework, while others appreciate inquiry. In terms of parents' wishes for the amount of homework, open-ended comments told us that 8% of families would like more and/or differentiated homework, while 41% indicated that they would prefer little or no homework at all. Within that 41%, many commented on the importance of family time and self-directed learning.

This learning led us to the conclusion that our skills-based homework practices (primarily taking the form of homework packets that emphasize math, spelling practice, and at-home reading) are costing both teachers and students time, without bringing benefits in terms of increased student learning.

Although the research does not suggest that there are benefits to teacher-assigned homework at the elementary level, there are certainly benefits to learning outside of school. We lean on the ideas that are in the research as we make this shift, and are emphasizing regular communication about learning between school and home; encouraging home learning in areas of students' interest; and developing good learning habits in developmentally appropriate ways that teachers will communicate with you over time.

In addition to watching for further communication about home learning from your child's teacher, we encourage you to take a look at the Home Learning Menu on our website. There are infinite ways to encourage and challenge your children to continue learning after the school day ends. We also want to emphasize that for elementary aged children, a great deal of learning happens during unstructured play and through good conversation with family members. I hope that you will take this opportunity to talk with your children about learning at home, and to set up the time, space and routines to support the learning that will be most meaningful to your family!

**Resources for our staff inquiry included the following:**

Bellingham Promise. (n.d.). Retrieved September 1, 2015, from

<https://bellingshamschools.org/sites/default/files/BhamPromiseFlyer2015.pdf>

Cooper, H. (1989). Synthesis of Research on Homework. *Educational Leadership*, 85-91.

Duke Study: Homework Helps Students Succeed in School, As Long as There Isn't Too Much.

(n.d.). Retrieved September 1, 2015, from <http://today.duke.edu/2006/03/homework.html>

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*.

London: Routledge.

Kohn, A. (n.d.). Homework: New Research Suggests It May Be an Unnecessary Evil. Retrieved

November 1, 2015, from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alfie-kohn/homework-research\\_b\\_2184918.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alfie-kohn/homework-research_b_2184918.html)

Protheroe, N. (2009, September 1). Good Homework Policy. *Principal Magazine*, 42-45.

Research Spotlight on Homework. (n.d.). Retrieved September 1, 2016, from

<http://www.nea.org/tools/16938.htm>