



Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

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Well-Designed Homework Time as a Quality-Building Aid in Afterschool

If any children are peering over your shoulder as you read these lines, hide the next sentence from them.

The evidence that homework aids student achievement is inconclusive (Center for Public Education, 2007).

Yet, for many students, not completing homework on time, or completing it incorrectly, can leave them at a serious disadvantage as they try to progress successfully through school. It is also important to note that well-designed homework, instead of just “throwing worksheets at students,” is more likely to have merit and can be a positive connection between school and afterschool programs. Combining well-designed homework with other academic enrichment activities in afterschool can provide a well-rounded package of expanded learning opportunities that contribute to school success and positive youth development.

Homework has maintained a role as a traditional component of the education system over many generations, although it has not been totally proven to be effective as a tool for improving students’ learning. A battle waged in recent decades over the value of homework did not come to a definitive conclusion, leaving both proponents and opponents with research they can cite to support either side of the debate¹. It appears that the presence of homework serves more to forestall a decline in performance (Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000) rather than to advance achievement; however, making homework completion just one element of a broader, comprehensive afterschool program enhances its value.

Despite the conflicted research base, school policies continue to mandate and teachers continue to assign homework. This reality is where afterschool programs must position themselves, regardless of any personal opinions on homework. The general charge of an afterschool program is to help students succeed in school; and if homework is required by the school, then many afterschool programs see homework support as part of that charge. Going a step further is to encourage staff buy-in and enthusiasm for a program culture that embraces homework time as useful and important, rather than a bore and a chore for all involved.

This commitment to productive homework time can be bolstered by a program's recognition that well-designed homework, as part of a broader afterschool initiative, not only can provide benefits to youth but also serve to reinforce some of the desired—and often required—yet hard-to-come-by program goals: (a) homework is a natural link between afterschool and school, (b) homework is a promising bridge between afterschool and families, (c) homework supports principles of youth development that are central to afterschool programs, and (d) homework help can be a hook to engage students in expanded learning and broader opportunities.

Supporting the School Day and Connecting With Teachers

Homework serves as a natural point of connection between school-day staff and afterschool staff, whose roles are parallel yet often isolated. Many school-day teachers do not ask for help from afterschool, or even do not picture the potential for afterschool programming to aid in school-day goals. The practitioner who takes the first step to building relationships with school-day staff can demonstrate that program practices, such as homework support or tutoring, are working toward the same outcomes the school-day teachers hope to achieve.

Once this common understanding has been reached, the relationship can be maintained through intentional and sustained communication. A regular schedule of check-ins via phone or e-mail or in person should be established. Tools such as a homework contract or a homework completion tracking document allow both sides to stay up-to-date without adding additional strain on job responsibilities. By using such tools and scheduling regular check-ins, afterschool staff can more readily ask school-day teachers for help with students' more difficult assignments. In a time when 89% of students stress about homework (Met Life, 2007) this communication builds trust that makes students more confident in the program's ability to be helpful and meet student needs.

In rural Missouri, for example, the West Plains R-7 Before and After School Education program utilizes the regular school day homework planner to track student assignments and facilitate information sharing between afterschool staff and teachers. The planner includes space for both groups to sign and record relevant information each day. The program director also takes advantage of the school district's data system to track student achievement, routinely meeting with teachers when students fall behind. This real-life example illustrates the kind of collaboration and mutual support that many afterschool programs have found to be a critical ingredient in boosting student achievement.

1. See, for example, Ramdass & Zimmerman (2011), Cooper, et. al. (2006), Marzano (2003), for research that supports the use of homework. For research that is critical of homework, see Kohn (2006), Bennett & Kalish (2006), and Kralovec & Buell (2000).

Opening up the avenues of communication between school and afterschool was the focus of a pilot project conducted by the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development during the 2010–2011 school year. This project, funded by the Heinz Endowments, was a partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools and five local afterschool program providers. The partnership developed a set of communication strategies based on research that indicates that formal communication between teachers and afterschool providers supports quality homework time in the afterschool setting.

Linking together on homework can even open the door to more substantive school-afterschool collaborations—one of the hallmarks of quality afterschool programs.

Easing the Pressure Off Families

Students are not the only ones whose stress levels rise with homework; in today's society, with more single parents and more dual-income families, the demands of home life leave little time for parents to offer homework help. Most parents want their children to do homework, and they see the importance of connecting with what their children are doing in school, but dinner time, chores, and leisure activities compete with homework time. An overload of homework also competes with sleep, which suffers as a result for students, not just their overtired parents (Dudley-Maring, 2003).

By providing a structured and supportive space for homework time, afterschool programs can become an ally of busy parents. This program role again opens up an opportunity for communication, in this case with families. The tools mentioned above, such as the homework contract, can include families as participants, and informal conversations about homework can reassure parents that their children are completing assignments, indicate what is left to be done at home with bigger projects or additional assignments, and provide a sought-after link by proxy from the parent to the school day. Through this link, an afterschool program kindles homework's role as a cornerstone to facilitating family-to-school communication as it contributes to parents' understanding of what school expectations are and offers direction for how they can support their children (Perlman & Redding, 2011).

For example, the East Allen Family Resource Center in New Haven, Indiana, requires all staff to speak with parents who come to pick up their students in the program and share information about their students' progress with homework. "We really love the parents who choose to pick up their students from the school. It provides such a wonderful opportunity for parents to see what their child is doing, the environment that is provided for them, and have face-to-face time talking with staff," notes the program director. To reach parents who may not be able to pick up their children in person, staff routinely make phone calls to students' homes to discuss student achievement.

In considering homework support as one component of a family involvement plan, an afterschool program is again making strides in the direction of program quality.

Using Homework Time to Enhance Youth Development

Within the body of evidence that exists about homework, studies have shown that homework does play a role in building skills that equip young people to be more efficient and motivated students and prepare them for 21st century careers. By completing homework, students gain soft skills such as greater self-direction, self-discipline, organization, and more independent problem solving (Protheroe, 2009).

In four charter high schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, such skills are coupled with homework time in deliberate lessons taught through “mini clinics” by Foundations, Inc.’s Prep Zone Plus afterschool program. Mini clinics are quick (lasting about 20 minutes), relevant, and engaging lessons that address a variety of study skills and life skills, from reading for meaning to budgeting to selecting colleges. For students who complete their homework early or need extra assistance with certain skills, the mini clinics provide a robust but palatable lesson. Students feel that they are getting more for their time and gaining skills that will be useful as they progress toward college, careers, and independent life.

From its experience of operating homework-based afterschool programs over the past decade, Foundations has learned that a substantive way to improve homework time and other elements of afterschool is to listen to young people in afterschool settings and solicit and use feedback from school-day teachers, administrators, and parents.

Going Beyond Homework

Quality afterschool programs, even homework-based ones, build out engaging learning opportunities that go beyond homework and offer value-added programming. Often after homework time ends, students attend their choice of enrichment clubs (for example, robotics, chess, art, music, cooking, service learning) to round out their afterschool experience. Research shows that afterschool programs with multifaceted programming are more likely to achieve the greatest academic gains (Pearson, Russell, & Reisner, 2007).

Starting in 2011 and continuing through 2012, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Indianapolis has been working to go beyond homework and infuse academics into regular club programming. Through a grant from the Lilly Endowment and a partnership with the Center for Afterschool and Expanded Learning at Foundations, Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs of Indianapolis has focused on creating a sustainable approach to academically-focused enrichment across seven sites. Staff receive ongoing training on topics such as planning hands-on activities linked to academic standards, project-based learning, STEM, and literacy in out-of-school time. In turn, staff are supported by leadership teams to implement meaningful enrichment activities into a range of existing programming, from art projects to basketball tournaments.

The enrichment opportunities offered on top of homework support help students see how they can apply what they’re learning to real-life situations, build confidence through the mastery of new talents or completion of significant projects, and understand the connections between what they are doing now and their future possibilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Relationships with the school day, connections to families, youth development practices, and using the attraction of completing homework to engage students in expanded learning and broader opportunities are enhanced with a positive approach to homework.

Below are a number of key recommendations to make homework a positive component of quality afterschool programs:

- *Set up systems for communication between afterschool instructors and school-day teachers that keep everyone up to date. Do the same with families.*
- *Create a physical environment that encourages homework completion—include quiet space with individual desks for assignments that require deep concentration, bigger tables for study groups to gather, couches for catching up on reading, and a resource area with reference materials.*
- *Build in opportunities for youth choice. Do some students study better when they can listen to music through headphones? Can students seek help from peers or adults? Can they choose which assignment they want to work on first?*
- *Keep homework time active, even when all the assignments are done. Offer short, self-directed activities such as brain teasers, board games, or activity centers that students can enjoy while still reinforcing some academic and 21st century skills . . . not just worksheets.*
- *Sometimes the best homework help is just directing students to the right resources they can employ to answer a tricky question. Refrain from giving them the answer; instead, empower them to find it on their own.*
- *Be aware of families' homework preferences. Some families want their students to complete as much homework as possible in the afterschool program; others may want to work with their children on some assignments at home, too.*
- *Keep groups fluid, not static. Depending on the students, the assignments, and the day, change grouping arrangements frequently.*
- *Expand your own view of homework as a positive element of expanded learning. Remember that you are a role model, and students may adopt your attitude toward homework.*

If afterschool programs—and their school partners—use these recommendations, dogs all across the country can experience fewer stomachaches from the proverbial eating of the homework.

For More Information

SEDL Afterschool Training Toolkit – Homework

http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/about_toolkits.html?tab=homework

Homework Sharing Tool (You for Youth web portal)

<http://y4y.ed.gov/Content/Resources/DCID20110713104426.pdf>

TASC Resource Brief

https://www.century21me.org/staticme21/academ_achiev/Research%20on%20Homework%20Help.pdf

What Research Says About the Value of Homework: Research Review

<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Instruction/What-research-says-about-the-value-of-homework-At-a-glance/What-research-says-about-the-value-of-homework-Research-review.html>

Homework Time, Afterschool Style

Homework Time, Afterschool Style. (2009). Mt. Laurel, NJ: Foundations, Inc.

Homework Zone Program Pack

Homework Zone Program Pack. (2009). Mt. Laurel, NJ: Foundations, Inc.

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