

# The Goldilocks Dilemma: Homework Policy Creating a Culture Where Simply Good Is Just Not Good Enough

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**Abstract:** Throughout the decades of educational reform cycles, the value of homework has proven either meaningful or meaningless depending on the reforming framework. Questions about homework as simply busy work or knowledge work, mere content distraction or content extension, ambivalence toward importance, or discipline of character all cloud any conclusions about homework, good or bad. Our research is a case study of one rural, high school that has created a No Excuses Homework expectation that is embedded in the school's culture. Focus groups of faculty and students, interviews with both the principal and assistant principal, combined with quantitative data reveal a cultural shift within the organization. Three themes emerge as contributors to a cultural transformation around homework expectations: initial and ongoing professional development exploring the creation of meaningful homework assignments and consistent quality expectations, continuous support for students and parents in meaningful homework standards, and informed stakeholders regarding quality standards and consequences when standards are not met. The results of this study reveal that high expectations for homework quality can have an impact on student academic performance and motivation for meeting quality standards. Much of the criticism directed toward homework policies is the disjointed, low expectations that marginalize its impact on learning and the value in assessing student progress. Integrating homework as a valued cultural experience may offer a possible answer to some of its common criticism.

**Keywords:** No Excuses Homework, Rebel Advisement Period

The dilemma of Goldilocks is much the same as that currently found in high school classrooms regarding homework. Is the homework porridge too hot? Is the homework porridge too cold? Or, is the homework porridge just right? It might be argued that the temperature does not matter—throw it all out. Much of the homework literature focuses on who owns the outcome (teacher, student, or parent), and, ultimately, whether the outcome values anyone (Kohn 2007; Thomas 1992; Xu 2010). Academics' and pundits' attitudes (Kohn 2007; Cooper 2001) about the value of homework range from it being highly relevant to totally useless. Given this range of attitude, advantages from homework as an instrument of pedagogy remain elusive. Teachers see homework as a necessary expansion of daily instruction, parents expect it, principals view it as a catalyst to higher test scores, and students understand it as an inconvenient truth about their busy lives (Anderson, Mead, and Sullivan 1986).

Essential school stakeholders value homework, but its implementation and unity of purpose remain unclear. If there is a fragmented policy agenda on a local level, national policy reform has shown even greater confusion around the question of homework and its impact on learning. Following World War II, Arthur Bestor, a leading critic of Dewey's progressive influence on

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education, championed greater rigor—a “back to basics” movement (Bybee 1997). The launching of *Sputnik I* in 1957 demonstrated that it was in the nation’s interest to change education, and the United States adopted much of Bestor and his supporters’ strategy of rigor with a core of science and mathematics (Ravitch 1983). Homework played a significant part of the “basics” movement. The belief was that extended learning through homework would accelerate learning (Bybee 1997; Cooper 2001).

The social unrest and reform of the 1960s and 1970s took the focus away from a narrow, complex curriculum. Schools became a marketplace that offered a variety of choices to students, attempting to be all things to all stakeholders. A buffet line of learning crowded out homework, which was considered a distraction (Cooper 2001).

By 1983 the poor performance of America’s schools was once again identified by politicians as a risk to America’s national security. *A Nation at Risk* was a manifesto with a plan to rehabilitate schools and produce academically competent citizens. The expectation for students was to compete globally as business leaders, technology innovators, and lifelong learners (Ravitch 1983; Mondale and Patton 2001). *A Nation at Risk* openly condemned schools for not assigning enough homework: “The amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased, 2/3 report less than an hour a night” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 19).

Authored and revised by the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, Goals 2000 followed *A Nation at Risk*. Goals 2000 crafted eight broad goals for education reform and adopted a comprehensive approach, assuring that all students in America would have the opportunity for a successful life (Austin n. d.). Because the Goals 2000 agenda was broad, open to interpretation, and lacked accountability standards, it fell prey to ambiguity and cynicism (Austin n.d.).

The next sweeping reform, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of the George W. Bush administration, took the approach that the federal role in education is to expect every American school to describe success by what each child can accomplish regardless of social class, ethnicity, or intellectual ability. While homework is not directly addressed, a review of the NCLB government Web site shows that homework is an expectation and there is a belief that homework makes a difference (<http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/how/parents/homework-tips/edlite-slide001.html>).

Arguments about the value of homework continue to rage. However, it is the purpose of this study to examine how one high school has used a homework policy to help its efforts to improve student performance. Research that is skeptical if not condemnatory (Kohn 2007) of homework present sound and reasonable evidence that, poorly implemented, homework can be-

come counterproductive (Vatterott 2009; Bennett and Kalish 2007). No expert, however, has called for homework’s total elimination.

The purpose of this article is to examine one Midwest high school’s commitment to student academic excellence. Commitment did not come from proclamations, board action, or state or national intimidation. Instead, commitment for academic excellence became a cultural transformation that began with homework accountability from all stakeholders and continues to shape academic decisions. Even as the popularity of assigning homework has risen and fallen through the decades at this Midwest high school, it remains a pivotal learning tool. A No Excuses Homework reform, a teacher-driven shift in culture, galvanizes efforts to improve student academic performance.

The No Excuses Homework reform began with the high expectation that “you don’t get to choose not to do homework.” Equally important was the expectation that homework would not only be completed, but completed with quality. The reform developed the following structures that encouraged the completion and quality of homework.

- Homework was clearly defined as assignments that require time outside the classroom to reinforce and/or enhance instruction.
- Students were required to revise or redo work that did not meet the basic level of 70 percent.
- Zeroes were not allowed. Students were given after-school tutorial time in PASS (Performance Achievement System for Success).

The following levels of interventions were established. These consequences gave substance to the high expectations that teachers held for comprehensive quality in student effort.

- Level 1: Teacher/student conversation and a new due date
- Level 2: Teacher/parent conversation and a new due date
- Level 3: Teacher/counselor conference and an e-mail to the principal
- Level 4: Administrator/teacher/student conference and follow-up call to parents; the student is assigned to Saturday PASS
- Level 5: Parent/teacher/student conference; develop an action plan
- Level 6: Crisis intervention; all are involved to decide further action

The levels of homework intervention provided stakeholders the opportunity to communicate expectations and demonstrate resolve.

The research for this study addressed the following four questions that helped guide an understanding of

how one high school coalesced around homework and accountability.

1. How does faculty perceive the benefits or risks of the homework policy?
2. How do students perceive the risks of the homework policy?
3. How do administrators perceive their role in the implementation and oversight of the homework policy?
4. How does a No Excuses Homework initiative influence organizational culture?

A Midwest high school was selected as the case site for this study because it overcame the threat of losing state accreditation. Previous to this study, student failure rates were high due mostly to missing homework assignments that were recorded as zeros. Teacher frustration regarding poor student motivation created an environment of mistrust and resentment among faculty, students, and the students' families. Discipline referrals reflected the increase in missing assignments and student apathy toward their academic success. Graduation rates were abysmal, with only a 68 percent completion rate. Students enrolled in remedial classes were at 71 percent of the student population. Parent participation was at a low of 48 percent. The principal, through his interview, revealed that teachers were giving zeros in the hopes of helping students understand the consequences of not doing acceptable work. Instead, "we [were] letting students off the hook by accepting incomplete or missing work." He went on to explain that "many students were leaving our high school completing few, if any, challenging assignments." It became clear to the school leadership and faculty that something had to change.

A focus group consisted of teachers from different content areas and a range of teaching experience. As a means of investigating the four questions presented earlier, four teachers participated, discussing their involvement with the homework initiative. The faculty group was all female with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 18 years in the Midwest high school. The faculty taught science, social studies, and math courses for freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. A second focus group of five students offered another perspective on homework and the elevated standards for completion. Students represented the freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior classes. Some students were in college preparation courses while others were in the vocational track. Finally, the principal and assistant principal, both males, were interviewed. The triangulation of data from the three informant groups offered an opportunity to look at how the actors saw their different realities. It also provided insight into how each group constructed reality from different contexts.

Both the faculty and school leaders responded to the same focus-group interview protocol. The same slate of questions for these stakeholders provided an opportu-

nity to offer potentially different perspectives on the homework initiative. Students responded to a modified protocol from that used for teachers and principals, but the concepts regarding their involvement remained the same. Pseudonyms identify focus-group participants.

## Findings

Three themes became apparent after analyzing the focus-group discussions and principal interviews. First, a culture of accountability in the school was overtaking ambivalence toward homework. Second, the quality of student work improved with support and honest feedback from faculty and home. Finally, a sense of empowerment among stakeholders continues to sustain the No Excuses Homework initiative.

Teachers participating in the focus groups were positive about the No Excuses Homework initiative. They felt empowered by the school's administration, who offered changes in the standards for assignments completed outside of class. In a separate focus group, most students felt that the initiative had a positive impact on their school work and on their future beyond graduation. Both administrators believed strongly that they were at a place in the initiative where they needed only to stay out of the way.

Teachers talked at length about the adoption phase of the No Excuses Homework project. Teachers voiced a sense of helplessness as they reflected on how it was before they began to make changes in their approach to homework. Becky, a science teacher, reflected on the years prior to the initiative.

We were tired of giving Fs on homework assignments that weren't turned in, turned in late or poorly done if they were turned in. Students knew they didn't have to be accountable.

Something had to change. One teacher explained that when she investigated missing assignments, she found that the same students were spending a year in class without turning in any homework. Many teachers were not assigning work outside of class because they felt "it just isn't worth the effort" to follow up with students. Prior to the initiative, other teachers took the approach that students can make a choice to complete or not to complete the assignments. There are natural consequences for choosing the latter.

Teachers felt that the tipping point over homework accountability came during a professional-development conference that some in the focus group attended. The conference revealed a way forward for making all stakeholders accountable for homework. One teacher in the focus group explained that teachers were not expected to be passive conference goers, instead:

The principal gave us roles when we attended the conference. Some were to be advocates for new ideas, while others were to challenge that advocacy. That was really

important because you can come away blinded by all the wonderful things you hear at conferences and not think about reality.

Returning to school from the conference, a core group of teachers with the full support of the administration and the local board of education began structuring homework strategies and policies. This structure began shifting the culture from everyone's homework ambivalence toward everyone's homework accountability. Kim, a social studies teacher, explained the initiative in direct terms.

Homework must be completed with an effort from everyone, beginning with faculty, continuing with parents, and ending with students; homework assignments were to be clearly stated and engaging; It was to be graded with feedback that promoted learning; students had the right to succeed, and they should have added support when it was needed.

Another teacher shared an important first step with parents, providing them with initial awareness about how expectations were going to change.

At our fall open house with parents, all of the teachers outlined for them the importance of homework and that everyone had a stake in the success of students. We told them that we would notify them immediately if assignment were missing.

The teacher focus group agreed that most of the parents wanted to be informed. Some parents, however, did not want to hear from the school about missing assignments, and even some faculty pushed back that it was too much trouble. However, once teachers began consistently calling, e-mailing, or texting home, parents and students took their responsibility seriously. Turning in homework on time was routine. Kim also indicated that she "wanted a balance. We called parents to report when their student's homework was awesome."

The students interviewed agreed that holding them accountable was also making a difference. "It didn't matter much to me if I did my assignments or not. When my mom was called, I really felt bad. I didn't want to let her down."

Another student told a similar story. He was in the vocational program, hoping to become a computer technician. For him the No Excuses Homework program was transformational.

Before I got to high school, I had the reputation in my family that I wasn't going to finish school, and it was true. I wanted to quit and start my life. When I got here [to high school] teachers expected me to do my work and supported me with extra time in school to do it right. I found out that I could do the stuff they wanted me to do, and I was pretty good at it.

Not all the students saw the No Excuses Homework policy as significant to their experience. Sherrie resented

the extra support and extended time needed to complete the homework. For her, the argument was that:

I feel I do my homework on time and do the best job I can—the first time. I don't think it's fair that others get extra time and help if they don't turn in work. That's not how it works in life.

Regardless of their experience with the No Excuses Homework program, students held strong feelings that it had an impact on them personally and on their school success.

In their interviews both the principals believed that teachers' buy-in and their commitment to student success made the greatest impact on the changing culture. "I can't pay them [teachers] for their extra efforts with our students, but I have shifted duties so they have no additional responsibility other than their classroom."

The principal also adjusted athletic practice times, beginning all practices an hour later after school. The hour gain before practices was assigned to additional support for students completing homework or preparing for exams. Teachers were available during that time to mentor students in their efforts. He strongly believed that students received limited support at home with their assignments. Parents worked evening shifts or lacked the content background to offer effective help. The principal revealed that "many of our students work evenings late into the night or they have their own family responsibilities. We need to offer them additional help and keep them engaged so they have access to success."

Further supporting the impact of the No Excuses Homework initiative, the principal shared that "the number of students assigned to extra help for below-basic work has decreased by 68% from 2009 through 2011." The program became fully implemented in the fall of 2009. He went on to say that "the number of students receiving Ds has decreased by 57% and Fs by 72% in the first semester of 2009. Grades of a D or F dropped by 63% and 75% respectively for the second semester of 2010." He credits much of the drop in low performance to the high accountability standard for completing class assignments.

The school policy provides an environment that supports a culture where homework is valued and its accurate completion is a standard and no longer a goal. The school's master schedule provides common planning time for department faculty to meet regularly. These regular meetings allow teachers to examine curriculum, share ideas, and make decisions. They find overlapping homework assignments, streamline learning benchmarks, and address common assessments students must complete.

Another policy revision provides a Rebel Advisement Period (RAP). The advisement time carves out 45 minutes a week from the schedule, allowing students time to connect with a faculty member who offers them

support with homework, learning-goal achievement, and collaboration with parents. RAP offers a significant underpinning for the No Excuses Homework effort.

## Discussion

No Excuses Homework grew from dissatisfaction among faculty about the ambivalence students demonstrated toward completing assignments and the poor quality of assignments. Moving from ambivalence to productivity and changing a school's culture presents a paradox (Sergiovanni et al. 2009) of competing interests between those who see change as credible, if not necessary, and those who feel change is disruptive and destabilizing to the status quo. Bolman and Deal (2008) express this paradox as old-timers passing along "time-tested values and traditions. If newcomers succumb, an organization risks stultification and decay; if old-timers fail to induct new arrivals properly, chaos and disarray lie ahead" (Bolman and Deal 2008, 263). Leadership in this study had to find a balance in their cultural paradox that supported the change for more accountability among students, faculty, and parents but respected existing culture. This study found that the principal and his assistant were adept at finding the correct change levers to push and pull. They offered a path for faculty to find alternatives to the homework traditions and practices that did little to provoke motivation or learning. Professional learning, shared literature on best practices, and a national conference provided that initial tipping toward reforming sluggish homework expectations.

The cultural shift began with small incremental steps taken by a few committed staff who were nurtured and encouraged by the leadership in the building, the superintendent, and the board of education. These teachers were able to demonstrate meaningful results from the homework they consistently received from students. Their results and commitment gained traction with colleagues. The homework inertia today, started by a few faculty, drives many academic decisions and scheduling policies for the school.

Parents and students became key stakeholders in changes with homework accountability. Vatterott (2009) characterized children today as products of a democratic upbringing. Parents are less restrictive today with a child's behavior than parents 30 years ago. A patriarchal authority does not drive families as it did in the past. As a result, Vatterott tells us, "much of what [homework] is completed beyond the classroom doors is done in proximity to the school" (2009, 28). Such programs as RAP, after school tutoring, and mentor scheduling all demonstrate the school's respect for Vatterott's assertion. Students recognize that homework is now a requirement and not a mere suggestion. They experience personally how accountability for homework prepares them for meaningful class participation and they raise

their semester grades. They see potential in themselves that they had not experienced before.

While the No Excuses Homework reform has had measurable success, how well the initiative can be sustained remains to be seen. As veteran teachers close to the initiative retire or move to other schools and find opportunities for advancement, will their replacements continue the vision? If a leadership change occurs, will new ideas overtake and replace the old? Will the paradox of change explained earlier reach an imbalance throwing off scheduling and tutoring support for homework? Teacher leadership and sustained professional development continues to safeguard student achievement gains through the No Excuses Homework initiative. Teachers have invested in efforts to transform a school culture that accepts no excuses. Everyone is accountable. High expectations for homework quality and accountability have credibility with faculty, students, and parents. Such credibility will sustain the program well beyond personnel changes.

## Conclusion

While this remains the story of only one school's efforts to make homework the cornerstone of student achievement and to transform culture, it is a story that can be replicated in other high schools. Low-performing high schools become particularly vulnerable to accountability standards. These schools must restructure to meet state academic standards. Even with the No Child Left Behind Waiver, standards are not disappearing. Instead, states are encouraged to join the Common Core State Standards, which may bring greater depth and expectations to the classroom. Homework, with all its critics, can serve as a means to achievement ends. Homework must become embedded and sustained within the school's culture. It will not succeed if only randomly applied and intermittently supported by leadership. The Goldilocks dilemma is not a question of too hot, too cold, or just right. The homework porridge results from a culture where all the cooks and diners are committed to a tasty outcome.

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