

The Case for P.R.E.P. Work

There have been provocative books written in the past decade criticizing the concept of homework. I read and took to heart a couple of them including *The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn and *The Case Against Homework* by Sara Bennett. I experimented with the idea of limiting homework and having our middle school teachers, students, and parents keep diaries of how much time was spent weekly on work outside of class. My conclusion is that some teachers and classes demanded more outside work, but that homework is a necessary and important part of building lifelong learners.

During the past couple of years when I went through my experimentation stage and assigned little work to be done outside of class, I made some discoveries. It was true that students “liked” the classes (and maybe the teacher) better when they did not have to complete assignments outside of class. It was also true that the teacher could monitor the students’ work more closely when the students were doing their work in the classroom. But, two things bothered me. One was that there was not as much information or skill-building occurring during the course of a school year. The other was that students and parents placed more of the burden of teaching and learning on the teacher, and the students were taking less responsibility for their own learning. They were *expecting* the teacher to convey information and draw higher-level thinking out of the student, all in the course of forty minutes a day.

So, this year I became more of a traditionalist again. And, I was honest with my students, right from the beginning. I explained that they would be better off, despite heavy backpacks and “free” time being spent on assignments, if they did some of the preparation work outside of class and left the processes of application and synthesis to our time spent together. I told my students that I view homework as having one (or more) of four purposes: practice, reinforcement, extension, and preparation. So, on the board in my room, students can view their P.R.E.P. assignments. They are not fooled into thinking that this is not homework. I just hope that they see that there is a purpose for the assignments, that learning does not and should not stop when they leave the school building, and that we can do more together if they take more responsibility for their learning inside and outside of the classroom.