



Indicator: Teachers regularly make “interactive” assignments that encourage parent-child interaction relative to school learning. (5180)

Explanation: The evidence review confirms that all teachers promote regular parent-student interaction by assigning activities that require mutual engagement. Keys to designing successful interactive assignments is make certain the home activity’s learning outcome supports and is aligned to the school learning outcomes. Providing parents and caregivers with explicit training on how to support their learners at home serves to increase the learners’ time and attention to all of their homework, not merely the parent student assignment. Building the capacities of parents to support their learners directly positively impacts those students achievement.

Questions: What expectations have been set for all teachers assigning interactive parent with student at home activities? How will the principal determine that the teachers align the at home activity’s learning outcomes with the classroom’s learning outcomes? What types of training will the school provide to parents and caregivers to enable them to support their students learning at home?

Why Parent Involvement in Education is Essential

Getting parents involved in their children’s educational pursuits can be a challenge for teachers, especially in disadvantaged communities when parents may not have the time or capacity to truly help their students with their homework or academic skills. Although they may be interested in what their children are learning in school, some parents lack the literacy, content knowledge, or English language skills to effectively help their children complete their homework (Trumbull, et al., 2000). Others may have work schedules that conflict with the evening hours when their children are completing work at home (Bennett-Conroy, 2012). These barriers cause some parents to feel upset because they do not know how to help their child (Van Voorhis, 2003; Bennett-Conroy, 2012). These struggles are exacerbated when the assignment instructions are not clear or when the teacher has not shared concerns about the child (Bennett-Conroy, 2012).

What is important for both teachers and parents to know is that a lack of skills or limited time are not barriers to building connections between parents and children around learning at home. Involvement in learning at home is one of Epstein’s six key types of parental involvement that schools are encouraged to foster (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis, 2003). While it may seem that learning at home is outside of the school’s responsibilities, teachers can put in place simple structures and interactive assignments that foster stronger parent-child relationships around academics. Small changes with little effort on the teacher’s part can make a big difference in the engagement of their students and parents.

A parent does not need to walk a child through all of his or her assignments to help make their homework experience more effective. As Van Voorhis (2003) writes, parents can be involved during homework time in a variety of ways, including motivating their child, helping them understand the assignment, eliminating distractions in the

home, encouraging good study habits, or simply monitoring that their child is working. Redding (2006) shares that homework "...can be a focal point of constructive family interaction... [that] extends formal learning beyond the school day" and provides opportunities for both teachers and parents see how and what a student is learning (p. 15).

Van Voorhis (2003) found that students who talk to their parents about their school day and who enjoy discussing what they have learned are often higher achieving than their peers. Parental interactions during homework time were also found to have great benefits on the academic performance of students with learning disabilities (Battle Bailey, 2006). Most notably, in one study, parental involvement was shown to reduce the negative effects of low socioeconomic status on student achievement by seven percent (Van Voorhis, 2003). Teachers were seen to benefit from increased parental involvement as well; those who made more efforts to involve families in the process of learning at home had more positive attitudes about the efficacy of parents in general in regards to helping their children at home (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

What Teachers Can Do to Facilitate More Parent Engagement

Small changes in teacher behaviors can have a large impact on how welcome parents feel in the classroom, how informed they are about their children's progress, and how engaged they are in school activities. Instead of allowing messages to be filtered through students, teachers should be more open to communicating their expectations for children and parents directly to the parents themselves (Van Voorhis, 2003). Parents who are especially interested in becoming more involved can become classroom volunteers, which not only allows them to be more engaged with their child and build a relationship with the teacher, but it also gives them an opportunity to learn the material being taught and bolster their own skills (Trumbull, et al., 2000).

Another way to involve parents in the learning process is to ask for their participation on homework. Homework is an important way for children to build skills, especially when it is directly tied to what was taught during the school day and when students receive feedback soon after they submit an assignment (Redding, 2000). Homework assignments, if carefully designed, are also

a great way to incorporate real-life application to academic concepts, which gives parents more context and experience from which they can help their children (Van Voorhis, 2003).

What are Interactive Assignments?

Interactive homework assignments are specifically designed for children to work with a parent or other family member at home to complete the assignment. Instead of a daily worksheet for skills practice, interactive assignments are assigned less frequently and at longer time intervals to allow time for the family to get involved (Van Voorhis, 2003). As part of interactive assignments, teachers include clear instructions about their expectations, as well as how the parent or adult should be involved; some assignments also require a parent signature or feedback form to acknowledge participation and solicit their opinions (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Van Voorhis, 2003; Bennett-Conroy, 2012).

Because these types of assignments are not designed to utilize a parent's content knowledge or literacy skills, the engagement piece focuses on how all parents are able to contribute. Formal schooling or knowledge is not required for parents to complete their part of the assignment with their child (Van Voorhis, 2003). Instead, parents simply support and engage with their children while completing an interactive assignment; these types of assignments may ask families to: "conduct science experiments; share ideas and obtain reactions to written work; conduct surveys or interviews; gather parents' memories and experiences; apply school skills to real life; or work with parents or other family partners in other ways" (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001, p. 186). These types of engaging assignments not only make the students more interested in completing their homework, but they also make the process more appealing for parents whose children are excited to share their learning with them (Van Voorhis, 2010).

Benefits of Interactive Assignments

Researchers from multiple studies of interactive assignment programs noticed improvements in parent participation, rates of homework completion, report card grades and standardized tests in both English and Math, and teacher attitudes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis, 2003; Van Voorhis, 2010). While the programs

studied did not necessarily increase the time requirements for homework assignments, just their content and instructions, parents self-reported spending more time with their children on their homework than they had done in the past (Battle Bailey, 2006; Van Voorhis, 2010).

Van Voorhis (2010) writes about the increases in parental self-efficacy that interactive homework assignments can bring; “By their design of homework and guidance and invitations offered to parents, educators play key roles in whether parents feel confident and effective in their interactions with their children on homework” (p. 4). Bennett-Conroy (2012) expands on the benefits of interactive assignments to families:

... Invitations by the teacher and child to assist with homework create an expectation that parent homework involvement is desirable and normative. Also, all parents are asked to assist with homework, [so the teacher] provides guidance on how parents should assist with homework, and the successful completion of the interactive homework assignment gives parents a sense of confidence and mastery in being involved in promoting their child’s educational achievement (p. 91).

Interactive homework assignments certainly take more time for teachers to plan than making copies of worksheets or assigning questions from a textbook. However, the benefits to teachers, parents, and students alike make them worth the effort. Van Voorhis (2003, 2010) suggests that teachers may want to use the summer as a time to plan ahead for these in-depth assignments. However, teachers who are working collaboratively across the staff and with the administration to support increased and improved family engagement may be able to plan these interactive homework programs in cohesive and interdependent ways, thereby reducing the burden on and increasing the benefit for any one instructor.

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