
AFTER-SCHOOL HOMEWORK HELP

A Resource Brief

PREPARED BY POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

If you ask the site coordinators at any three after-school projects how they approach homework help, you are likely to get three different answers. One may employ only certified teachers to supervise homework completion, hoping to ensure high-quality instruction. A second may use noncertified staff, or group leaders, to manage a quiet and orderly study hall where children work on homework independently. The third project may use young adults to coach children in problem solving.

All three projects might well represent the “best” way to organize this important part of after-school programming. Why? Because schools use homework to achieve a variety of goals that promote students’ academic success, and each goal demands a different approach to homework help.

The practice of providing homework help after school raises many important issues about the amount of time that should be devoted to homework, who should provide the assistance, how students should be grouped, whether homework should replace extracurricular activities in programs that wrap around the school day, whether the program can or should ensure homework completion, and how to engage parents in homework completion. This *Resource Brief* does not define TASC’s policy on those issues. Instead, it offers concrete examples of ways that TASC projects can support the homework goals of their host schools, which is a fundamental need in after-school programs regardless of the policies that guide their choices.

Although each strategy works well in its context, each also raises potential concerns. We present both the promise and the challenge of these practices so readers can judge how each strategy might work in their schools and after-school projects.

Homework Goal 1: Keeping Parents in the Loop

At some schools, homework is a tool for letting parents know what their children are studying and how well they are performing in class. Consider the homework policy of C.E.S. 64 (Bronx), which

collaborates with New Settlement Apartments to offer an after-school project. According to Principal Nancy Alvarez, “Homework is a contract [among] teacher, parent, and child.”

The school’s guidelines call for students to receive a prescribed number of minutes of homework every night, determined by grade level, and for parents to help their children complete the work. During the after-school homework period, students begin their assignments under the watchful eyes of group leaders. However, parents are expected to review homework every day after the children get home so that the parents understand their children’s progress. Alvarez and her staff explain to parents that they are a vital part of the homework team and that no amount of help from others can substitute for the families’ roles.

In other schools that actively involve parents, group leaders sometimes send “incomplete homework” forms home and to the students’ teachers to indicate that, although a student worked hard, he or she could not finish the homework. The form is intended to let parents and classroom teachers know whether the student’s level of effort was appropriate and whether he or she needs more help.

Potential challenges: The time burden and risk of creating unnecessary concerns

What are the downsides of this strategy? It certainly places extra demands on after-school staff, who must find time to communicate with parents and regular school staff about students’ homework status.

In addition, several site coordinators and teachers at TASC-funded after-school projects said that written communication from the after-school project might raise parents’ fears about their children’s progress, even when the intent is simply to keep parents informed. A parent also might interpret a note to mean that the child misbehaved. For this reason, after-school staff say it’s a good idea to make brief personal contacts with parents to reassure them and make certain they understand the message.

Homework Goal 2: Extending Professional Instruction

Some after-school projects view homework as an opportunity for students to receive extra instruction by certified teachers. Their rationale is that students who struggle to master academic content will benefit from coaching by professionals who know exactly what kinds of challenges students experience. This is especially true at schools where many students and parents are English language learners and therefore may need extra help to understand and complete homework.

The after-school project operated by Samuel Field/Bay Terrace YM&WHA at PS 115Q, the Glen Oaks School (Queens), takes this approach. There, the site coordinator assigns certified teachers who understand the school curriculum to give expert instruction during after-school homework sessions. The coordinator hires just a few teachers, carefully chosen for their tutoring skills as well as their ability to keep the homework room quiet and productive. Groups of students from the same grade cycle through the homework room, where the teacher offers individual instruction to students who need it. Other students work independently while the teacher supervises.

The after-school project at The Family Academy (P.S. 241, Manhattan) also views after-school homework help as time for extra learning under the supervision of certified teachers—the final academic sprint of the day, rather than the beginning of the recreational or enrichment session. At this project, teachers from the regular school day sign on for an extra hour of duty from 4 to 5 p.m.

Together with interns from a college teacher-education program, these instructors help students understand the academic substance of their homework. Teachers stay with their own homerooms and use any strategy they deem appropriate to complete the day's instruction. On some days, they add a few extra minutes of direct instruction to finish a lesson that was cut short during the school day. On other days, they give students time to complete a project or a set of practice problems. In each case, the extra hour helps students solidify their new knowledge and skills.

In a less formal way, teachers at the School of the Future (Manhattan) extend their academic day into the first hour of an after-school project operated with Educational Alliance. On a volunteer basis, teachers stay in their own classrooms and tutor after-school participants who need extra help.

What Are the Long-Term Effects of Homework Well Done?

A review of 17 studies completed since the 1950s indicates that:

- Homework completion generally improves student achievement. This is true for boys and girls and across ability levels. The benefit appears in class tests and grades more than on standardized tests.
- Older students benefit from homework more than younger ones.
- Frequent, short homework assignments produce better results than long and/or less frequent ones.

—From Harris Cooper (1994), *The Battle Over Homework*. Thousand Oaks, CA : Corwin Press.

Potential challenge: Teacher and student burnout

After-school coordinators generally respect teachers' expertise, and most try to include the school's certified staff on after-school teams. Teacher burn-out is always a potential problem, however. By 3 or 4 p.m., many teachers are ready for a change of pace and may not be able to muster the same level of energy and expertise that they show during the school day. In addition, students may get tired of working with the same teacher for an extended day or may be reluctant to do so if the teacher-student relationship is negative during the school day. Several teachers interviewed for this *Brief* said that some students blossom under the supervision of a fresh instructor after school—sometimes in ways that a school-day teacher could not or would not elicit.

Homework Goal 3: Practicing or Applying New Skills

A popular form of homework involves rote memorization or routine application of basic skills, so that skills become virtually automatic. Homework assignments based on this principle are intended to show teachers whether students have learned a lesson adequately and also to provide more practice opportunities.

The TASC-sponsored project at P.S. 24 (Brooklyn) takes this approach to after-school homework sessions. Group leaders employed by the after-school partner, Educators for Social Responsibility, don't re-teach a subject after school

if students have trouble with their homework. Instead, they do their best to help students practice their lessons independently. Teachers from the regular school day then use their students' success in completing homework to gauge whether the teachers should spend more time on a topic during the school day.

If a student makes an honest effort but does not finish the work during the time allotted after school, group leaders send home a letter that describes how the student approached the work and asks parents to follow up directly with the classroom teacher if the student has not mastered the content in the next few days.

Potential challenge:
Failure to define roles clearly

Most adults who work in schools are eager to help students, and the intuitive approach to helping is to explain and advise. It may be difficult for group leaders to resist the impulse to provide assistance when students are struggling, even if they have been asked not to do so. Regular school teachers and after-school staff must define the role that after-school staff will play in homework help to ensure that they don't overstep the agreed-upon limits. This is especially important if the principal fears that after-school staff are not adequately trained in teaching academic subjects.

Homework Goal 4:
Using Homework Time to
Promote Critical Thinking

Some projects view homework help as a time for students to learn independent thinking skills, rather than the skills embedded in the homework itself. At P.S. 198 (Manhattan), for instance, the after-school partner, Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center, views homework period as a time for academic enrichment. After-school staff recruited from colleges and high schools receive weekly training in how to promote their students' problem-solving abilities. Instead of explaining the steps to solving an assignment, after-school group leaders teach the general skills of thinking through a problem, organizing work effectively, working collaboratively, and using available resources to

find answers. (For further information on this approach, please see the *Sources of Information* box on page 4.)

Potential challenge:
Failure to complete the homework

Most parents prefer that their children spend time on enrichment skills *only* after the basic homework is completed. These parents say that if homework isn't completed during the after-school session, there may not be time to finish it at home—or it may get done without guidance from adults who understand the language and content. For that reason, it is important for parents, teachers, and after-school staff to agree on a shared plan for helping children meet homework goals.

What if the School's Homework Goals
Aren't Clear?

If goals aren't clear, the after-school coordinator should meet with school leaders and staff to discuss their instructional and non-instructional goals for homework.

Instructional goals may include:

- Practicing skills independently or applying them in routine ways
- Preparing for a new lesson
- Applying a familiar process to new content
- Integrating lessons learned across several content areas
- Interacting with peers to solve problems

Non-instructional goals may include:

- Communicating with parents about students' learning in school
- Developing students' ability to work independently
- Fulfilling school policies or public expectations
- Engaging community members as partners



Although all TASC-sponsored after-school projects allocate some time for homework help, there is no single practice or amount of allocated time that works in all schools. The effectiveness of each strategy depends on the host school's goals for homework and the way in which staffing patterns, scheduling, and other strategies are adapted in response. Using a supportive group leader to supervise this activity is appropriate in a school that wants help keeping students focused on drill and practice, for example, but it's the wrong approach if the school assumes that homework is a time for extra assistance by expert teachers. And it is fine to enrich homework time with critical thinking exercises if the school wants students to complete some assignments at home, but perhaps not at schools where parents expect homework to be finished by pick-up time.

As the after-school initiative evolves, TASC will continue to define its policies on the role and shape that homework assistance should take. But the vital need to connect after-school homework with the goals of the host school will not change. The practices presented in this brief offer solid ideas for making that connection.

Sources of Information on Homework Help

Cooper, H. (1994). *The Battle over Homework: An Administrator's Guide to Setting Sound and Effective Policies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc. This 60-page volume summarizes research on homework, addresses issues of time and process, and recommends guidelines for schools to adopt. It could form the basis for a conversation on how an after-school project can support a school's academic agenda.

Epstein, J. (1992). *TIPS: Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning. This comprehensive manual aims to help schools develop partnerships with parents that promote children's academic success. It provides sample activities for language arts, science, and health.

Paulu, N. (1995). *Helping Your Child with Homework*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. This online publication answers commonly asked questions about the usefulness of homework and provides guidelines for how adults can help. It is available at www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/homework.

Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center (1999-2000). Description of training techniques to prepare high school and college students for employment in after-school programs. *Citigroup Success Fund for Promising Practices: A Collection of Write-ups Documenting Promising Practices in TASC-funded After-School Programs*. New York: The After-School Corporation. Available from TASC's Research and Education Policy staff at (212) 547-6950.



The After-School Corporation and Work/Family Directions have developed a program to help elementary and middle-school sites create homework clubs. Using a turnaround model, site coordinators receive training and then pass their knowledge along to staff at other sites. The training covers topics such as: setting up the homework environment, selecting materials that facilitate homework help, making homework help a learning experience, hiring and training appropriate staff, keeping students motivated, and communicating with schools and parents.

In 1998, The After-School Corporation (TASC) launched an initiative to improve the quantity and quality of after-school programs for students in the public schools of New York City and State. Through grants to nonprofit organizations that sponsor school-based projects, TASC now serves students in kindergarten through twelfth grade at almost 200 sites. This Resource Brief shares some of the promising practices used by TASC projects. We hope that it helps your planning, program improvement, and further exploration into the world of after-school services. For more information on the Resource Briefs or the companion Tool Kits, which contain checklists and other practical materials, contact TASC's Research and Education Policy staff at (212) 547-6950 or www.tascorp.org. This brief was prepared for TASC with support from The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.