

We often hear about the topic of homework. But the term “homework” is often confused with academic rigor. You can hear kids in the halls saying, “Man, that teacher sure assigns a lot of homework.” We all can speak of teachers in our past that seemed to assign work just for the sake of keeping us busy. For some families, the amount of homework a student is assigned is equal to “how hard their classes are.” And many parents hope that being busy equates to learning. After all, every parent wants to make sure students are challenged. But rigor and homework are two very different things.

**We should evaluate success at school by the quality of the instruction we provide to students and the engagement of students in the learning process.** This leads to developed and clear communication between home and school to meet a students’ needs. In terms of classroom teaching, we view an academically rigorous curriculum as one that has high levels of student engagement and learning. Educators are flexible in the methods used while we teach—adapting lessons to increase understanding, grouping and ungrouping students within classes to enhance their knowledge, and creating lessons that drive understanding rather than regurgitation of factual knowledge. Curricula needs to be rigorous because it adapts to student needs—not because it rigidly adheres to a textbook or tool.

This spring, students will again take state tests. In Wisconsin, there are mandated state tests as part of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS). This includes the Wisconsin Forward Exam (grades 3, 4, 8, and 10), PreACT Secure (grades 9 and 10), the ACT with Writing (grade 11), and Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) for students with disabilities. While we are mandated to maintain this process, we use this data as a measure of our systems. It is one of many ways to gather data and assess how much our students understand on a larger scale, which will better inform our teaching moving forward. It can also provide us with information about whether or not we are meeting the demands of rigor.

We believe that skills practiced at home (“homework”) can help to develop stamina and develop communication with the home. But homework should never be a new skill learned without the educator present. Research states that there is no conclusive evidence that homework increases student achievement across the board. Some studies show positive effects for some and negative effects for others (Kohn 2006; Trautwein and Koller 2003). And homework appears to have more positive effects for older students who benefit more from homework than younger students. This is most likely due to younger students having less effective study habits and being more easily distracted (Cooper 1989). However, skills practiced at home can help develop fluency in a skill that will make learning much easier. An example is practicing math facts or independent reading. As a student gets older, time to research or complete classwork becomes appropriate.

So, instead of hoping that school would send our students more homework, let’s hope for more rigor and communication...for lessons that develop critical academic and thinking skills which help to develop future leaders that are problem-solvers. The River Valley School District has an incredible tradition of developing strong academic and resilient leaders that can lead our region in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Loren Glasbrenner, District Administrator  
River Valley School District