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PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF HOMEWORK ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AT A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

Cody Huisman

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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Document Origination Statement Digital Commons @ NLU

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The "program" can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this program evaluation was to gain a clear understanding of how homework supports or deters the achievement of students, specifically the overall grade a student attains. This document details how students and teachers at a suburban Middle School perceive homework and its effect on student learning. The findings were that many students received failing grades in classes, primarily due to missing homework. The program evaluation used mixed methodology. Using survey and focus group results in conjunction with current literature, the conclusion revealed a need for homework policies that would support student learning without punishing students' grades. Students shared that they have busy lives and much of the homework is challenging for them to complete on their own. Teachers shared feelings of how subjective homework policies and grading can be, and they agreed that policies should be designed with this in mind. The recommendations made were for policies that are more consistent, and that grading policies do not put too much emphasis on homework as part of an overall grade.

PREFACE

There are topics in American education that have been an essential issue at every school, and homework is one of those topics. Homework is an important part of the culture at Lee Middle School. The majority of the staff uses it as a tool to enhance learning. Homework is also viewed by many staff members as a way to build responsibility and work ethic. Conducting a program evaluation questioning a practice that is perceived to build these skills was challenging. The experience has given me an opportunity to refine my leadership skills in several areas. Three of these leadership skills are building strong professional relationships, being a change agent, and guiding and focusing research on a topic that is built into the educational value system of many people.

Strong professional relationships require a lot of trust by both parties. I have worked as a part of the Lee team for two and a half years and have tried to strengthen relationships between myself and our staff. The surveys and group interviews asked challenging questions that invited people to be reflective about their beliefs and practices. This process would not have been successful without trust. This reinforced my belief that there is no successful school culture without great professional relationships among the adults in the building.

There is very little course work or reading that can prepare one to be a change agent. The evaluation of homework practices at Lee was conducted with change in mind. Teachers and administrators knew that this process might lead to new homework policies at Lee Middle School. Change is difficult, especially when change means less homework or decreasing the value of homework in an overall grade. Changing homework policies at

Lee is perceived by many as "making things easier." Being a change agent means communicating with people and sharing research-based information about the effectiveness of homework. The focus of the evaluation was on student achievement.

The final leadership lesson I learned was making sure that the evaluation process had a sharp focus on improving student achievement. Everyone involved needed to know that we were doing surveys and group interviews to gather as much information as possible in order to make an informed decision on homework policies at Lee. The objective and focus of the entire process was to come to an agreement about using homework effectively to improve student learning. The process started in May 2014, and it is still ongoing in the spring of 2015. I need to communicate and remind people that we are doing what is best for students and parents. As a school administrator, I will be evaluating programs for the rest of my career. They will not all result in a formal academic report, but they will involve student-centered decisions. The experience of evaluating the homework program at Lee Middle School has given me opportunities to grow as a leader that I would not have had otherwise. I am thankful personally—but more thankful for the impact it will have on students.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation is to investigate the effects of homework on student achievement at Lee Middle School. The primary goal of education at all levels of instruction is to create opportunities for student learning, not only academic but also social and emotional. Learning is defined as a relatively permanent change, due to experience, in either behavior or mental associations (Ormrod, 2003). Educators must present material that is developmentally appropriate and scaffold it as children make their way through school. Lessons are delivered in many different ways; they can all be successful if taught with focus and consistency (Dean et al., 2012). Developing learners should be presented with lessons that match their ability level (Wormeli, 2006). This experience should and does include practice, which is required to build and create a learned behavior (Carr 2013; Dean et al. 2012; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). At Lee Middle School this practice takes place in class in the presence of a teacher or at home—usually both. This study will take a deeper look at the role of homework within the curriculum at Lee Middle School by examining the extent to which it supports student achievement.

Currently, Lee Middle School employs thirty-three classroom teachers in grades seven and eight to support an enrollment of 405 students. There is no schoolwide homework policy; teachers have the autonomy to set their own guidelines about homework. Some teachers, for example, assign work daily, while others assign small amounts with little or no routine. An informal inquiry prior to this study revealed a great deal of variance in grading policies, with some teachers crediting homework as low as 10 percent of a student's overall semester grade, some as high as 50 percent, and many

type and weight. Teacher practices of accepting late work vary as much as grading percentages. A large number of the faculty members assign a zero when a homework assignment is not turned in. Though most teachers accept work late with a deduction for each day it is missing, some accept late work without deduction, and a few do not accept it at all. This set of individual teacher practices is confusing to students, and it sends an inconsistent message about the importance of homework. A uniform policy could be helpful in meeting the needs of both the teaching faculty and the student population.

Rationale

It will be useful for Lee Middle School to examine current homework policies and practices as a school. One anticipated outcome of this study is an improvement in professional practice: making things better, rather than rendering summative judgments (Patton, 2008). The staff itself must determine whether it is doing what is best to support students' learning. All stakeholders may benefit if a more uniform homework policy is created that is clear and understandable to the stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents). As assistant principal of the school, I believe that such uniform practice will enhance students' overall experience at Lee, especially for the many learners who may not have the assistance or support for school to excel with homework that affects their class grade.

Like many schools Lee Middle School has a significant number of students who live in poverty, as evidenced by the large number of families who qualify for free and reduced lunches. At Lee the staff seeks ways to help these children overcome the obstacles that prevent them from reaching their full potential. The failure to complete

homework often represents a barrier to academic success. Research has shown that practice is needed to reinforce skills (Wolfe 2001; Ormrod 2003; Dean et al., 2012). However, many Lee students do not have a space at home that is conducive to doing homework. They might not have an adult in the house who can assist them with the work. They may live in a household where parents work late at night, making the student themselves the caregivers for younger siblings. Thus, the assigned homework is often not completed. The missing homework assignments create bigger problems for students when they come back to class the next day (Beegle & Ellis, 2007).

Homework can create a false conception about the knowledge a student is retaining. Homework can be completed with a friend, by a parent, or through the students themselves copying answers directly from the textbook. None of these instances would show what that individual student is learning. Students who always turn in their homework may have a grade that is inflated because of homework that is weighted heavily in the grading system. At Lee Middle School staff members often encounter situations in which grades are poor due to missed homework assignments, yet the students know the material. Conversely, grades are sometimes inflated solely because of homework completion. Many students are allowed to make up incomplete assignments during the last week of the quarter in order to receive an acceptable grade. There are numerous stories of students at Lee who missed out on activities, athletics, and other social experiences because they did not do their homework and therefore received a failing grade. This reduces opportunities for learning. This system could be improved.

Failing grades in classes at Lee frequently relate to homework that has not been submitted, according to informal inquiries. Twelve eighth-graders last year were not able

to participate in the graduation ceremony because they had failed classes and were required to attend summer school in order to progress to high school. Between the two grades at Lee, eight students were retained. Failure to complete homework was one of the key reasons for their retention. Some of the retained students had met the standards on the state assessment in sixth grade. Does it make sense to have students repeat a grade when they know the material and can demonstrate that skill on standardized assessments? Evaluating current practices can lead to policy and practices that will be better for students.

Goals

This program evaluation will be guided by two goals: 1) to provide data that show what current homework practices are at Lee, and how they impact achievement for students, and 2) to learn more about how failing grades due to missed homework assignments affect students in noncurricular dimensions of school. The goals require that teachers, students, and administrators at Lee Middle School critically view how homework supports student achievement.

Goal 1: To provide data about current homework practices at Lee and how they impact achievement for students.

Teachers completed a survey about their current homework practices in their classrooms. The survey contained questions about the type of assignments given, their frequency, the weight of homework in the grading, and late-work policies. The purpose of the survey was to gauge how homework supports student learning. Students were asked both through a survey and a group interview how their perceptions of homework support what they are learning in class. The survey and group interviews captured their

thoughts about how homework relates to students' grades, as well as their feelings about potential consequences for students who do not complete homework.

The data gathered through this evaluation will inform the school's thinking about the wisdom of creating a homework policy at Lee Middle School. Comparing current research-based literature on homework with teacher perceptions and practices will help determine whether changes can be explored. The research will show how homework impacts student grades, both positively and negatively.

Goal 2: To learn more about how failing grades due to missed homework assignments affect students in noncurricular dimensions of school.

The number of students who fail due to lack of homework completion will be determined by analyzing individual student grade reports. The evaluation should show how this affects participation in other activities such as graduation ceremonies, sports, academic competitions, and promotion to the next grade.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study is: What is the impact of current homework practices on student achievement at Lee Middle School? To answer this question, the evaluation will investigate the fairness of grading policies, whether assignments are effective for learning, and whether teacher homework policies are preventing students from participating in nonacademic activities that can enhance their overall school learning experience. Secondary questions include:

- What are teachers' and students' perceptions of the purpose of homework at Lee?
- What are the unintended consequences of current homework practices?

 What is the outcome of homework on student achievement, in terms of both grades and retention?

Demographics

Maple Creek Consolidated School District #93 (MCCSD #93) is comprised of students from a diverse community with a rich history in a large metropolitan area. There are approximately 2,800 students enrolled in the district. Of the 405 students currently enrolled at Lee Middle School, 49% are white, 44% are Hispanic, 3% are black, and 3% are Asian. The student poverty rate of 48% is calculated as the percentage of students in the school who receive free and reduced lunch. Thirteen percent of the students are reported as living with a disability, and 4% are English language learners. Schools use standardized tests as a gauge to report their academic progress. Fifty-nine percent of the Lee Middle School students met or exceeded the state standard on the reading portion of the most recent administration of the state achievement test in 2014, and 67% met or exceeded the math portion.

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review explores recent research about homework from scholars and practitioners in the field of education and examines literature that focuses on the value of homework, the quantity of homework, the feedback given to students from teachers, and best-practice grading policies. This literature will be used to help guide the program evaluation of homework practices at Lee Middle School.

To investigate the effects of homework on student achievement at Lee Middle School, it is essential to first gain an understanding of how the practice of giving homework fits with the curriculum, schedule, and overall belief about teaching within the school. Homework is an important contributing factor in increasing student achievement (Carr 2013; Dean et al. 2012; Cooper, 2007). There are other factors that must be considered, including lesson design, grading, the amount and purpose of homework, and differentiation of homework by ability, culture, and income level. All will be addressed in this evaluation.

In this section, research on the purpose of homework is identified and discussed in terms of authenticity and design for the support of student learning. The discussion includes research into the amount of homework, teacher-written feedback, grading, and penalties for not doing homework. Finally, consideration is given to how homework factors into the success of students living in poverty and whether it has been shown to support or hinder this population of learners.

Purpose of Homework

The effects of homework on student achievement are not entirely clear (Dean et al., 2012). Studies differ in how questions have been worded and how the term "achievement" has been defined. Although one would think that the main purpose in assigning homework is to increase student learning, some studies show a positive effect on student achievement, while others show little or no correlation (Kohn, 2006). Agreeing on a definition of achievement is difficult. A clear definition of the term is the deciding factor in researching the effectiveness of homework and has created a conflict among the leading researchers in the field. Cooper (2007) conducted a meta-analysis in which he reported that 70 percent of various studies found that doing homework was associated with higher achievement (Kohn, 2006). Some educators and researchers define achievement in terms of (high) grades, while others define it as scoring (high) on standardized tests (Kohn, 2006). Cooper (2007) cited twelve studies in a meta-analysis of research on homework; eleven found positive associations to an improvement in grades or standardized tests, while one showed a negative link.

Improved grades, test scores, and learning are not the only purposes of homework. Teachers who send work home to be done outside school cite the benefits of instilling a good "work ethic" into young learners (Dueck, 2014). Peltier (2011) found that homework has been used to encourage parent-child communications, to fulfill administrators' expectations for rigor, and to punish students for poor classroom behavior. Others have stated that homework can help build time-management skills across a broad range of areas, especially those that contribute to developing a sense of responsibility in the student (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Cooper has stated that the

nonacademic benefits of homework include greater self-direction, greater self-discipline, better time management, and more independent problem solving (Carr, 2013).

Other research suggests that there are academic benefits to be gained from homework (Dean et al., 2012). Those benefits generally take the form of improved academic scores, although Kohn (2006) states that there is no way to show homework's effect on actual student learning. Other critics point out the challenge of assessing whether or not a student is learning responsibility or gaining a better understanding of the value of hard work (Vatterott 2009; Kohn, 2006). There is no significant correlation of homework completion to the above-mentioned worthy values. It has been shown that homework can have a negative impact on the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students (Vatterott 2009; Dueck, 2014). Many have noted the barriers to completing homework for students of households living in poverty (Carr, 2013).

Effective Homework

The effective use of homework in the instructional program engages practice that supports learning objectives for the lesson or unit. Few would argue that "busy work" that merely requires students to search for answers from a textbook has a positive effect on student learning. Some research posits that student completion of homework is usually predictable by the type of assignment that is sent home (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). According to this study, students' engagement drops with lower-level thinking questions that involve searching and finding an answer in a textbook. According to Vatterott (2009), assignments that allow students to think critically and generate their own answers or ideas are more likely to be completed. Homework completion increases when students are emotionally engaged, allowed to give their opinion, solve a problem, compete with

others, use their imagination, or be creative (Vatterott 2009, 104). The author finds that assigning homework that is engaging is important; however, valuable learning will not take place with engagement alone. Aligning homework to learning objectives is critical.

Dean et al. (2012) state that homework should be given as needed to support essential learning, and it should link directly to those skills needed to master learning objectives. Classroom teachers should be designing lessons around essential questions, and homework should also be designed with these final objectives in mind. When teachers design homework to meet these specific goals, more students complete their work and benefit from the results (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

Vatterott (2009) points out that routine assignment of daily homework may be done to please adults who want to make sure that students are working hard or for teachers to ensure that they collect enough grades to fill the grade book. Vatterott (2009) believes that homework should never be used for new learning. She also asserts that "busy work" does little or nothing to reinforce existing knowledge. Homework should be used to help teachers formatively assess how students are progressing. Doing "busy work" (such as finding answers in a book) does nothing to demonstrate what a student knows or has learned. Homework should be a guide for informing teachers about what a student knows or understands (Carr, 2013). Homework should never be used as a punishment, a technique that likely sends the message that homework is an undesirable task (Dean et al., 2012).

Amount of Homework

Homework that is repetitive and that does not require higher-level thinking results in little additional learning beyond what could have been done with a lesser amount in

class. Vatterott (2009) notes that teachers have discovered that the rate of homework completed increases when the teacher assigns less work (108). Smaller amounts may be good for learning, whereas too much homework can have a negative impact. Cooper (2007) states that a strong relationship between homework and achievement was demonstrated with seven to twelve hours of homework per week.

Critics believe that students spend too much time doing school work outside school and that they do not have enough time to enjoy leisure activities or family time (Kohn, 2006). Students, and increasingly parents, have expressed frustration over the amount of time spent on homework (Rauch, 2004). Some teachers assign homework as a way to demonstrate a high degree of academic rigor. Thus, many teachers are afraid *not* to give homework, for fear of being perceived as "easy" (Vatterott, 2009). More homework may give the appearance of being in a "tough" class (Vatterott, 2009).

Feedback on Homework

Teacher feedback is essential to making homework more meaningful to students. Students' motivation to complete work is increased when they know teachers are reading the work and giving them feedback that is specific. Specific teacher feedback demonstrates to students the importance of the homework assignment (Vatterott, 2009). A grade alone is not sufficient feedback to inform a student how well he is doing and to motivate him to try harder. Written feedback from the teacher is more likely to promote student learning (Dean et al., 2012). Written feedback is motivational because it is authentic communication between the teacher and student; number grades alone do not communicate as effectively (O'Connor, 2002). Written feedback from the teacher conveys that the work assigned has purpose, value, and importance both for teacher and

the learner. If homework is important enough to be assigned, it is important enough to be graded and commented upon. Students should always receive corrective feedback on assignments for growth and learning (Knore, 1996).

Feedback can take many different forms, such as grades, completion grades, general comments, and specific comments. Certain kinds of feedback can produce negative results. For example, a common method used to encourage students to complete homework is to assign low grades early in the quarter when work is not turned in correctly. With this negative feedback the teacher may hope that the student will be motivated to work harder (Dyrness & Dyrness, 2008). However, a poor grade on homework may discourage the student or it may not be mentioned until the end of the quarter when it is too late to fix the situation (Guskey 2000; O'Connor, 2002). Failing grades look bad for both the teacher and the student. Rather than an exercise in compliance, homework can be an opportunity for teachers to formatively assess students' understanding of course objectives. Students need to practice newly introduced skills. Used in this way, teachers can reteach by giving feedback to homework that shows a lack of understanding (Dyrness & Dyrness, 2008).

Grading

Not everyone agrees about how homework should be graded, and it is not uncommon to find a variety of homework expectations and practices in operation within a district—or even a single school (O'Connor, 2002). When determining a final grade, teachers and administrators at Lee Middle School credit homework's impact in a range from nothing to 50 percent. Research has found that, on average, schools and teachers count homework as one-third of an overall final grade (Knore, 1996). To provide some

direction for teachers, schools must identify the function of homework: does it show responsibility or obedience? Or is the purpose of a grade to show students' progress toward academic goals? Vatterott (2009) asserts that a grade should reflect learning over demonstrating responsibility and other valued behaviors.

The difficulty in crediting homework toward a final grade is that it is not possible for teachers to know whether the work was done by the student, with another student, by a parent, or whether it was copied from a peer or taken from a source on the Internet.

More teachers in the United States count homework toward a final grade than do those in Japan, Germany, or Canada (Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Suskind, 2012). Counting homework as a large part of a final course grade encourages cheating and the avoidance of even minimal standards of performance for the student; both are detrimental to learning.

Receiving poor grades on homework can have a negative effect on students' internal motivation. Grades are often subjective and can vary greatly among teachers. As discussed earlier, homework completion can count for as much as 50 percent of the final grade in some schools and as little as 10 percent in others. This means that a student who has perfect scores on all course tests could fail in one school and get a B in another (Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian, 2011). This variation suggests that failing a student as a result of poor homework grades or trying to motivate her using lower grades may have a negative impact on her desire to achieve in school.

Low grades typically distance students from their desire to learn, while making teachers work harder to bring the students' confidence back to its level when school started (Guskey & Bailey 2001; Wormeli, 2006). Grading practices must be fair.

Teachers should not rely on homework to demonstrate whether a student understands the curriculum (Wormeli, 2006). Homework can be effective if it is used to assess student progress as well as to enhance the main objective of a lesson.

Homework Policies—Late or Missing Work

Students do not always complete homework on time. Some frustrated teachers will not accept late work, hoping that students will know that they "mean business." Vatterott (2009) asserts that this approach often results in the same amount of missing work, more zeroes, and even more frustration for the teacher as the number of failing students mounts. Many teachers at Lee assign zeroes for missing homework. A few zeroes or F grades can lower students' grades for the quarter significantly. Low grades as punishment for not completing homework can distort an overall grade to the point where it does not give the teacher or parent a true picture of the student's understanding of the material (O'Connor, 2002). Many schools and teachers justify giving zeroes by saying that they cannot just give student credit for doing no work. Dyrness & Dyrness (2008) argue that teachers should accept late work and avoid giving zeroes since such a practice creates an incorrect measure of the student's knowledge. They believe that grades should reflect knowledge of the material, rather than a measure of forced behavioral compliance. One way to avoid the trap of damaging a student's grade beyond repair is to use a minimum-grade system (setting a minimum number to be assigned instead of a zero when a homework assignment is not turned in) (Carifio & Carey, 2009). Many teachers set 50 percent as the minimum grade for homework, meaning that a student cannot get anything lower if an assignment is not turned in. Conversely, if a teacher regularly assigns zeroes, some students' grades drop so much early in the quarter that they have no

hope of earning a passing grade for the semester. Part of the reason behind minimum grading is to prevent students from getting such a low grade that it would be impossible to recover (Reeves 2000; Carifio & Carey, 2009). Minimum grading helps to keep students motivated as a quarter or semester goes by (Guskey 2004; Carifio & Carey, 2009). Student engagement leads to increased curiosity and learning; it is also a key factor in homework completion.

Making sure students are engaged and motivated helps the completion of homework and enhances learning (Vatterott, 2009). Teachers who will not accept late work end up having some students who do no work at all. Not only are these students losing a desire for learning, they are falling further behind by not gaining new knowledge or skills. There is no motivation for a student to complete homework for which he has already received an F (Dyrness & Dyrness, 2008).

Many students have poor home environments for studying, or their parents cannot help them with their homework (Vatterott, 2009). Typically, these are the same students who struggle to get their work turned in on time. Not only do such students have a home environment that is not conducive to study, they may feel undervalued when their teacher gives them a zero and then does not require them to complete assigned homework.

Low Income Students and Homework

Completion of homework is largely dependent on the environment and the support that a student receives when she is at home (Kohn 2006; Vatterott, 2009). Dueck (2014) points out that many students living in poverty are not overly concerned about receiving a zero for not completing homework. This often results in a low final grade and missed opportunities to gain new knowledge or practice skills that would enhance

learning. For many students living in poverty, completing homework is not only difficult, it can become frustrating when they return to school to find out that they will be penalized. Besides a low or missing grade, students might be held in from recess or other school-based events that help address their social-emotional needs. A positive school experience is especially important for students in poverty, who are the most in need of additional support and guidance. This is true for both elementary and high school students.

Educators need to be cognizant that many parents do not have the knowledge or skills to support a child who has to do secondary-level homework. One study of Mexican-American parents found that they wanted homework for their children but that they could not provide support once the level of schooling surpassed the parents' educational level (Azmitia, 1994). This is a challenge in many homes, since 22 percent of American children currently live in poverty (NCCP, 2014). Parents in low-income households are often less familiar with the curriculum and may not feel as comfortable as parents who have finished high school or college (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

All students, especially those living in poverty, should be exposed to high-quality instruction while in class and homework designed to enhance the knowledge and skills they have been exposed to in class. According to Krashen (2005), homework can be used to support low-income students, who need more exposure to print materials. These students often live primarily in an oral culture; however, school success correlates with print culture. Teachers can expose these students to the print culture by getting them excited about reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure cannot be a high-stakes event

tied to a grade or a book report. Such practices introduce an element of force that takes away the element of choice and freedom, which is detrimental to learning.

Summary

Research on homework has been done on grading, penalties, the effect of homework on low-income students, feedback, and authentic homework. The research is not conclusive when it comes to the effect of homework on student learning. It is difficult to arrive at an agreed-upon definition of student achievement.

The review of literature showed that there are research-based strategies to assign homework effectively in schools. Reasonable amounts of homework are appropriate and will avoid overloading students' lives outside of school. Homework is more effective when assignments are authentic and support the objective of the lesson and when it does not include work that students are unable to do. More learning takes place when specific feedback on homework is used in a timely manner, rather than a grade that comes later. Homework should not make up more than 10 percent of a final grade. Grades should demonstrate mastery of concepts, not responsibility and compliance. Assigning penalties for late or missing work is damaging to all students, especially those living in poverty. Homework can be beneficial to learning, but only when designed with a specific goal in mind.

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

For this program evaluation data was gathered using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The purpose of the evaluation was to appraise current homework practices in order to make changes where needed. The process encompassed all stakeholders who either do or administer homework daily or weekly. The intended users of this evaluation are all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and administrators (Patton, 2008). Quantitative data was gathered through surveys. Teachers were asked how they administer and grade homework. Students were asked for their perceptions and opinions about the purpose and value of homework. Qualitative data was gathered using small group interviews of teachers and students.

Participants

Participants in the study were teachers and students at Lee Middle School. The teacher survey and follow-up group interview were both completed by staff members who volunteered. The teachers in the group interview were a mix of grade level (seventh and eighth) and subject areas.

Students

All students were given the opportunity to take the survey. Students were asked whether they would like to volunteer in a group interview. Interviewees were asked to comment on the student survey findings during the group interview along with other questions to gain their perspective.

The interview groups were selected to give a range of experiences with homework. It was decided that seventh- and eighth-grade students would be interviewed

in two separate group interviews. Students were carefully selected with the goal of both academic and racial diversity. There were both males and females on each panel. There were equal numbers of Latino and white participants, representative of the demographic breakdown at Lee. Teachers were asked to nominate students who were outgoing, honest, and could think critically. Each interview group was filled with two different types of students, one group that generally does the homework and another group that does not turn in the homework all the time. Each group met in the assistant principal's office for one hour.

Teachers

Thirty-three members of the faculty completed the online survey. Upon completion of the survey, all the teachers were invited to participate in the group interview. Teachers were asked to volunteer after taking the survey online. Eight different staff members volunteered. Five were able to participate on the day that the interview was scheduled. Each teacher was asked to identify himself by a letter assigned to him and encouraged to not use another teacher's name at any time. Teachers from three of the four academic subjects (English language arts, math, and social studies) were represented.

The teacher group was designed around the same principles as the student groups. Teachers were recruited from both seventh and eighth grades, with a goal of securing teachers who assign much homework and ones who do not. The group met in the assistant principal's office for one hour. The questions were derived using the topics discussed in the literature review; some questions emerged during analysis of the survey data.

Data Gathering Techniques

Four types of data were collected. They include individual teacher homework policies, individual student grade and assessment reports, surveys, and interview data. Individual teacher homework policies

Homework policies were collected from each teacher at Lee. The policies were sorted and broken down into categories based on the frequency with which homework is assigned, the homework's impact on the final grade, and treatment of late work. The teachers' homework policies were categorized along with survey results and interviews to help clarify current homework practices at Lee.

Individual student grade and assessment reports

Students' grades were pulled from PowerSchool administrative software. Final grades were examined to determine whether they were reduced because of homework noncompletion. This assessment was done to find out how much of an effect homework has on a grade. In conjunction with this grade analysis, students' standardized test scores from NWEA's MAP test and past state standardized test scores were examined. *Surveys*

Individual surveys were given to all teachers and students. The surveys were administered using Survey Monkey. Teachers answered survey questions that focused on aspects of homework such as the amount of homework, type of homework, grading, teacher feedback, and late-work policies. They were asked how often they assign homework, how it is scored, the percentage of students who turn in assignments, the purpose of homework, its relation to lesson objectives, homework's effect on student achievement, and respondent views on accepting late homework. The survey had a

comment section for each question to give participants the opportunity to add information to their answers. (See appendix A for teacher survey.)

Students surveys contained only closed-ended questions. The goal in surveying students was to gain an understanding of their perspective of homework and its benefits to them. Students were asked how many days a week they receive homework, how much time they spend completing homework on average, how they feel that homework aligns with learning objectives, and their perspective on how homework helps or hurts their final grade. The survey was conducted through Survey Monkey and utilized a Likert scale. (See appendix B for student survey.)

Group interviews

Teachers and students were given the opportunity to participate in group interviews of four to six participants. Questions were open ended, covering a wide range of ideas and perceptions about current homework practices at Lee Middle School.

Students were asked to conceal the name of each teacher when describing a classroom situation. Students almost always said "my teacher" or "he or she" when using pronouns, rather than simply "he" or "she." At no time during the interview was a name used by any of the students. Participants were given the chance to elaborate on answers from the survey. (See appendix's C and D for interview questions.)

Data Analysis Techniques

Four different types of data were analyzed. These were individual teacher homework policies, individual student grade and assessment reports, surveys, and interview data. The four different groups of data were analyzed to understand the possible causes and effects of student achievement at Lee Middle School.

Individual teacher homework policies

Individual homework policies were collected from teachers. The policies were analyzed for differences and commonalities. The data were separated by categories such as homework grading percentages, type of homework given, and late-work acceptance. This compilation of teacher policies provides a framework for analyzing student grade outcomes.

Individual student grade and assessment reports

Student grade reports were analyzed to find the correlation between a student's final semester grade and her average assessment score in the class. Along with analyzing a student's assessment average in the class, nationally-normed assessment data was used in comparison to that student's overall semester grade. Scores identified as being outside the norm yield another data point to compare a student's GPA with test score assessment data to determine whether homework completion may have affected the grade.

Teacher and student surveys were conducted through Survey Monkey.

Quantitative data was compiled and sorted for patterns. Information from the teachers' homework policies was combined with teacher and student survey data to create the teacher and student group interview questions.

Group interviews

Surveys

Student and teacher group interviews helped to clarify survey data and identify common themes emerging within the student and teacher interviews. Selective coding was used by searching for statements that fit preselected themes (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008).

SECTION FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Information was gathered from surveys completed by students and teachers, group interviews with students and teachers, student grade reports, and individual teacher homework policies. One of the two goals of the program evaluation was to answer the question: What is the impact of current homework practices on student achievement at Lee Middle School?

This section will use a combination of teacher's homework and grading policies combined with individual grade reports of failing grades to provide an understanding of the role of homework in the lives of students at Lee. Students and teachers took surveys. Questions were centered on the purpose of homework, the amount of homework, feedback given on homework, and grading practices. Group interview questions were written using issues derived from the literature review along with questions that emerged from the analysis of the survey results. Findings will be presented first from the teacher homework policies and student grade reports, followed by surveys and group interviews.

Data Findings

To understand the current state of the effect of homework on overall student achievement at Lee Middle School, individual teacher policies and student grade data were collected from the 2013–14 school year. The student data analyzed were individual grade reports of twelve selected students. These twelve were students who were required to go to summer school or repeat seventh grade due to failing grades.

Individual teacher homework practices

All teachers at Lee Middle School were asked to share the current homework practices used in their classes. Twenty-five of thirty-five faculty members turned in a syllabus that they give their students at the start of the year; the rest summarized their own homework policies through email. The factors examined were homework's percentage in the student's overall grade and late-work policies. The analysis revealed practices covering a wide spectrum.

The value of homework as part of an overall grade ranged from 10 percent to 50 percent. This percentage makes up a part of a student's overall grade in a class. The rest of the grade is made up of tests and quizzes, projects, in-class assignments, and labs in some classes. The majority of the teachers value homework as 15–30 percent of the final grade.

Penalties for late work or homework not turned in plays a major role in a student's overall grade. Incomplete homework is frequently counted as zero. Zeroes disproportionately weight a grade toward failing. O'Connor (2006) reinforces that this practice of grading inaccurately communicates a student's understanding of curriculum. Of the twenty-five late-work policies that were shared, many of them were idiosyncratic. There were eleven different policies of the twenty-five submitted. The most common policy was that late work is accepted, but it is only graded with a maximum possible grade of 50 percent. This policy is used by seven different staff members. Three teachers will always accept late work for full credit. The majority of policies cause students to lose a percentage each day the work is late. The evidence suggests that students at Lee Middle

School are likely to have multiple late-work policies for homework. These differences may lead to confusion for students who do not complete a homework assignment.

Individual student grade reports

Twelve seventh-grade students were retained or required to go to summer school in 2013–2014 at Lee. Lee Middle School policy dictates that a student will be retained if she receives five or more semester Fs in a full school year. The policy also states that a student will be required to complete summer school if he earns three or four semester Fs in any class in a school year or two semester Fs in math or language arts. A semester F is an overall grade for the semester that is 59 percent or lower. Homework played a significant role in semester Fs that were earned by those twelve individuals.

The full grade report for each semester F attained by those twelve students was analyzed. Forty-six grade reports from the 2013–14 school year were studied. Of the twelve students analyzed, four were retained and eight were required to attend summer school. The goal of the research was to look at each individual report and separate assessment grades from other categories of grades (labs, in-class assignments, homework, etc.). The final result was a numerical average of assessments in each class. Students passed the assessments in twenty-three of the forty-six semester Fs analyzed. This analysis is a small sample of the semester Fs in the entire school; the analysis could have been done on every failing grade. The evidence of this sample indicates that half of all semester Fs were earned by students who actually passed the assessments in the class, indicating that the failing grade was the result of other factors, in many cases missing homework.

The homework policies collected from faculty members and the breakdown of individual semester Fs show the current state of homework at Lee Middle School and provide a context to the survey and group interview answers. Many inconsistencies currently exist in the grading of homework at Lee Middle School.

Student Survey Data

A survey about current homework practices at Lee Middle School was given to students. The survey was completed by 148 of the 405 students at the school. Only students who submitted a signed parent-consent form were allowed to participate in the survey. This is a limitation of the survey results because bringing back a consent form is a task that is similar to following through on a homework assignment. Therefore, it is likely that the survey was taken mostly by students who finish and turn in their homework. The survey was conducted online using Survey Monkey. The survey was fifteen questions long, using the Likert scale on thirteen questions; two were ranking-style questions. Survey responses indicated that students feel homework is important in their learning.

Students' Perceptions of Current Homework Practices at Lee Middle School.

Table 1: Classes that give the most homework are the ones I learn the most in.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	18	12%	
Disagree	85	57%	69%
Agree	35	24%	93%
Strongly Agree	10	7%	100%
N = 148			

The responses to the statement "classes that give the most homework are the ones I learn the most in" show that students do not feel this statement to be true. Sixty-nine percent of respondents did not agree with the statement. One student commented, "I personally think it depends on how the teacher teaches." The responses indicate students feel they learn regardless of the amount of homework they are assigned. This is important for teachers to know. While they may want to give large amounts of homework, unintended consequences can emerge. Students may be overwhelmed by a large amount of work or perceive to be difficult for them, resulting in noncompletion. Large amounts of homework may be a challenge for students who are not able to do the work as quickly as some of their peers. As shown by the analysis of student grades at Lee, this can have a detrimental effect on the grades of students who do not complete the work. Responses indicate that students do not feel they learn more when more homework is assigned. This finding affirms Cooper's (2007) research that shows an adverse effect when too much time is spent on homework.

Table 2: *Homework is difficult for me to complete.*

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	22	15%	
D'	C 4	4.40/	500/
Disagree	64	44%	59%
Agree	44	30%	89%
Agree	44	3070	0970
Strongly Agree	15	10%	100%
N = 145			

Forty percent of the respondents stated that the homework assigned is too difficult for them to complete. Teachers must assign work that is challenging while making sure they do not give work that is too challenging for a student to complete independently. Teachers must also decide how much work to assign. Both of these factors impact the number of students who bring the completed assignment back the next day. Students should be challenged, but grading policies that place too much value on homework can have detrimental consequences for someone who cannot complete the work. At least twelve teachers count homework as 20 percent or more of the student's overall grade. Ten additional teachers use the total point system. In classes that use the total point system, the weight of homework is not stated so some of them may exceed 20 percent as well.

Table 3: *There is someone at home who can help me with my homework if I need help.*

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	12	8%	
Disagree	28	19%	27%
Agree	61	42%	69%
Strongly Agree	44	30%	100%
N = 145			

As indicated by the previous question, many of the participants said homework is difficult for them to complete. Just under half of the students felt this to be true. This response demonstrates the risk for students when homework counts heavily in an overall grade. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents said they do not have someone at home

who can help them with their homework. One student stated, "I feel a lot of kids in the school are like me with just one mom or dad so no one really helps with homework."

There are 405 students at Lee Middle School; this percentage would indicate that 109 students at Lee do not feel there is someone at home to help them with their homework.

Any school must keep this in mind when creating grading scales. A student who does not have someone at home to help her is at risk for failing a class that has a weighting percentage where homework counts for more than 20 percent. Many students have parents who are not home to help with homework. As one respondent said, "I do it myself all of the time because my parents are usually at work."

Teachers want students to build or reinforce skills at home, but they must be aware of the lives that students live and avoid making homework a high-stakes practice. This goes along with Kohn's (2006) belief that students spend too much time doing homework and do not have enough time to enjoy leisure activities or family time.

Table 4: *My teachers accept late homework without giving a penalty.*

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Never	24	16%	
Rarely	53	36%	52%
Sometimes	65	44%	96%
Often	5	3%	100%
N = 147			

Late-work policies are another key factor in grading homework. A strict late-work policy usually results in a zero for a missing assignment. Another late-work policy might

be that work is accepted without a deduction of the grade on the assignment. Half the respondents said that their teachers rarely or never accept late work without a penalty. Ninety-six percent of the respondents indicated that in their classes a penalty exists for turning work in late. It has been discussed in previous questions that many students indicated that homework is difficult for them to complete; many also said they do not have someone at home who can help them with their homework. Both of those responses show that homework is a challenge for some students. The responses to the question of whether one's "teachers accept late work without giving a penalty" indicate that grades are negatively impacted when work is not turned in on time.

Table 5: Check the reasons why you may not have done your homework.

Response	Frequency	Percent
It is too hard for me to do and I don't	56	44%
understand it		
I do the work, but forget to turn it in	50	39%
I am involved in a lot of after school activities	47	37%
I take care of younger siblings or have chores	41	32%
at home		
I just don't like doing homework	28	22%
My parents don't ask about it, so I don't do it	2	2%

Educators often want to know what they can do to support students in completing their homework and why students do not complete homework. The main response was that "it is too hard for me to do and I don't understand it." This is similar to the question

where nearly half the respondents said, "Homework is too difficult for me to complete."

Students should be challenged at an appropriate level; too great a challenge can lead to unintended consequences such as too many failing grades for work not completed. These results engender questions: How can an appropriate level of challenge be provided in homework assignments? How can homework be less punitive? Both questions are focused on increasing student achievement and decreasing student frustration.

Teacher Survey Data

Teachers were surveyed about current homework practices at Lee Middle School.

The survey was completed by thirty-three different teachers at the school and was conducted online using Survey Monkey. The survey was fifteen questions long, using the Likert scale on thirteen questions. Two questions asked respondents to rank order a list of responses.

Table 6: Research has shown the five options below as the main reasons teachers assign homework. Please rank the five choices in order of importance.

Reasons (in order, highest to lowest)	Average Ranking
Reinforce skills from unit	4.76
The all many and hilling	2.00
Teach responsibility	3.00
Prepare students for high school	2.97
Teach time management	2.52
Demonstrate high expectations for my classes	1.76

Ninety-one percent of the teachers said the main reason they assign homework is to reinforce skills from the unit. The fact that all but three teachers chose reinforcing of

skills as the main reason would suggest that the work is important and achieves a specific instructional goal. Students will be more successful in the class if they finish the homework. They will learn more in addition to what they learn in class. The second leading choice shows that teachers feel that homework can or does teach responsibility. This is a highly disputed topic among researchers and authors. It is unclear from research whether homework teaches responsibility—or whether responsible students do homework. Cooper (2007) states there are non-academic benefits to be gained from the process of completing homework (Carr, 2013). Whereas, Vatterott (2009) and Kohn (2006) suggest there is no way to measure whether a student is learning responsibility. Table 7: When students have failing grades primarily due to poor homework completion,

holding them back in their current grade level is a fair consequence.

Response	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	7	21%	21%
Disagree	22	67%	88%
Agree	2	6%	94%
Strongly Agree	2	6%	100%
N = 33			

The responses to this question indicate that the staff at Lee does not feel that a student should be retained due to homework. Eighty-eight percent of respondents do not feel it is fair to hold a student back for lack of homework completion. However, as student grade reports showed, half of the semester Fs analyzed showed that students passed the assessments in the class, suggesting that homework was a contributing factor

to this failure. From the group of students whose data were analyzed, four were required to repeat seventh grade. Three of those four would have passed seventh grade had they been judged on assessment scores alone. The Lee faculty expresses strong opposition to holding any student back based on homework scores alone, but that is precisely the result that current grading policies are producing.

Table 8: How much should homework count towards the overall grade in a class?

Percentage toward final grade	Frequency	Percentage
0–10%	11	33%
11–20%	14	42%
21–30%	5	15%
31–40%	1	3%
41–50%	2	6%
Greater than 50%	0	0%

This survey question shows the consequences of the lack of a uniform homework policy at Lee Middle School. The question on the survey indicates that seventy-five percent of the Lee staff believes that homework should count for 20 percent or less of an overall grade. Earlier, the homework policies of each individual teacher were sorted out after teachers were asked to turn in their syllabi or grading policies for their individual classes. However, the collected policies demonstrate that 25 percent of the staff is actually counting homework for 20 percent or less. This is most likely not intentional. The survey was given during the 2014–15 school year; perhaps some teachers changed their policies since they were collected. Another reason for the discrepancy may be that

categories are not spelled out correctly. Some of the syllabi said that homework counted for 15 percent, but there was an additional assignments category that counted as an additional 20 percent; the "assignments" category contained homework. This shows that some teachers may believe that homework is a small percentage without realizing that some homework assignments are falling into a different category.

Table 9: In your own experience, what reasons have you heard for why students do not turn in their homework?

Reasons (in order from most frequently heard to least heard)	Average rank
I just don't like doing homework	4.45
I do the work, but forget to turn it in or lose it	3.94
It is too hard for me to do and I don't understand it	3.79
I am involved in a lot of after school activities	3.67
I take care of younger siblings or have chores at home	2.91
My parents don't ask about it, so I don't do it	2.28

The teachers' perceptions of why students don't do homework are that they "just don't like doing homework." This question was the fifth most-cited selection of the six choices given to the students, meaning the students rarely believe this to be a reason they do not turn in their homework. This difference in opinion between the teachers and students is key. Teachers' belief that students "just don't like doing homework" suggests that faculty believes that students' "not liking it" is a main reason they do not do the work. The student participants counter that rationale by ranking it one spot from the bottom of reasons they don't turn in homework. Through survey results and group

interviews, students have shown that they do not mind homework and that they see the value of it; they generally just don't like what they perceive as "bad" homework. This finding correlates with Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) who state that when teachers design homework to meet specific goals, more students complete the work.

Table 10: What percentage of students complete and turn in an average homework assignment in your class?

Percentage who turn in work	Frequency	Percentage
0–49%	1	3%
50–59%	3	10%
60–69%	6	19%
70–79%	10	32%
80–89%	7	23%
90–100%	4	13%

The question "what percentage of students turn their homework in" correlates closely with the students' question that showed about 40 percent of them feel that homework is too difficult for them to complete. Half the teachers at Lee Middle School said a quarter of their class does not turn in the homework assignments. Only one-third of the staff feels that four out of five or more of their students turn in assigned homework. This question indicates the importance of late-work policies at Lee Middle School since 20–30 percent of all homework assignments are "late." If each student receives 2.5 homework assignments a day, Lee would have 1,000 homework assignments a week. That would suggest that roughly 250 homework assignments a week are not turned in.

That number gives a context of the significance for Lee Middle School of a researchbased late-work policy that supports student learning.

Themes of the Student Group Interviews

Theme One: Students' lives are busy and sometimes interfere with homework.

The survey showed that the majority of participants are doing one to two hours of homework a night. Teachers shared the same opinion on their survey, with the majority of them agreeing that a middle-school student should do one to two hours a night. Many students made it clear that they are busy outside of school and do not always have time to complete homework each night. The following remarks were made by students:

Student D—I had robotics last night. I got home at about 5:20–5:30. I had to get ready and go to my sports practices which began at 6 and ended at 8:30. By the time I got home and took a shower, it was 9 o'clock. I had to do my homework while eating before I went to bed.

Student A—That is how it was with softball. I only live a block away, and it took a little time for me to walk home. You would get out at 5:15 or so, I had to do chores when I got home, and cheer started at 6. Cheer gets out at 8:30; by the time I got home, I had chores to finish, and I played with my little brother a little bit. By that time it would be 9 o'clock, and I am just tired.

Both of the previous students cite specific time constraints stemming from athletic participation. Student K discusses an overall frustration with some teachers who have strict late-work policies:

Student K—I wish teachers would understand when it is late, sometimes we have things to do. Some teachers understand and don't give you zeroes right away.

There are some classes where you just can't do your homework. My life is not surrounded by homework.

The discussion of how busy students are indicates that there will be nights when they do not complete the one to two hours of homework that they have to do. With the increase in sports and cheerleading clubs that are not associated with schools, practices are often held outside the regular 3:30–5:30 time slot that has traditionally been set aside for school sports teams. An individual grading policy that counts homework as a large part of a final grade could potentially penalize students who are taking part in athletic or club activities outside the regular afternoon time slots.

Theme Two: Homework is valuable, but it must be the right kind of homework.

There was discussion in the student interviews about the role of homework in student learning, most specifically what is "good" and "bad" homework. Even if teachers have the students' best interest in mind when they assign homework, some work may not be as effective as they would hope. Participants shared the following remarks:

Student E—Sometimes we wonder why we are assigned something we all did in class and know what we are doing.

Students voiced their displeasure for work they know how to do or work that does not challenge them to think, but they also spoke highly of good teaching combined with homework:

Student D—The things that show a good or bad teacher is not how much homework they give; a good teacher is one that gives you a great explanation. Just giving you a sheet and taking it shows nothing, it only teaches you how to work independently.

Student H—They can't just give you a worksheet and expect us to learn. We need help, we are not fully independent.

Setting up the homework in class is a way to increase student participation.

Students commented on the value of getting started in class to aid in the success of homework completion:

Student J—Teachers need to spend the previous period on the homework that we are going to do. Sometimes, the teacher will explain it, but there is no time for questions. You might even be able to ask questions, but they don't explain it that well.

Getting through a large amount of material in a year is a challenge for many teachers. Homework can be a tool for teachers who need to administer a lot of curriculum to their class. This is a problem for many students who are behind:

Student F—I feel like teachers rush, they rush classes to get it done. The kids that get it get A's on their test, but those of us that don't get it are failing because they have to rush in classes. Teachers are rushing warm-ups, quizzes, and homework.

Theme Three: Late-work policies should be reevaluated.

Teacher syllabus and survey responses demonstrate that late-work policies vary greatly by individual teacher. Late-work policies affect more than just the overall grade; they can also have unintended consequences on a student's completion of late work.

Students shared their perceptions of the late-work policies:

Student E—My teacher will not allow us to go to our lockers. I know it is done, and it is in my locker. They won't let me go, and then it is deducted if I bring it during advisory. I have been failing classes because they won't let me bring it in.

Student F—One of my teachers will accept work for one day, but it is a zero if you are two days late. It can be good, but a lot of kids get zeroes.

The late-work policies lead to the question of what happens to a student who does not turn in an assignment at all. A missing assignment results in a zero in the majority of classes at Lee Middle School. In some classes the result is a zero even if the work is only a day or two late. One zero pulls a grade down significantly. Students shared the following responses:

Student A—I don't turn in my homework all of the time. Some teachers will call us up to find out if we did it. If we didn't, they will put up a zero. They should understand that we have stuff going on.

The power of a zero on a final grade can be felt immediately, even if the student is doing well on assessments:

Student H—You can have five assignments in class; you miss two homework assignments, and all of a sudden your average is a D, even if you did well on the quizzes.

Some students may never do an assignment if they have already received a zero. This keeps the student from ever doing the assignment. Student H points out the lack of desire once a zero is assigned to that activity:

Student H—If you don't turn it in the next day, two days late and it is a zero. The teacher still makes you do it. Kids don't want to do it, because who cares if you know you got a zero.

Students agree that homework should be a part of the learning process, but it can be improved to support student learning. All participants concurred that homework

should not be used to punish them, but only support or enhance their learning. Similar themes emerged in the group interview with teachers.

Themes of the Teacher Group Interview

Theme One: Homework plays a role in learning.

Teachers assign homework for a variety of purposes. The stated purpose of assigning homework varied in the group interview, mainly aligned with the subject that each participant teaches. All participants shared student learning as a key purpose:

Teacher E—The purpose of homework is to practice the skills we are learning in class. To practice the skill at home, free of distraction and with no assistance.

Teacher D—For language arts, it is for practice. School cannot provide the time they need for independent reading.

Some teachers focused on practicing skills learned in class; however, others use homework as a place to supplement learning in class:

Teacher A—I look at homework as a context for the things we do in SS, things they can look up on their own, or online, or get information or opinions from their family.

Teachers noted an increase in homework being turned in when they start the activity in class. Students in the interview shared the same sentiment:

Teacher D—I see an increase this year in homework completion because we are starting it in class.

Teacher B—If I give them 10 or 15 minutes in class, there is a much, much higher rate to turn things in. But we don't always have time.

Theme Two: Schoolwide late-work policies could be beneficial for the school.

Teachers spoke of the possibility of creating a schoolwide policy for late work and making mandatory the percentage that teachers must use as the overall amount that homework counts toward the final grade:

Teacher D—We don't have a consistency in the building. There is a discrepancy among the staff. I think it is confusing that we all have our own thing.

The impact of homework on a student's overall grade may have too great an impact in some classes. It varies greatly from teacher to teacher. Teachers discussed possibly counting homework for the same percentage of an overall grade in all classes:

Teacher E—In terms of grading, I think it is something that should be set up. I am okay with late policies being different because all of our subjects are different.

Percentages should be the same.

Teacher B—I think there should be a range. Your homework can be from 10 to 20 percent.

One teacher stated that homework is for practice, and students need to be able to make mistakes and revise their work until they learn it:

Teacher B—Students have to be able to revise their homework. It can't be worth a ton of points, because it is practice. Practice it until you get it and are ready for the test.

Theme Three: Students have busy lives.

Students expressed that they are busy and do not always have time to complete their homework on a consistent basis. Some teachers stated that they are aware of the

busy lives that many students live and they are trying to change the way they are giving homework:

Teacher E—We have so many kids that have so many things going on in their lives. They have other responsibilities that their families think are important. They are able to watch siblings, or do chores. They just have a lot going on. They are in sports, music, siblings are in things, a parent told me they had to take their other child to dance lessons in the south burbs; my student had to go with and has no control over that.

One of the participants pointed out that she is making changes based on the knowledge that students are busy:

Teacher C—They have so much going on in their lives. That is why I have taken a step back. Not only was it killing them, it was killing me.

Teachers' views coincided with the students that homework is an important part of learning in middle school. However, they identified that the current practices at Lee Middle School need to be evaluated to better enhance student learning.

Summary

In summary, the student and teacher interviews revealed similar themes. The student groups reiterated everything the survey data had already suggested, but with greater detail. Student groups shared information about the relation between their lives and homework. They too shared their conception of purposeful homework versus work that was not. The surveys and group interviews made it clear that homework is needed but that students do not always understand why they need to do things they already know how to do. Students understand how one missing homework assignment can drop a grade

drastically. It was challenging for the students to discuss grading policies and procedures when they were asked how much homework should be worth. Formative and summative assessments in grading are a complex topic for adolescents that they rarely talk about.

The survey and interview data showed that students feel that late policies that immediately assign a grade of zero for missing work are not fair.

The teacher surveys and interview groups both suggested that the practices of giving homework, weighting homework toward an overall grade, late policies, and giving zeroes are not exact sciences; rather, there is a varying human element that guides these practices. Upon reviewing the survey responses, it can be concluded that current practices at Lee Middle School vary greatly among the thirty-three instructors in the school. When asked whether they believed that giving zeroes for late work motivates students to start doing their homework, 53 percent of the staff responded that they "disagree" or "strongly disagree." This shows the divide in one major aspect of grading consequences in homework. The teacher group showed that there is a variance within a small group of five colleagues.

The research findings were perceptions of current homework practices at Lee Middle School. The survey and interview responses show that students have strong beliefs about homework practices. The evidence suggests that there are inconsistencies within the school and within grade levels. The findings show that there is a need for further discussion about homework practices at Lee.

SECTION FIVE: JUDGMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Judgments

The primary research question is: What is the impact of current homework practices on student achievement at Lee Middle School?

This research question was written with the goal of gathering the data needed to discover whether current homework practices positively or negatively impact student achievement at Lee Middle School. The second goal of this evaluation was to use perceptions and students' individual grade reports to determine the impact of homework on students' grades at Lee Middle School. The current homework practices show mixed results. Students and teachers agree that homework can enhance skills learned in class where practice is needed; it can also be an activity that gives a student a preview of learning to come, usually in classes that are focused on reading. Evidence from teacher surveys and group interviews suggests that homework is given to reinforce learning that took place in class. Student groups conveyed that they want practice, especially in subjects that are problem focused. Students expressed that they want to slow down and have the information explained more before they practice the problems.

Not all students are feeling a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment during or after completing homework. Students do not like being assigned work they already know how to do. Their perceptions are that this work has no place in their educational lives. It becomes even more problematic when it is tied to a grade that is a large part of an overall semester grade in a class. Students feel that their time could be spent better than doing work that is not directly linked to classroom learning objectives. Many students' grades

may result in their feeling a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment; however, a large part of the student body at Lee does not feel that way.

Secondary Questions

What are teachers' and students' perceptions of the purpose of homework at Lee?

Teachers' and students' perceptions of homework give a context to how homework is used at Lee and how it is graded. The students' responses show how they feel it affects their learning and why they choose not to complete some of it. The majority of the teachers believe that homework can be used to teach responsibility, and students share this belief. Teachers perceive homework to be a low-stakes activity since the majority of the faculty said in the survey that it should only count for 10–20 percent toward a student's final grade.

Students feel that homework is a tool that is part of their learning. Students want it to be an opportunity to practice and not to be punished if it is wrong or not done on time. They state that homework should just be a small part of learning that enhances their overall educational experience, not the main part. The majority of the survey respondents do not feel that classes that give a lot of homework are the ones in which they learn the most. Rather, they state that the key to great teaching is explaining content and also recognizing mistakes that students are making while doing homework.

What are the unintended consequences of current homework practices?

Homework is a large part of a student's grade in many classes at Lee. Poor homework completion currently results in lower grades for many students. In many cases individual student grade reports showed that students who are failing classes have the ability to pass assessments. This evidence suggests that homework is being weighted

heavily in students' overall grades in these classes. Students' grades are being affected because of homework, and achievement in school is being dictated based on a behavior that takes place outside school. Every student's living situation is unique. Some do not have a home environment or adult support that is conducive to homework completion. Because of these challenges, homework should not be a high-stakes event. However, homework is having a negative effect on the overall achievement for some students at Lee. The data suggest that the same learning could take place even if homework did not count so much toward a student's final grade, and frustration toward school could be reduced for those that do not have much support at home.

What is the outcome of homework on student achievement, in terms of both grades and retention?

Analysis of the individual grade reports reveals that some students do receive semester Fs based on work done outside the classroom. Half the semester Fs earned by students who were either required to complete summer school or who were retained occurred in classes in which those students had passing averages on the assessments. Participants in the teacher group interview voiced doubts that this scenario could occur. (The student grade analysis was not presented to the group beforehand). The teacher survey showed that the majority of the faculty did not feel it was right for a student to be retained based on lack of work completion alone, yet the grade report archival data show that this happened to students at Lee last year. This discrepancy indicates a need to look further into how homework is used at Lee Middle School.

Recommendations

The goal of this program evaluation was to gather data that would provide a deeper understanding of the homework practices at Lee and how they are impacting grades for students, specifically those students with multiple failing grades. Enough data were gathered to fulfill this goal by using teacher syllabi, individual grade reports, surveys, and interviews from both students and teachers. The following are recommendations based on this data and supported by the literature review:

Investigate a maximum grading percentage for homework as a part of a student's overall grade.

Exploring a maximum homework grade percentage for all classes at Lee will be beneficial. There are multiple concerns with the current system: there is variance among teachers, homework is weighted heavily in several classes that make homework a high-stakes activity, and heavily weighted classes can have a negative impact on students who do not have support at home.

Implement late work policies that are more consistent and less punitive.

A student may currently have five or six different late-work practices of which she needs to be cognizant. This can cause confusion as students and parents try to remember what each teacher accepts. A more consistent policy will benefit students and result in more valid grades. Policies that assign zeroes for missing work are damaging for many students who are busy or don't have time. It would be beneficial to collaborate about a school-wide policy for accepting late work.

Accepting late work will result in more students completing assignments. Current policies that assign zeroes immediately reduce student incentive to complete

missing assignments. A policy change will ensure that turning an assignment in late would not have such a large impact on a student's grade.

Consider the amount of homework assigned and focus on homework that is challenging.

This evaluation showed that students are busy. Students and teachers both agree that students need practice to reinforce learning objectives, but practice is most effective with feedback from teachers or peers to make sure that learning is correct. Students will benefit from a focus on class work and less homework. The workload can be cut down by assigning fewer problems or activities each night or by eliminating homework that does not require students to think critically.

Establish a universal grading scale that is consistent and puts less emphasis on formative assessments as a grade.

A grading scale that results in a grade that comes from summative assessments will put less emphasis on the role of homework in the overall grade. This would include a smaller percentage of the grade from formative assessments or activities. The summative assessments would consist of quizzes, tests, and performance assessments.

Homework is valuable and needed at Lee Middle School, but it can be refined to support student achievement more clearly and accurately than it currently does. The work that is being assigned is effective; however, the policies associated with the homework should be carefully considered for appropriate changes. Once these changes are made, students' overall grades may more accurately reflect student learning; fewer students may express frustration with school; and students can learn more.

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Appendix A: Teacher Survey Questions

Teacher survey

1.	Research has shown the five options below as the main reasons teachers assign
	homework. Please rank the five choices in order of importance. 1-most
	important / 5 - least important.

- a. Teach responsibility
- b. Teach time management
- c. Reinforce skills from unit
- d. Prepare students for the real world
- e. Demonstrates high expectations for my classes
 - i. Comments:
- 2. On average, how much time should a middle school student spend doing homework?
 - a. No homework
 - b. Less than 1 hour a night
 - c. 1-2 hours a night
 - d. 2-3 hours a night
 - e. 3 hours or more a night
 - i. Comments:
- 3. Teachers should communicate with each other about the amount of homework they are giving.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:

4. Parents, administrators, and co-workers will think my class is too easy if I do not give enough homework.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:

5. Written comments are more valuable than grades (letter grade or percentage).

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:

6. An incomplete assignment should be a zero.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:

7.	Giving a 50% for missing work, which would be a minimum grade for all missing work, is fairer than giving a 0.
	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:
8.	When students have failing grades primarily due to poor homework completion; holding them back in their current grade level is a fair consequence. Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:
9.	How much should homework count towards the overall grade in a class? a. $0-10\%$ b. $11-20\%$ c. $21-30\%$ d. $31-40\%$ e. $41-50\%$ i. Comments:
10	. Time should be created for students to make up school work during the school day. Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:
11	 Which "late work" practice is the most similar to the one you use in your class? a. I do not accept late work b. Deduction for 1 day late, it is a zero after the 2nd day. c. Students have until the end of the chapter or unit, and then it is a zero. d. Late work is accepted until the end of the marking period, for a deduction. e. Students receive a 10% deduction each day it is late. f. Late work is always accepted for full credit. i. Comments:
12	. Giving zero's for late work motivates students to start doing their homework. Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree Comments:

13. In your experience	e, what reasons	have you he	eard for why s	tudents do n	ot turn in
their homework?	Rank order the	six reasons	listed below.	1 = most co	mmon / 6
heard the least					

- a. I take care of younger siblings or have chores at home
- b. I just don't like doing homework
- c. It is too hard for me to do and I don't understand it
- d. I am involved in a lot of after school activities
- e. My parents don't ask about it, so I don't do it.
- f. I do the work, but forget to turn it in or lost it.
 - i. Comments:
- 14. What percentage of students complete and turn in an average homework assignment in your class?
 - a. 0 49%
 - b. 50% 59%
 - c. 60% 69%
 - d. 70% 79%
 - e. 80% 89%
 - f. 90% 100%
 - i. Comments:
- 15. Do you deviate from your homework policies at the end of the quarter once you see the number of F's that are coming in?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Comments:

Appendix B: Student Survey Questions

Student survey questions

Directions: Mark the choice that comes the closest to your feeling on homework at Lee Middle School.

1. I know what the purpose of each homework assignment is.				
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
2.	Homework teaches student	ts responsibility.		
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.	Homework challenges me	to think.		
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4.	Classes that give the most	homework are th	e ones I lea	arn the most in.
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
5.	Homework is difficult for	me to complete.		
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
6.	You can tell how "tough" a	a class is by how	much hom	ework is assigned.
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
7.	Teachers give written feed assignments.	back (comments	about my v	vork) on homework
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
8.	Specific feedback about m	y work is more v	aluable tha	n a grade.
	Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

9. Homework is a way for m	e to raise my gr	ade if I have l	ow test scores.
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Comments:			
10. I complete homework that	t is assigned		
Strongly disagree	_	Agree	Strongly agree
Comments:	C	G	
11. There is someone at home	who can help r	ne with my ho	-
Strongly disagree Comments:	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
12. My parents encourage me	to do my home	work.	
Never Rarely Sometimes Often			
Comments:			
13. My teachers accept late homework without giving a penalty.			
Never Rarely Sometimes Often			
Comments:			
14. Check the reasons why yo	ou may not have	done your ho	mework:
a. I take care of younger siblings or have chores at home			
b. I just don't like doing homework			
c. It is too hard for me to do and I don't understand it			
d. I am involved in a lot of after school activities			
e. My parents don't ask about it, so I don't do it.			
f. I do the work, but forget to turn it in.			
i. Comments	:		
15. On average, how much tir	ne do you spend	l a night on ho	omework?
a. I don't do homework			
b. Less than 1 hour a night			
c. 1-2 hours a night			
d. 2-3 hours a night			
e. I do 3 hours or more a night			
i. Comments:			

Appendix C: Teacher Group Interview Questions

Teacher Interview questions

- What is the purpose of homework?
- What does authentic homework look like for your subject?
- Do you regularly assign homework? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Most of our semester F's are a result of homework not being turned in. Is this fair? Why? Or Why not?
- What does good teacher feedback look like?
- When students were asked: "you can tell how tough a class is by how much homework is assigned." The majority of the students did not agree with the statement. Does it surprise any of you that they said this? Why or why not? Do you have any thoughts on their answers?
- Some say that homework teaches students responsibility. What do you say to that?
- The student survey showed that 40% of them said, "Homework is difficult for me to complete". Both focus groups said they receive homework they don't understand. Do you think this is because of a lack of paying attention in class? Or is some of the work too difficult?
- What's the difference between a "good" homework assignment and a "not so good one"?
- After looking at individual policies and survey data, it can be said that our current grading and late work practices vary GREATLY between our 33 teachers. Is this a problem? Why or why not?
- Based upon the discussion so far, do you think the school district should adopt a uniform homework policy? Why? Why not? What would that look like?
- Is there anything you want to tell me about homework?

Appendix D: Student Group Interview Questions

Student interview questions

- Do you always do homework? Why? Why not?
- If you do not do a homework assignment, why do you generally not do it?
- Why do teachers assign homework?
- If you could make homework better, what would it be?
- Is there anything about homework you like?
- Why do you think some kids cheat on homework?
- What if school got rid of homework? What would think? Explain?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me about homework?
- Do you receive homework that is just given a completion grade? Sometimes? A lot?