

The Principal's Perspective

Homework, part 1

Homework is one of those aspects of Ridgeview that has been both our best friend and our worst enemy. As such, it has earned the euphemistic title of “issue” over the years. Thus parents, students, teachers, and board members speak from time to time of “the homework issue.” Over the next few weeks I hope to navigate the troubled waters of homework at Ridgeview in order to state very clearly the purpose of homework, how homework is best done, and the various duties of teachers, parents, and students with regard to assigning, supervising, and doing homework. My basic contention is that if we all become more aware of the realities behind the homework issue and if we all make some reasonable adjustments here and there, homework at Ridgeview can be more often a friend than an enemy.

It may amuse or unsettle, even irk, some people to see that I call homework, especially homework at Ridgeview, a “best friend” or a friend of any kind. Yet it has been. Every day about six hundred fifty children come to school carrying books they have read and thought about and essays they have written the evening before: good books that shed light on the nature of the universe and the purposes of man, and essays that—if not perfect— mark the first steps towards students becoming “effective communicators,” or what used to be called orators and rhetoricians. These students therefore come to school prepared and eager, which is to say, they come as students in the original sense of the term. Better still, that these students form the habit of spending a portion of their day *at home* reflecting on the nature of the universe and the purposes of man encourages in us the hope, if Aristotle is to be believed, that they will forever after lead reflective lives, that their homes will be places not only for eating and sleeping and entertaining and having fun, but equally places for reading and serious conversation. “But that’s what they’re supposed to do at school,” one might say. Yes, they are supposed to learn to read and think and converse at school. Yet Ridgeview is a school that believes education and moral development must take place both at home and at school if the great project of cultivating the minds and hearts of young people is to succeed. I hope I am preaching to the choir at this point. Ridgeview, unlike many schools these days, does believe that homework is an important part of education.

Let us begin by reviewing the intent of the policies. The homework should be meaningful. In other words, it should not be busy work. Specifically, the purposes of the homework are to review lessons that have already been learned in class, normally in preparation for a test; to reinforce knowledge that should be committed to memory (e.g., multiplication tables); to practice skills such as playing an instrument; to prepare materials that anticipate the next day’s lessons (lest the students and teacher show up with books but nothing to talk about); and to complete more extensive assignments that either could or should not be completed in class, such as science projects or essays. And, finally, the amount of homework should be on average a specified amount of time as broken down by grade. In addition, there is one more, somewhat related policy: Ridgeview’s grievance policy. That policy clearly states that whenever there is a grievance or an “issue” concerning a particular class, the parent should go to the teacher in the first instance, the appropriate principal if the issue is not resolved, and either the accountability committee or the board if the issue is still not resolved after seeing the principal.

So how are we doing on the homework issue in light of the policy and original intent? By *we* I mean teachers, students, and parents. The first aspect of homework at Ridgeview would appear to be a great victory. Homework at Ridgeview is not busy work. In six years I have heard only once or twice from elementary parents suggesting that this or that assignment might have been busy work. I have never heard anything about busy work in the high school. Please realize that

across the country parents are up in arms, and rightfully so, about not the amount but rather the nature of their children's assignments, as being tedious, unenlightening, simplistic, and unnecessary. Not so at Ridgeview. The teachers do an excellent job preparing meaningful assignments to be taken home, and the parents and students seem very grateful for this fact, especially those who have suffered under the regime of busy work at other schools.

Another great victory has been the general agreement on the purposes and desirability of homework in school. I can only think of a couple of instances in which parents disputed the need for any homework on the part of students, and these complaints came in the early years of the school. Many schools around the nation, however, assign little or no homework at all for fear of parental backlash.

The record on the amount of homework given has been rather more mixed. In fact, had it not been I doubt I would be writing these essays. Parents and students may well smile or frown as they wish. And yet, the record has not been one of complete failure. Our record in the middle school, for example, has been by all accounts outstanding. Over the course of six years and after much surveying, the level of homework in the seventh and eighth grades has almost always been exactly what policy promises. We have heard far more complaints in the high school, of course. Until this year, however, those complaints have rarely, if ever, come from juniors and seniors. My hope is to get to the bottom of this mixed record in order to improve it.

The final policy is well worth considering. Do parents, when they are concerned about the level of their children's homework, follow the grievance policy? Some do and others do not. Several years ago, for example, there was a genuine problem with the freshman homework load. This was certainly a concern of mine since we had done much in the previous years to make the transition from eighth to ninth grade if not easy, at least manageable. This concern was coming from a very hard-working student who had been at the school for some time. After talking with this student and the parents, I was able to narrow the problem down to a couple of very specific things going on in the ninth grade. The homework load was made more manageable within a couple of weeks. I offer this story simply to make people aware that there have been homework problems in the past that have been taken care of when parents and students have followed the proper procedures. Knowledge of specific assignments is always a big help. There have been other times when the "homework issue" was not so much a problem with a particular class or grade but the case of an individual student who needed extra help or even needed an adjustment in his or her schedule. When parents do not follow the grievance policy a different scenario presents itself that goes something like this: There seems to be a lot of homework. Students get frustrated. Parents get frustrated. Students talk to other students. Parents talk to other parents. No one addresses the issue with the teacher. No one calls the principal. Time passes. Ridgeview gets the reputation among some of the parents as being a place without a heart. Finally, someone goes to the board and says there is a huge homework problem at Ridgeview. Few specifics are offered. The problem, if there is one, is not corrected for months, if at all.

I want to assure the parents and the students that this school has not been created in order to deprive young people of "a life" outside of school. Ridgeview is a serious school that intends students to do serious work at home. Yet it does not intend for schoolwork to take up all of a student's time outside of school. There are ebbs and flows in the homework cycle, the flows being mainly towards the end of a quarter. The students largely understand this cycle. In any event, there are things that can be done on the part of parents, students, and teachers to make the homework load more manageable and therefore life more pleasant. I hope to offer several helpful suggestions to all constituencies over the next few weeks. For right now, I would just urge everyone to follow the policies.

Dr. Moore