

1 June 2001

### ***HOMEWORK: an open letter to Waverley Park School Parents & Caregivers***

For several years, I have had serious professional doubts about the value of homework – what was the pay-off for the weekly (at times, nightly) family warfare that inevitably accompanies the issue of homework?

For many years, I have harboured serious misgivings about the hours of class time lost as teachers battle with setting / explaining / chasing up / marking / defending homework: homework set in response to public expectation rather than the expectation of obtaining meaningful educational benefit. Add to that the three or four hours spent every weekend preparing and marking homework. And for what?

Indeed, a researcher by the name of John Hattie has reviewed the results of many, many international research projects. Hattie was seeking to identify factors which had positive impact on children's learning: **guess what he found?** Homework has no significant positive impact at all. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest quite the opposite. (Just for the record, Hattie's work shows positive feedback to pupils and working with their peers are the two factors which have the biggest positive effect on children's learning!).

For the last two or three years, I have kept an eye out for research on the effectiveness of homework. I have also monitored what has been happening in our own school. Within Waverley Park School, a wide range of strategies has been employed to encourage pupils to be involved in homework.

For example, over the last five school terms, one teacher has spent at least \$100.00 per term (from her own pocket) supplying prizes and rewards for her pupils as positive reinforcement for completing homework. However, this term, she has used only standard classroom reinforcement strategies (ie: no major expenditure – no impressive reinforcement items offered).

**And the homework?** The number of children completing it has dropped by almost 50%. Of those who do hand it in, the standards of presentation of many; previously often outstanding; has dropped well below even their own day to day standard. There has also been a marked increase in communication from parents excusing their children from the work that has been set.

It has been my experience of many years that, whether or not the children involved are regarded as academically able, for every home that expresses strong demand for homework, there is at least one where homework and it's accompanying stresses are absolutely dreaded and abhorred.

At the interviews next week, I have provided for every family in the school a copy of an excellent article from this week's issue of "The Listener" magazine. Written by Noel O'Hare, it is one of the most readable articles on homework that I have come across in some time. Please take the time to read it.

To further clarify my own position, I offer the following points for your consideration:

**Homework for primary aged children need consist of no more than regular reading, basic maths facts ("tables") and spelling.** Ideally, lots and lots of regular discussion on any items of interest / family history / current events that catches your family's imagination has more value than anything else.

- It doesn't matter what your child reads, **as long as they get a balance of reading to you, reading with you, and reading for themselves**. Books, magazines, comics, newspapers, model aeroplane instructions, the back of the Weet Bix packet ... whatever: it doesn't matter. As long as kids are doing something that they are interested in, they will read it, enjoy it and be all the happier and better off for it. (So will you).
- Spelling practice is not just lists of words (which the pupil may never otherwise use) set by a teacher. It's crosswords, word-finds, word puzzles, secret codes, Scrabble – all of which can be easily found.
- If your child has trouble with basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, division (and assuming that he or she is at the age and stage to tackle whichever of these is appropriate), don't rely solely on the practice that he or she will get at school to improve the situation.

If you sit with your child a couple of times a week and work through some practice examples that you have set together, the practice will be far more valuable than facing five set questions in a class homework sheet. Why? Because it will be individualised to your child's needs. Because you will be sharing the experience. Because you will be able to provide instant and positive feedback.

- Dot to dot puzzles; colouring-in activities; jigsaws; cutting out pictures and words to make up puzzles / scrapbooks / messages – these are the mere tip of the ten-thousand-things-that-are-of-more-benefit-than-a-homework sheet iceberg.

In summary: I do not believe that homework as we know it has any value. I do not believe that I can defend any longer the stress that it places on the majority of teachers, their in-class time, their weekend time; or students and their families. Family time and after school time in childhood should be exactly that. Encourage your child's imagination and creativity – you will do more than any homework or extra-tuition programme ever could. Lock away the TV during the week. Let them play. Talk with them. Share with them.

Currently, it is my intention to stop the setting of homework work sheets here at school. **If families get involved in the sort of activities listed above and we limit homework to reading, spelling and "tables"**, it is my contention that we will have reduced stress levels all round and, according to the researchers, we will, in all likelihood, effectively increase the amount of effective learning that will happen for children.

The old-timers were dead right and now third millennium research is proving what they knew all along: *"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."*

Should the lack of set homework sheets be a major issue for you, please contact me so we can discuss the matter.

Yours faithfully,

Kerry Hawkins  
Principal.