

# THE HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

*Learning to Share Accountability*

BY ROBERT D. STROM

**D**uring the past decade, our society has clarified its achievement expectations for its schools. Certainly, minimal competency testing has resulted in greater accountability for teachers. Unfortunately, no corresponding effort has been made to identify the learnings which should be provided at home. A need for shared accountability is evident from three conditions.

First, teachers believe they are being assigned a disproportionate share of

the responsibility for child rearing. Second, mothers and fathers want to have more influence on their children and they believe the key lies in improving themselves as parents. Third, longitudinal studies show that children make greater and longer-lasting gains when they are involved in school programs which focus on both parent and child development. Together, these conditions urge us to devise more effective and satisfying ways for including parents as partners in the educational process.<sup>1</sup>

## **Partners Reasonably Divide Obligations**

Once children enter school, some parents are inclined to exempt themselves from further responsibility for teaching. These parents believe classroom teachers are well paid to ensure that children learn what they need to learn. However, according to teachers, there is not enough time during the school day to accomplish all of the public mandates. Consequently, the amount of homework at all grade levels has risen dramatically in the past

five years.<sup>2</sup> Although this trend can be viewed as a way to guarantee more parental involvement, there are other less favorable consequences. Despite growing objections to excessive after-school assignments, homework is not likely to disappear; nor should it be seen only in terms of limitations.<sup>3</sup> When teachers plan wisely, homework can yield benefits for children and parents. The following recommendations are intended to support better assignments by teachers.

Homework that has a distant, yet definite due date gives children flexibility in accommodating their out-of-school commitments. Parents who are aware of deadlines can help by arranging family activities or plans and by assisting pupils (especially young ones) to schedule time carefully. When assignments are made for the following day, children and their parents need to know how long a work period is expected by the teacher (it should usually be no more than an hour). At the end of the designated time, the homework should be put away, regardless of whether some problems remain unfinished. This practice permits leisure activities for some boys and girls who might otherwise have to work beyond their bedtime.<sup>4</sup>

Parents can become more aware of their children's academic progress by sharing the responsibility for checking homework. Instead of having to work out the solutions to problems themselves, however, mothers and fathers should be provided with answer sheets. This procedure saves time, reduces their embarrassment when they are unable to do the assignments, and offers immediate feedback to students. It also conveys teachers' respect for the family's role in evaluation. As parents become more involved in assessing their children's work, teachers should communicate how to reward successful homework.

Nowhere is consideration of the individual more important than in the assigning of homework because the teacher does not control conditions of learning at home. For example, teachers often wonder what they can do for students undergoing domestic shifts—e.g., children of divorced parents who feel alone because they miss an absent parent and helpless because they can do nothing about it. The temporary emotional disturbance for such children is predictable, and teachers can help by modifying their own expectations. This change can take the form of shorter and less frequent assignments or longer time limits. What matters is that no child involved in a troubled home situation should be

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pressured to perform as though conditions were normal.<sup>5</sup>

Junior and senior high school faculty need a plan to coordinate their assignments of homework so that students are not overwhelmed. Students consider school as their work; they spend six to eight hours a day involved in serious business. During an era in which adults seek shorter work weeks, longer vacations, and earlier retirement, we are disappointed to note that many of them would deny children the same opportunities for leisure time. Parents and students ought to be consulted in developing the school's homework policy, which might include a maximum number of assignments, provisions for flexible

deadlines, and a procedure for monitoring the operation.

**Partners Acknowledge Personal Limitations**

Teachers ought not to continue to despair about their enlarging workload while ignoring available sources of assistance. Pre-service and in-service training is needed for learning to utilize volunteer helpers. For example, teachers of all grade levels want to know how to provide individualized instruction in large classes, how to help students develop a sense of responsibility toward others, and how to balance the competitive orientation at school with experience in cooperative tasks. Peer teaching may result in the achievement of all these objectives and more. For those who receive tutoring, the additional gains may include a higher interest in learning, better test scores, increased task persistence, and greater self-confidence. For older students, the opportunity to become tutors offers an alternative to confrontation and rebellion as a way to gain influence, recognition, and status. The opportunity also enables them to develop attitudes and interpersonal skills that can be used throughout life to get along with other people. Usually,

the tutor's academic performance improves whether he or she is an average student, a low achiever, or gifted. When parents are properly oriented to peer teaching, they also feel good about the practice and readily approve of their children's participation.<sup>6</sup>

The extent to which teachers and administrators support peer teaching depends, in part, on how they interpret its effect on their roles. Teachers concerned about losing status might reflect that the best way to gain respect from students is first to show respect for them. This is precisely what takes place when adults entrust boys and girls with the opportunity to become peer teachers. Every child can use more individual help than one teacher can normally provide. The key to individualized instruction is more helpers. Further, a common goal of education is to foster the independence of the student, a goal more likely to be reached when peer teaching is utilized than when everyone in the class must look to a single source for all their learning.

Along with student helpers, the elderly also represent a valuable source of assistance for teachers. Now that many mothers of school-aged children are entering the labor market, senior citizens have become a

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major source of volunteers. The mutual advantage of this circumstance deserves mention. Because most older people have not been in schools since their own children attended 30 or 40 years ago, the elderly are easily misled by critics who allege that today's teachers are doing a poor job. By inviting older people into the school, we can have them observe, first-hand, the success of teachers and pupils.

While they are in the classroom, elderly volunteers can perform such

tasks as checking homework, listening to individuals read, tutoring, shelving books in the library, and facilitating discussions in social studies. In return for these efforts, volunteers have much to gain. The stimulation of interaction with children combats loneliness and depression. By directly helping youngsters, volunteers favorably revise the emerging stereotype that old people are a selfish group who want respect without responsibility. For the 80 percent of the elderly who are grandparents, volunteering at school presents an opportunity to learn more about the age group of their grandchildren.<sup>7</sup>

**Partners Respond to One Another's Needs**

Society should become more concerned about the well-being of those who teach children. Teachers have a need to feel valued. When this need is unmet, self-confidence is replaced by symptoms of burnout. Because burnout interferes with professional competence, it can cause victims to be cross, to shout, to be unable to plan, to suffer from feelings of guilt, and to engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of helplessness. Children are inadvertently harmed when teachers are undervalued because teachers who

lack confidence often do not help students build favorable self-concepts. Although the record of American education is commendable, critics have convinced the public that most students are getting a poor education. The necessary shift in popular opinion regarding school effectiveness ought not be left to chance. Rather, we should view parent education as the most viable means for informing people about the merit of contemporary schooling.<sup>8</sup>

Parents are a diverse population, but they increasingly have in common the need for mothers to be employed. In part this is a response to inflation, to divorce, and to job opportunity. Whatever the reason, schools ought to accommodate parents by rescheduling the school day and school year. Many parent groups have already begun to challenge the practice of dismissing school in mid-afternoon when no adult is at home to receive and attend to the children. Surely, schools cannot claim to prepare students for a future so long as educators themselves fail to adjust the school schedule reasonably to fit the times.

### **Partners Strive to Improve Their Influence**

The success of any long-term partnership, such as that between the home and the school, requires that each of the parties continue to grow. We are accustomed to thinking that teachers should return to college from time to time so that they can remain competent. But this same line of reasoning is seldom taken when discussion centers on the ever-changing role of parents. Whether parents are rich or poor, single or married, they have an important role throughout the years, their children are growing up. When children are small, parent education programs are readily available. After boys and girls enter elementary school, however, it is uncommon to find a corresponding parent curriculum. Even more rare are programs for parents of adolescents—despite the fact that most parents feel their role is more difficult when children become teenagers. Clearly, there is a need for greater scope in parent education. Instead of helping only families with young children, our efforts should be redistributed to include families of older boys and girls as well.<sup>9</sup>

To work closely with the family only during the pre-school years implies that this early period represents parents' only significant opportunity to influence their children's development. It also suggests that what mothers and fathers will need to learn

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about being successful at later stages of parenting will come to them naturally. The fact is that parents are a child's only continuous source of guidance throughout the growing-up years so they need to acquire a broad understanding of human development that encompasses the period from birth to late adolescence. Parents have a role unlike that of a third-grade teacher, or, for that matter, any school

teacher whose students are always in the same groups and are taught for only a year. Because parents must teach children who keep getting older, they need a curriculum sequenced to match their children's stages of development.<sup>10</sup>

### **Summary**

Certain conditions are essential for any partnership to succeed and have a promising future. Shared accountability requires a reasonable division of obligation. Teachers can improve present homework practices by letting parents know the amount of time to be spent on each assignment, making clear the kind of assistance they expect from parents, taking into account the domestic shifts some children are going through, and permitting students enough leisure time to accommodate non-school commitments. When partners acknowl-

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edge their personal limitations, they give up presumption in favor of collaboration. An important agenda for teacher education is the preparation of candidates to utilize volunteers. The key to individualized instruction is not smaller class size, but more helpers. Tutoring experience helps children mature, become responsible, and improve academically. Similarly, volunteering in the classroom can help the elderly value modern education and regain the responsible roles they desire.

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Responding to one another's needs is essential for a partnership. In this connection, parents ought to help teachers feel valued, and teachers should modify the school day to fit parents' schedules. By providing parents continuing education for their ever-changing role, we can help them have more reasonable child-rearing expectations, more confidence in their teaching and guidance skills, more satisfaction in day-to-day relationships with sons and daughters, and more readiness to share an education partnership with the schools. □

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At the time this article was written, Dr. Robert Strom was Professor of Education and Director of the Parent-Child Laboratory at Arizona State University, Scottsdale, Arizona.

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<sup>5</sup> S. Zakariya, "Another Look at the Children of Divorce," *Principal*, 62:1, pp. 34-37.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Westin, *The Coming Parent Revolution* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1981).

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<sup>10</sup> R. Strom, D. Griswold, and H. Slaughter, *Child Study Journal*, 10:4, pp. 243-260.

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## KIDS REALLY NEED RECESS

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youngsters in organizing their time and materials.

1. First, and most important, consult with the parents to gain their cooperation. Compile a list of suggestions they can use at home to help the student organize his time and materials.

2. Compile a syllabus for every student. List daily assignments for each subject, giving the dates of quizzes and tests (if surprise quizzes are planned, this should be indicated). Include a list of materials necessary for the class (spiral-bound notebook, crayons, pencil, protractor).

3. Make certain that each child understands the assignments and knows what materials are necessary to complete them. Offer peer tutoring or after-school assistance for students who are struggling with a particular subject.

4. Have the child write all assignments in a special notebook, with the teacher initialing each one as it is completed.

5. Supply different-colored folders so that the student can organize papers for each class.

6. Set up an a telephone "assignment line" with a recording that lists the homework for each subject on a given day.

Minor offenses, such as failure to bring in a permission slip or school supplies, are not sufficient reason to deny children recess. In many cases, this punishes the student for some-

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## How can you discipline a student if you do not deprive him of recess or playtime?

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thing that is really the fault of the parent.

### Ideas for Recess Indoors

We have established that recess is important and necessary, have discussed ways of dealing with uncompleted work or misbehavior. But what does one do for recess if there is no gym and the students cannot go outside?

Here are some activities and resources that you can use to cope with energetic students on rainy days.

### Exercises

These can be done in a classroom or hallway. Have students participate by bringing an exercise and teaching it to the class. Look for exercises developed for office workers that make use of chairs and desks.

### Aerobics

This is simply exercising to music. Students can help you make up routines. They often have so much fun that they forget they are exercising. Be sure to include a warm-up and a cool-down exercise.

### Action Records

Many records have activity songs that require lots of movement. Often done in circle formation, these activities help burn a lot of youthful energy and provide good exercise. (See RESOURCES.)

### Parachute Games

Small parachutes can be purchased for use indoors or outdoors. Many activities can be developed around these that provide exercise for arms, legs, and the entire body. Cat-and-Mouse is a favorite that includes everyone.

### Lummi Sticks/Beanbags

These usually involve arm and upper-chest activities. However, some records use these props as part of exercises for the entire body. (See RESOURCES.)

### Conclusion

Recess, physical education, and dis-