

# Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School

JOSHUA M. LANGBERG

## INTRODUCTION

Homework is a teacher-assigned task designed to be completed during nonschool hours. Homework is a core component of educational curricula in the United States, and as such, difficulties with homework completion can have a significant, negative impact on academic achievement. Further, homework problems tend to be stable across time, with parent-reported difficulties with homework completion in elementary school predicting grade point average in high school. Homework problems can also lead to significant parent-child conflict and parental stress. As a result, parents frequently express concerns surrounding homework and look to teachers and school mental health providers for answers. This handout is designed to provide evidence-based strategies for improving homework completion that can be implemented in schools.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

In the research literature, homework completion has been studied, defined, and measured in many different ways, such as time spent on homework, amount of homework completed, quality of homework completion, and engagement in homework. Overall, it appears that time spent on homework is not as important for academic achievement as the student's active engagement in homework. Specifically, time spent on homework and the amount of homework completed are not strongly associated with academic achievement, but student engagement and motivation

for homework have shown a fairly robust association with academic achievement (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017). Accordingly, the section below focuses on the characteristics most strongly associated with students' effort and engagement in homework-related tasks—student and family characteristics and school factors.

### Individual Student Characteristics

Certain characteristics of students often lead to problems with homework completion. Perhaps not surprisingly, students who display lower motivation for school and lack confidence in their academic abilities tend to be less engaged in the homework completion process (Flunger et al., 2017). In addition, students with specific learning disabilities and other mental health conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), often lack confidence in their academic abilities and have low motivation to complete homework (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001).

### Family Characteristics and Parental Involvement

Family characteristics and parental involvement also are associated with homework completion. First and foremost, many parents are not sure how best to support their child in completing homework or how to promote autonomy (Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2013). Educators and school mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to teach parents how to interact positively with their children with regard to homework. For example, positive parenting behaviors (e.g., praise) that focus on encouraging the student's autonomy are associated with higher student engagement during homework.

In contrast, high parental control of homework (versus responsiveness when needed) is associated with lower academic achievement, which in turn leads parents to exert more control (Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014). Overall, students display higher homework effort when parents are not directly involved with homework unless needed and when they actively encourage the student to complete homework independently (Núñez et al., 2015).

### **School Factors**

School factors can also play a role in creating homework problems. For example, when schools or teachers do not consistently communicate with parents about homework and studying expectations on a daily basis, parents will have difficulty supporting students. Further, teachers assigning developmentally inappropriate amounts of homework can put a strain on the family and negatively affect students' sleep. The National Education Association (NEA) recommends that students receive 10–20 minutes of homework starting in first grade, with that amount increasing 10 additional minutes per grade in school. However, how much homework is assigned varies from teacher to teacher, school to school, and district to district, with many school districts having established guidelines for teachers to follow. Also, the type of homework assigned is equally as important as the amount, if not more important. Tasks that are designed to engage students in critical thinking and that encourage metacognition (being aware of one's own thinking) more effectively promote learning as opposed to assignments that focus on rote memorization.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Many students do not have difficulties with homework completion. For those students, the goal is to encourage the use of efficient and effective homework practices to prevent the occurrence of problems and to ensure that students work to their full academic potential. Strategies to accomplish this are briefly described in this first section on preventing homework problems and establishing healthy habits. The following section presents strategies to implement when students are having difficulties.

### **Preventing Homework Problems and Establishing Healthy Habits**

Homework is often discussed in the context of problems and concerns, and indeed, some families

view the homework completion process as negative and aversive. However, homework can also be viewed as an opportunity for schools to teach and monitor students' use of the organization, planning, and study skills that will be important for their long-term success in college and employment. As shown in Figure 1, homework completion is a complex process that requires students to set short- and long-term goals and to organize both materials and time. As students move through secondary school, they are expected to start setting and completing homework and study goals independently from their parents and teachers. This is a critical learning opportunity, since in college the support of parents and teachers is significantly reduced, and students' ability to effectively manage their time is highly predictive of academic success (Britton & Tesser, 1991).

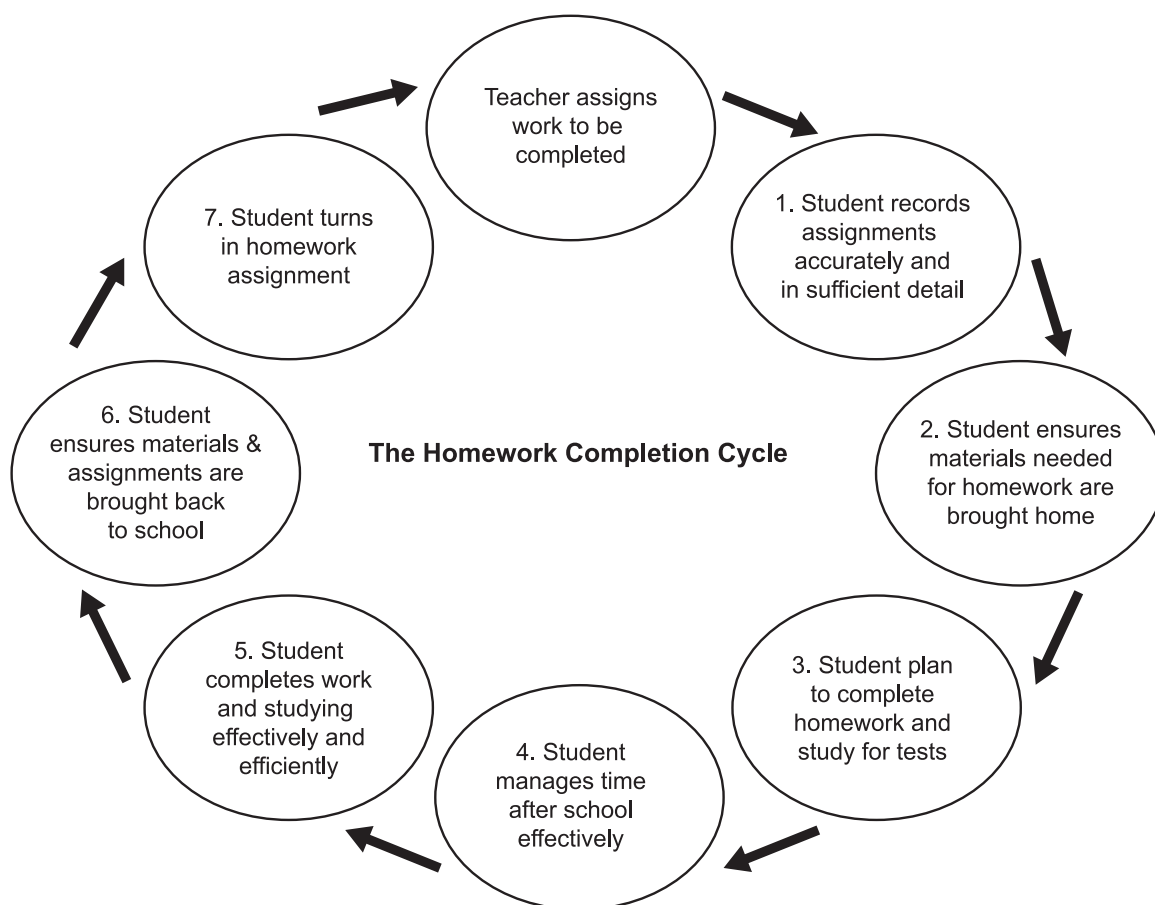
Teachers and schools almost always establish specifically defined and measurable goals surrounding core academic content, such as mathematics and science. Clear expectations and goals can also be established to help students develop effective organization, planning, and study skills. The following five recommendations outline how schools can establish clear expectations and monitor progress to establish healthy organization and planning habits and prevent problems.

#### **1. *Establish school-wide expectations and goals for homework, organization, and planning skills.***

This can be difficult, as expectations generally vary across school years (e.g., between 6th and 8th grade in middle school) and may even vary across teachers. It can be helpful to hold grade-level teacher meetings to establish goals and expectations that address the following questions:

- How much time on average would teachers expect students to take each night to complete homework and to study for tests, and how will teachers know if their expectations are not accurate for some students?
- How much parental involvement do teachers feel is developmentally appropriate for their students, and how will consistent recommendations and guidelines for parental involvement be conveyed to parents?
- How much structure and scaffolding surrounding planning and studying for tests will teachers provide versus expecting students to learn these skills independently?

**Figure 1. The Homework Completion Cycle**



- Are there particular study methods and strategies that teachers would like to encourage students to use?
2. **Consider setting specifically defined midyear and end-of-year goals.** The goals should be observable and measurable so it will be clear if students are displaying developmentally appropriate organization, planning, and study skills. Some examples are provided below:
    - By the end of the school year, all students will be using an online calendar to consistently record homework, tests, and study plans.
    - By the end of the school year, all students will be effectively using a homework folder and school binder to transfer papers to and from school.
    - By the end of the school year, all students will be able to discuss three different study techniques that they tried during the year and describe which one worked best.

Ensure that the established goals are clearly conveyed to students and their parents.
  3. **Review the goals and expectations weekly with the class, if feasible, and initiate discussions around troubleshooting when problems arise.** Goal setting is only effective when a student's progress is monitored. Importantly, monitoring has to be feasible for the school staff involved otherwise it will not be completed consistently. Teacher reminders and support can be reduced as the school year progresses.
  4. **Consider using an online tool similar to Gradebook to monitor progress so that parents can see how their child is doing.** For example, if a teacher checks students' use of seven skills each week (e.g., homework recorded accurately or no loose papers in the binder), then a percentage (4 out of 7 = 57%) can be recorded in Gradebook, similar to a test grade.
  5. **Be creative with progress monitoring.** For example, have students do a presentation and share how they have been using their online calendar to create study plans. Similarly, have students share how they organize materials in their binders and bookbags and transfer work to and from school. The class could discuss alternative

strategies and how they would know if a system was not working and needed to be refined (i.e., teaching self-monitoring).

### **Responding to Problems With Homework Completion**

For some students, setting clear goals, expectations, and monitoring is not sufficient. In the subsequent section, strategies for improving materials organization, planning, and study skills are provided for students who need additional supports.

### **Addressing Problems With Physical Organization of Materials**

Some students and families can independently come up with a materials organization system (e.g., binder, folders, bookbag) that will work well. However, in some situations, certain family or individual student characteristics prevent the student from independently developing an effective organization system. This is apparent when a student frequently loses or misplaces assignments. In these cases, schools may need to increase structure and scaffolding surrounding materials, as in the following recommendations.

6. **Consider having the student use a single 3-inch binder.** The binder would have a homework folder in the front and separate sections with dividers and folders for each class following the homework folder. In this system, teachers specify exactly where materials to be taken home would be placed and where homework to be turned in should always be located.
7. **Specifically describe methods for organizing materials.** Materials should be organized so that the teacher, student, and parent can clearly tell whether the student is meeting organization expectations. Create a checklist that specifically defines how the teacher wants materials organized. Specific criteria on the checklist could include the following: (a) All homework to be completed is on the left side of the homework folder, and all homework to be turned in is on the right side of the homework folder; (b) there are no loose papers in the binder; and (c) all nonhomework papers are filed in their appropriate class folders (e.g., completed math worksheets are in the math section). Multiple research studies show that these definitions have been used successfully to monitor intervention progress.
8. **Determine how frequently student progress will be monitored.** How often the teacher completes

the checklist would be determined by the severity of the problem. For some students, simply giving them a specific system to follow will be sufficient. For students with difficulties with inattention, focus, and forgetfulness (e.g., ADHD), daily or weekly monitoring combined with contingencies or rewards may be required.

9. **Consider rewarding the student for meeting the established organization goals.** Rewards might consist of lunch with the teacher or extra time with a friend. A reward is especially important for students who appear less motivated to improve academically. Start with a very easy goal to achieve and then gradually increase the goal as the student experiences success.
10. **Communicate with the family about the student's goals and progress.** Encourage parents to monitor and offer rewards for meeting expectations.

### **Addressing Problems With Planning Skills**

In middle and high school, teachers often assign long-term projects or announce tests days or weeks in advance. Unfortunately, many students wait until the last minute to complete work and to study. They end up rushing, making careless mistakes, and performing below their ability level. For such students, schools may need to increase structure and scaffolding surrounding planning ahead, as described in the following recommendations.

11. **Ask students to demonstrate planning skills.** They might record in their school planner or online calendar the steps they plan to take for completing homework and for studying.
12. **Describe specific activities for planning ahead that will be easily observable.** Create a checklist to be used for skills monitoring that defines planning. Examples of criteria that could be included on the checklist are (a) the student recorded an upcoming test or quiz in the planner, using specific terms, at least 1 day in advance of the test (e.g., listed the specific pages to be covered on the test); (b) the student designated a time to study for an upcoming test at least 1 day in advance of the test (e.g., study for test today); and (c) the student designated a time to study and recorded the amount of time to study and the method of studying (e.g., make 20 flashcards and review for 30 minutes).
13. **Establish a consistent monitoring schedule for reviewing what the student records in the planner.** Since quizzes and tests don't occur too frequently,

checking the planner and completing the skills checklist once per week is often sufficient.

14. **Consider implementing a rewards or points system to help motivate the student.** Higher amounts of points would be made available for the student demonstrating more complex planning behaviors (e.g., recording exactly what the test will cover and when they will study = 10 points versus recording “test today” = 3 points).

### **Addressing Problems With Study Skills**

As with organization and planning, defining steps and methods for studying that allow teachers to observe progress ensures that studying expectations are clear and gives students a goal to work toward.

15. **Consider assigning studying that will result in a product the student can turn back in to school.** Flashcards, structured outlines of text, and verbal presentations are examples of studying products that can be observed and graded by the teacher.
16. **If using flashcards, provide clear guidelines about what should be written on either side of the card.** Students tend to write entire definitions or paragraphs on their flashcards, copying straight from the book. This does not promote active learning. Have the student summarize the definition or key points on the back of the flashcard, giving them guidance such as “Use no more than 15 words.”
17. **If having students outline a textbook chapter, consider asking them to record the main idea and three supporting details from each page of the chapter.** As with flashcards, this promotes active studying and results in a product that the teacher can evaluate.

## **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

### **Websites**

<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/index.html>

The website of the U.S. Department of Education publishes guidance on homework and tips for parents in working with schools when homework problems arise. Schools may wish to direct parents to these resources or may be interested to learn how the Department of Education encourages parents to approach homework problems. See tips for parents (<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/involve/homework/homeworktips.pdf>).

### **Books**

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2017). *The work-smart academic planner, revised edition: Write it down, Get it done*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This is a school planner for students in Grades 6–12 that is designed to provide structure and guidance surrounding keeping track of assignments and tests. The planner includes activities and exercises for students to build self-monitoring, organization, and study skills.

Langberg, J. M. (2011). *Homework, organization and planning skills (HOPS) interventions: A treatment manual*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

This is an intervention manual for teachers, counselors, or psychologists to use to implement evidence-based organization, time-management, and planning interventions. The manual, which has been evaluated in multiple research studies, includes checklists that specifically define organization and planning skills that can be used to track student progress.

### **Related Helping Handouts**

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Joshua M. Langberg, PhD**, is an associate professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he directs the Promoting Adolescent School Success (P.A.S.S.) research group ([pass.vcu.edu](http://pass.vcu.edu)). He has received grant funding from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES), to develop and evaluate evidence-based strategies for teaching students homework, organization, and planning skills.

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