

## An Exploratory Analysis of the Structure of Homework Assignments in High Schools

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In this article we examine the structure of homework assignments in eight rural high schools. Seventy-seven teachers responded to a 36-item survey which was designed to assess (1) the amount of time students devote to homework; (2) the existence of a school homework policy; (3) the purpose and type of homework assignment; (4) teacher review, feedback, and grading of homework; and (5) the value and significance of assigning homework. Previous research in the area of homework has been limited to studies that investigate average hours of homework completed and correlations between time spent on homework and student achievement. Results presented in this article provide a deeper understanding of the structure and use of homework by rural high school teachers.

The importance of homework as an educational intervention has been the subject of debate for the past hundred years. This dialogue has revealed more about the educational philosophies of the discussants and the educational climates of specific historical eras than about the contributions of homework to student learning [26]. Neill [20], for example, had few positive things to say about homework. Other educators and parents have attributed numerous benefits to homework, including increased academic achievement and the development of character and self-discipline [26].

In spite of the long history of discussion about homework, our understanding of this educational intervention remains rather limited. Neither educators nor students report that much homework is being done these days at either the elementary [5] or secondary levels [10; 19; 29]. There is also evidence that decisions about the structure of homework (e.g., how much is assigned, how it affects course grades) are made at the classroom rather than at the school level [5]. Finally, reports are accumulating that show that structured homework assignments can have a "meaningful influence on achievement" [11; 21; 27; 28]. Findings about the positive association between homework and student achievement from educational production function studies are also being supported by conclusions from studies of effective schools [9; 15; 31].

Beyond these points, however, our knowledge of homework is slight. We have only a surface understanding of homework as an educational activity. We know little about how teachers provide structure and meaning to homework, e.g., how they assign, mark, and incorporate homework into course grades. Most studies in this area continue to emphasize analysis at only the broadest level of examination, i.e. total amount of homework assigned. Homework is generally studied in isolation, interactive effects with other organizational variables are ignored.

At the same time that we are discovering the complexity and multi-faceted nature of other educational variables, e.g. expectations and ability grouping, homework continues to be treated in a molar fashion and as a rather simplistic concept.

In this article we present findings from our exploratory study of the structure of homework in eight high schools. Building on what is known about successful homework [21], we attempted to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do districts, individual schools, and subject departments have and enforce homework policies?
2. To what extent do individual teachers assign homework?
3. What are the most commonly announced purposes of assigned homework?
4. What is the most commonly used type of homework?
5. What is the frequency of assigned homework and the expected time required by students to complete homework?
6. How is homework most frequently assigned?
7. To what extent is homework checked and graded?
8. To what extent do students successfully complete assigned homework?
9. To what extent is homework computed into course grades?
10. To what extent do teachers have assistance in grading homework?
11. How long do teachers take to grade and return homework?

Our primary goal was to develop a deeper understanding of homework, to get beyond average hours of homework completed and correlations between time spent on homework and student achievement. We wanted to study the ways in which homework is structured. In addition,

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we were interested in the topic of homework as a policy. Studies on the nature of schools as institutionalized organizations in general [16; 30] and studies of secondary schools in particular [8], as well as studies of organizational control [7] and teacher decision making [14; 25], led us to expect little formal school-level coordination with respect to homework assignments. Finally, we wanted to see if there were any differences among curricular tracks in the area of homework. Recent evidence indicates that lower-ability track students may be disadvantaged vis-a-vis their more academically-oriented peers in terms of both the amount and quality of homework they receive [18; 24].

## METHOD

### Sample

Eleven central Illinois high schools were invited to participate in this study. Eight schools agreed to do so. The schools contacted have enrollments ranging from 114 to 296 pupils. Each of these schools is a part of a unit (unified) district which offers a comprehensive educational program.

All of the participating schools are located in rural, agriculturally-based communities with populations between 561 and 2,252. Families in these communities are predominately white. The socio-economic make-up is largely middle-class, and both parents are frequently employed.

Teachers from each of the eight schools completed a questionnaire based on emerging knowledge about successful homework practices. Subjects were asked to draw their responses from the first class taught on Wednesday morning (or Thursday morning if they did not teach on Wednesday). Teachers had average total student loads of 81 with average class sizes of 16. Students in the Wednesday/Thursday morning classes were evenly distributed across grades nine through twelve. Teachers were also asked to describe student ability levels within classes as above average, average, below average, or learning disabled. The majority of students (92%) were perceived as functioning at average or above average ability levels.

### Data Collection and Analysis

**Instrument.** A 36-item survey was developed for this study. Questions were worded in either a forced choice, yes-or-no format, or multiple choice format. Questions were designed to assess five variables dealing with the use of homework in these high schools: policy existence, amount of time spent completing, relationship to course objectives, type and purpose, and impact on the students' final grades.

The initial survey was reviewed by research analysts at the University of Illinois. Information on the technical adequacy of the instrument was reviewed and corrections were made to the survey prior to field testing. A field test then was conducted with 13 teachers at a high school similar in demographic characteristics to the eight schools

**TABLE 1**

Assignment of Homework By Curricular Tracks\*

Track	Number of Teachers Assigning Homework (%)	Number of Teachers Not Assigning Homework (%)
Academic		
Science	7	0
Mathematics	14	0
Social Studies	7	0
Foreign Language	5	0
English	11	0
Computer Science	1	0
Sub-total	45 (100)	0 (--)
General		
Special Ed. English	4	1
General Science	2	0
Art	3	0
Driver Education	3	0
Mathematics	1	0
Music	1	1
Physical Education	0	5
Sub-total	14 (67)	7 (33)
Vocational		
Home Economics	5	0
Industrial Arts	3	1
Business Education	6	5
Agriculture	1	3
Art	1	0
Music	1	0
Health	1	0
Sub-total	18 (67)	9 (33)
Totals	77 (83)	16 (17)

\*Note: In this study, individual class sections are assigned to tracks on the basis of teacher responses to the question "in which curricular track does this class belong," not on the basis of an *a priori* list of academic, general, and vocational departments.

chosen for this study. Pilot study questionnaires were reviewed and modifications were made to survey items. The final questionnaire was then completed by the teachers in the eight sample schools.

**Interviews.** In order to supplement information gained from the questionnaires, interviews were held with 12 teachers from three high schools with demographic characteristics comparable to the original sample of eight schools. Teachers for these interviews were randomly selected. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes and were conducted during teacher planning periods. Questions focused on the eleven research questions listed earlier in this article.

**Results.** All teachers (129) in the eight respondent schools received copies of the questionnaire. Ninety-six completed surveys were returned, a response rate of 74%. Three surveys, completed for junior high classes, were discarded. Of the 93 teachers in the adjusted sample, 77 indicated that they did assign homework. A breakdown

by department for the assignment of homework is shown in Table 1.

After coding the returned surveys, questions relating to the various aspects of homework were grouped together. Data were descriptively analyzed and displayed. In addition, perceptions from the personal interviews were included to supplement and elaborate on the conclusions obtained from the survey.

*Limitations.* The findings reported herein must be treated with caution. First, this is an exploratory study: an attempt to assess the structure of homework rather than simply report the number of hours completed. The exploratory nature of our findings is readily apparent in our treatment of differentials among curricular tracks in homework assignments. Second, as noted above, the study is descriptive in nature. Third, at this stage of our investigation, a conscious decision was made to focus on one type of school community, i.e. rural high schools. In addition, we were able to examine only eight such schools, all from one state. Limitations are associated with our small size, and the extent to which the findings presented below may apply to other situations is not clear. Fourth, judgments and perceptions from students and parents were not gathered. Our report is based solely on information collected from teachers. Finally, no attempt was made to measure teachers' perceptions of the relationship between homework and increased academic achievement.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Policy*

Literature on effective schools indicates that homework is one means of extending students' opportunities to learn [9; 15]. Homework can contribute to improved achievement by providing students with additional content coverage and corrective feedback. Homework, when properly planned to meet individual needs, can motivate students and extend learning time beyond the designated school hours. Homework provides teachers with the opportunity to further monitor students' progress. To assist teachers in making the most effective use of homework, a school or district policy with guidelines for assigning, collecting, grading, and completing homework can be developed. Once developed, it must be adopted and communicated to all members of the school community including parents, students, teachers, administrators, and school board members. It has been recommended that such a policy (1) include an extended treatment of philosophy and objectives, (2) provide guidelines for teachers, parents, and students, and (3) delineate how much homework should be assigned at the various grade levels [23]. It is possible that a well developed and detailed policy will give teachers an additional tool for helping students succeed. A clear, written statement that communicates to all the importance that the school and/or district places on homework as an educational intervention is therefore considered to be desirable.

*Existence and Enforcement of Policy.* Teachers in our

study were asked to indicate whether or not a homework policy existed and, if so, the way the policy was regulated. Eighty-five percent of the teachers indicated that there was a lack of policy at the district, school, or department level. Even in those few instances where teachers indicated that there was a written district policy, they noted that there was little enforcement of the procedures. This finding is consistent with conclusions from a recent Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development study of elementary schools, which determined that less than one-third of the sample schools had written homework policies [5].

*Classroom Policy.* When asked to indicate their own practices in distributing homework, 77 of the 93 teachers (83%) surveyed replied that they assigned homework to the class in question, while the remaining 16 teachers (17%) indicated that they did not assign homework. Although the sample of 16 teachers who did not assign homework is rather small, it may be noteworthy that 33% of teachers of students in general and vocational subjects chose not to assign homework, while all those in academic subjects did so (see Table 1) [17]. Teacher-stated reasons for not assigning homework ranged from a lack of equipment to distribute for home use to a perception that in-class activities were the most effective methodology for assimilating course content.

Interview data help provide some insights about teachers' perceptions of homework policies. There appears to be more coordination and guidance around this issue than the absence of written policy would indicate. For example, a number of teachers stated that, even though there were no written expectations regarding homework, they were responsive to the principals' expectations in this area. In addition, teachers reported that the topic of homework was both formally and informally discussed among the staffs. Discussions about homework often concerned the equity issue of homework assignments, i.e., how homework was distributed across departments, and students' complaints of heavy loads in particular subjects. There was also disagreement in how teachers viewed the absence of written homework policies. Some reported that homework should not be the subject of schoolwide policy, and expressed appreciation for the lack of written standards in this area. Others viewed the absence of a written homework policy as unfortunate and as an indication of a lack of administrative support for the importance of academics.

### *Amount/Time*

To increase time allocated for learning activities, the assignment of homework may be a necessity. Brookover and his colleagues [1] maintain that the school staff has the responsibility of fostering the development of appropriate student norms regarding the amount of time to be devoted to homework. While there seems to be no universal agreement about the amount of homework to be assigned, Wynne [31] asserts that students should have a fair amount of homework regularly assigned. Research conducted by the California State Department of Educa-

**TABLE 2**

**Homework Frequency and Expected Completion Time**

Frequency of Assigned Homework	Number of Teachers (%)
Occasionally	8 ( 10.4)
Once a week	10 ( 13.0)
Twice a week	10 ( 13.0)
3-4 times a week	23 ( 29.9)
5 times a week	26 ( 33.7)
<b>Total</b>	<b>77 (100.0)</b>

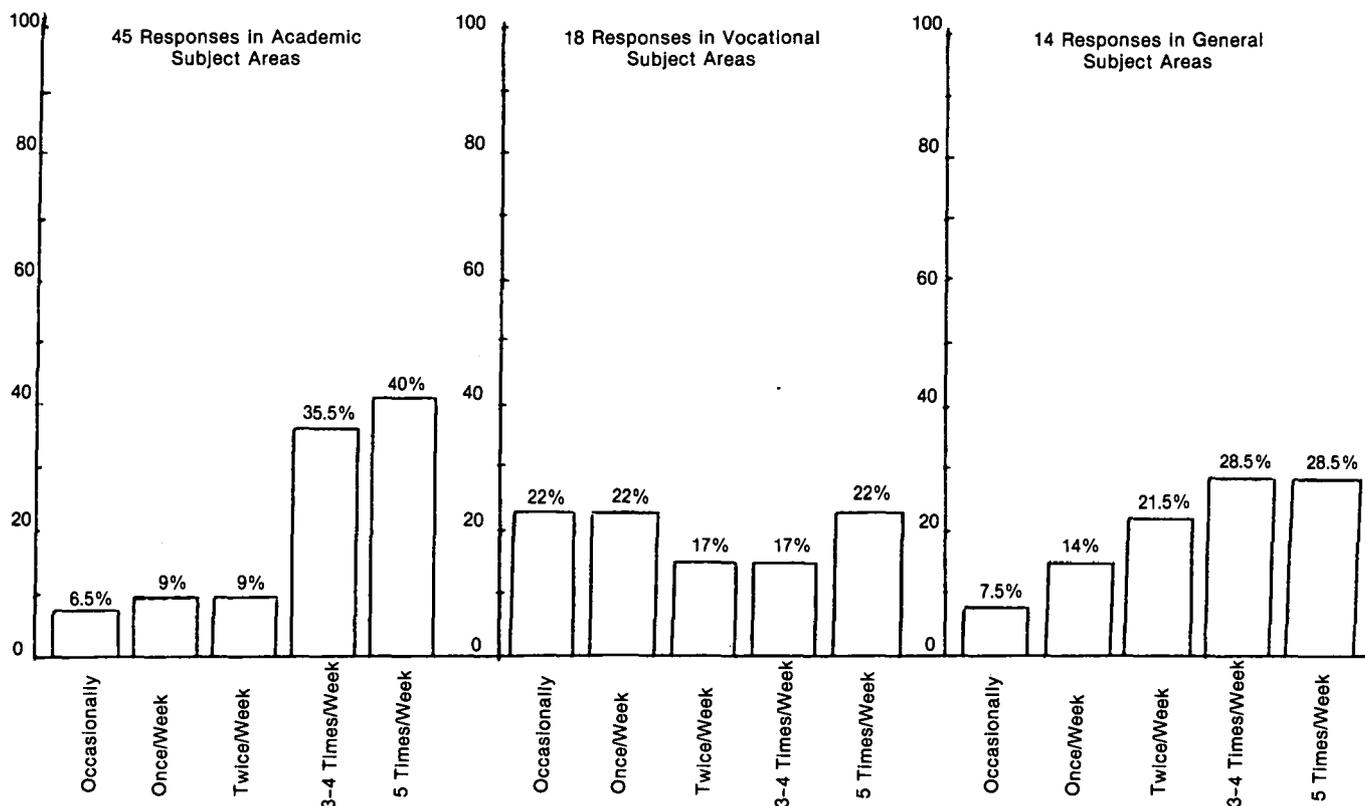
  

Time Expected for Students to Take to Complete Typical Homework Assignment	Number of Teachers (%)
0-20 minutes	16 ( 21.1)
20-30 minutes	29 ( 38.2)
30-40 minutes	20 ( 26.3)
45-60 minutes	10 ( 13.1)
more than 60 minutes	1 ( 1.3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>76 (100.0)</b>

tion [3], which indicates inconsistencies in the frequency of and amount of time devoted to assigned homework across subject areas, tends to be supported by the data in this study.

*Regularity.* Table 2 contains the responses of the teachers who provided homework to the question of the frequency with which they made such assignments. Nearly two-thirds of them reported giving homework assignments three or more times a week. Figure 1 shows that homework assignments were made in a differential fashion across curriculum tracks in these high schools. Teachers of academic subjects assigned homework more frequently than teachers in vocational and general subject areas. Given the small sample size for vocational and general subjects, these findings should be considered as suggestive. Further research should examine current practices as well as the effectiveness of more frequently assigned homework in vocational and general subjects.

*Time Expected.* Only one of the 76 respondents expected students to take longer than 60 minutes to complete the typical homework assignment in his/her subject for the class in question. Teachers in three of the eight schools did not expect students to take longer than 45 minutes for the assigned homework. More teachers expected students to take between 20-30 minutes than any other designated length of time (see Table 2). As with the frequency of assignments, we found important differences among the three tracks in the amount of time teachers expected students to spend on homework. For example, while 46% of the teachers of academic track classes expected students to spend more than 30 minutes on each assignment, only 36% of vocational class teachers and 29% of general track class teachers held this expect-



**FIGURE 1.** Percentage of responses to frequency of assigning homework in three teaching areas academic, vocational, general.

tation [29].

*Methods of Communicating Homework Assignments.*

Teachers answered the question about how homework is assigned as follows:

- 61% used only one method; 30% used two methods; and 9% used three methods;
- Oral instructions were used nearly twice as often as other methods;
- Of the 61% of teachers who used only one method, 72% used oral instructions;
- Of the 39% of teachers who used multiple methods, 91% included giving oral instructions;
- Writing instructions on the blackboard was the next most frequently employed method;
- The distribution of papers giving written instructions for homework at the conclusion of the lesson was used by only 14% of the teachers;
- Only four subject teachers designated homework as part of a course requirement contract.

These findings indicate that the majority of teachers used only one method of assigning homework and that providing oral instructions was clearly the preferred method. Further research issues to be addressed in this area include the relative effectiveness of each method, the amount of disruption of academic learning time connected with the various methods, and the reasons why teachers prefer one method over another.

*Purpose and Type*

*Purpose.* The value of homework assignments has been established in studies of effective schools and in studies of educational productivity [11; 21]. Homework is one way to extend content coverage and learning time. To be effective, however, homework assignments must be carefully planned and based on the objectives of the curriculum [23].

In addition to expanding the quantity of learning time, homework fulfills a number of other educational functions such as developing independent work habits, encouraging responsibility, refining study skills, and providing opportunity for creativity [22; 23].

To examine the purposes for homework in the eight schools in our sample, we asked teachers to select the "single most common purpose" of homework assignments from a list of eight choices. In a related question they were also asked to choose "all" the purposes for which they assigned homework.

The first observation to be made is that homework was assigned for a variety of purposes in these schools. As shown in Table 3, the most common purpose of homework was "mastery of objectives." Approximately one-third (35%) of the sample chose this as the rationale for homework assignments. Less than one-quarter (22%) of the sample selected "review of class material" as their most common purpose. "Introduction of new material" was

**TABLE 3**  
Most Commonly Reported Purpose of Homework Assignments

Purpose: Total	Number of Teachers (%)		
Reading of Literature	3 ( 4)		
Review of Class Material Taught	17 ( 22)		
Mastery of Objectives	27 ( 35)		
Introduction of New Material	13 ( 17)		
Preparation of Test	9 ( 11)		
Fulfillment of Policy	0 ( --)		
Monitoring of Student Progress	0 ( --)		
Unable to Select	6 ( 8)		
Other	2 ( 3)		
Total	77 (100)		
Purpose: Across Subject Areas	Number of Academic Teachers (%)	Number of General Teachers (%)	Number of Vocational Teachers (%)
Reading of Literature	2 ( 4.4)	1 ( 7.1)	0 ( -- )
Review of Class Materials	8 ( 17.8)	5 ( 35.8)	4 ( 22.2)
Mastery of Objectives	16 ( 35.5)	4 ( 28.6)	7 ( 38.9)
Introduction of New Material	7 ( 15.6)	2 ( 14.3)	4 ( 22.2)
Preparation for Test	7 ( 15.6)	0 ( -- )	2 ( 11.1)
Fulfillment of Policy	0 ( -- )	0 ( -- )	0 ( -- )
Monitoring of Student Progress	0 ( -- )	0 ( -- )	0 ( -- )
Other	0 ( -- )	1 ( 7.1)	1 ( 5.6)
Unable to choose one purpose	5 ( 11.1)	1 ( 7.1)	0 ( -- )
TOTAL	45 (100.0)	14 (100.0)	18 (100.00)

the third most common purpose, with 13 subjects (17%) choosing this response. A small percentage of teachers (12%) chose "preparing for a test" as the most common purpose. Only three teachers (4%) chose "reading of literature" as the most common purpose.

In the "other" category, teachers included "work not finished during class" and "practice of skills" as the most common purpose of homework. No teachers gave evidence of using homework for such purposes as application of learning or opportunities for individual creativity. Since none of the schools in the sample had a homework policy, it is not surprising that "fulfillment of policy" was left blank. "Monitoring of student progress" was also left unchecked as the most common purpose, but was checked by over 50% of the teachers when they were asked to record all possible purposes for homework assignments.

Table 3 also shows the most commonly reported purpose of homework assignments across academic, general, and vocational areas. Although the sample size is rather small—in fact, some cells are empty—at least two possible differences among tracks deserve attention. First, academic class teachers reported assigning homework less frequently to "review class materials" than did their peers who taught non-academic track classes. Second, they were much more likely than their colleagues to use homework to help students prepare for tests. This is consistent with research findings that show that non-academic tract students take fewer tests and quizzes than their academic counterparts [17].

The school effectiveness literature recommends that homework be tightly coupled with the core objectives of the course [6]. The three purposes most frequently chosen by the teachers in this study—mastery of objectives (35%), review of class material taught (22%), and introduction of new material (17%)—support this aspect of curriculum alignment in these schools. There is, however, no one strong concentration of teachers using a common rationale for homework. The distribution across all choices lends further support to the autonomous nature of teacher decision-making.

*Type.* During the last ten years studies have begun to look at the relationships between types of homework assignments and student academic achievement [26]. Although there are no clear answers as to which types of homework are most efficacious for learners in varying contexts [26], research indicates that irrelevant or "busywork" tasks unrelated to the curriculum, identical assignments for all students, and unnecessary repetition of already learned material are examples of ineffective types of homework [12; 22;].

Homework assignments need to be as carefully planned as daily classroom activities. They should be varied to suit the needs of individual learners and the purposes of the learning activity. Homework can involve reading, writing, drill, problem solving, and memorization. Long or short term, assigned or voluntary, individual or whole class assignments are some of the possible variations in type of homework [22; 26]. A number of homework taxonomies have been developed. For example, Lee and

**TABLE 4**  
Type of Homework Assignments

Type Most Commonly Assigned	Number of Teachers (%)
Worksheets	11 ( 14.3)
Textbook and Questions	25 ( 32.5)
Essays/Writing Assignments	3 ( 3.9)
Problem Solving	10 ( 13.0)
Independent Projects	4 ( 5.2)
Reading and Research	6 ( 7.8)
Other	3 ( 3.9)
Unable to Choose One Type	15 ( 19.4)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>77 (100.0)</b>

Number of Types Used <sup>a</sup>	Number of Teachers (%)
1	4 ( 5.2)
2	16 ( 20.7)
3	25 ( 32.5)
4	18 ( 23.4)
5	10 ( 13.0)
6	2 ( 2.6)
7	2 ( 2.6)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>77 (100.0)</b>

<sup>a</sup>The list of types from which teachers chose included: (1) worksheets, (2) textbook and questions, (3) essays/writing assignments, (4) problem solving, (5) independent projects, (6) reading and research, (7) other.

Pruitt [12], developed a taxonomy of homework types which includes: (1) practice, (2) preparation, (3) extension, and (4) creativity.

One of our objectives in this study was to discover which type of homework was most commonly assigned by teachers. From a list of seven types, teachers were asked to select (1) the most commonly assigned type of homework and (2) all types of homework assigned in the course (see Table 4).

Variety in homework type is desirable [12; 22], and it is apparent from our data that teachers varied in the importance they assigned to homework type and generally relied upon an assortment of methods (see Table 4). One-third of the teachers chose "textbook and questions" as the most commonly used type of homework assignment. Fifteen teachers (19%) were "unable to choose" one type as the most commonly assigned. The rest of the choices were distributed throughout the types in descending order as follows: (1) "worksheets," 14%; (2) "problem solving," 13%; (3) "reading and research," 8%; (4) "independent projects," 5%; (5) "essays/writing assignments," 4%; and (6) "other," 4%.

A number of interesting points can be deduced from the figures in Table 4. That nearly one-fifth of the teachers were unable to select the type of homework they most commonly assigned may indicate that assignments were carefully balanced among the various types. On the other hand, it may reflect a more intuitive and less planned approach to assigning homework.

**TABLE 5**  
Most Common Purpose and Type of Homework Across Subjects

Subject: Academic Areas	Number of Teachers	Purpose	Number of Teachers	Type
English	5	Mastery of objectives	4	Unable to choose one
	3	Unable to choose one	3	Reading and research
	2	Reading of literature	3	Textbook and questions
	2	Review of class material	2	Essays/writing assignments
Math	9	Mastery of objectives	8	Problem solving
	3	Review of class material	6	Textbook and questions
	2	Unable to select one	1	Reading and research
	1	Introduction of new material	11	Unable to choose one
	1	Preparation for test		
Science	3	Review of class material	4	Textbook and questions
	3	Introduction of new material	3	Worksheets
	2	Mastery of objectives	1	Independent projects
	1	Preparation for test	1	Unable to choose one
Foreign Language	4	Review of class material	3	Textbook and questions
	1	Mastery of objectives	1	Worksheets
Science			1	Other
	3	Introduction of new material	4	Textbook and questions
	3	Review of class material	3	Worksheets
	2	Mastery of objectives	1	Independent projects
Social Studies	1	Preparation for test	1	Unable to choose one
	4	Preparation for test	2	Textbook and questions
	1	Introduction of new material	2	Reading and research
	1	Unable to choose one	2	Unable to choose one
Subject: Special Areas	Number of Teachers	Purpose	Number of Teachers	Type
Fine Arts	2	Review of class material	3	Independent projects
	2	Mastery of objectives	2	Other
	2	Other	1	Worksheets
Practical Arts and Vocational Courses	5	Mastery of objectives	4	Worksheets
	3	Introduction of new material	3	Textbook and questions
	1	Preparation for tests	1	Essays/writing assignments
			1	Unable to choose one
Business	3	Mastery of objectives	2	Introduce new material
	2	Review of class material	2	Unable to choose one
	1	Introduction of new material	1	Other
Special Education	2	Mastery of objectives	2	Unable to choose one
	1	Preparation for test	1	Worksheets
	1	Review of class material	1	Essays/writing assignments
Driver Education	2	Introduction of new material	2	Textbook and questions
	1	Reading of literature	1	Essays/writing assignments
Senior Problems	1	Mastery of objectives	1	Unable to choose one

“Essays/writing assignments,” “independent projects,” and “reading and research” were all used infrequently (less than 10% each). These assignments emphasize higher ability skills and are more difficult to correct than textbook questions or worksheets. On the other hand, if we group “essays/writing assignments,” “problem solving,” “independent projects,” and “reading and research” together, we see that the emphasis on structured, skill-practice types of homework may be less than we would

conclude from an item-by-item analysis of types. If the “unable to choose” responses are eliminated, we see that over one-third of the most commonly assigned types of homework appear to stress higher order skills.

Table 4 also reveals that all but four teachers in the sample reported using more than one type of homework to accomplish their purposes. At the other extreme, only about 5% of the teachers used six or seven types of homework. The majority of teachers in the sample (77%)

**TABLE 6**  
 Frequency of Methods Used for Checking Homework  
 (in percentages)\*

Methods	Most Frequently Used Method	Second Most Frequently Used Method	Least Frequently Used Method
Class Discussion on Homework	36	29	3
Letter Grade with Comments	36	6	16
Students Correct with Grade During Class	22	29	20
Checked without a Grade for Completion	3	16	45
Quiz on Homework	3	20	16

\*N = 31

used either two, three, or four variations in homework type.

When asked to list all types of homework used, teachers included examples of more creative and applied learning types of homework under the category "other." The ten examples offered included such activities as preparing speeches, writing book reports, building models, and viewing television specials. Types of homework which involve students in using community resources (e.g., working with community leaders or providing direct services to community organizations) were not included by any of the teachers in the sample.

*Purpose and Type by Track.* The frequency counts for the most common purpose and the most commonly assigned type of homework were analyzed across subject areas. The small sample size and the fact that different schools were included within each subject area considerably limits the generalizability of the conclusions. Nonetheless, several observations stand out. Even within subject areas, there was little consistency regarding purpose and type of homework. As shown in Table 5, there were three different top-ranking purposes within the six academic areas. In most of the special areas—practical arts and vocational courses, business, special education, and senior problems—"mastery of objectives" was the top-ranking purpose of homework.

The most commonly assigned types of homework varied less across academic areas than special areas. Four of the six academic areas chose "textbook and questions" as the most commonly assigned homework type. A close examination of the number of teachers choosing various purposes and types reveals a wide distribution of choice within each subject.

#### *Review, Feedback, and Grading of Homework*

*Methods of Checking Homework.* Teachers were asked to rank order the procedures they used to monitor homework assignments. Results for the 31 teachers who answered the questions according to the directions are presented in Table 6. More teachers reported using "class discussion on homework" and "letter grade with comment" more frequently than any other methods. "Class

discussion on homework" and "students correct/grade during class period" were chosen as the second most frequently used methods of monitoring homework by more teachers than any other methods.

Forty-five percent of the teachers chose "checked without a grade for completion" as the least commonly used method for monitoring homework. The remaining 55% indicated the following as their least commonly used method: 20% "students correct/grade during class period," 16% "letter grade with comments," 16% "quiz on homework" and 3% "class discussion on homework."

*Amount of Homework Corrected.* Of the 77 participants, 45 responded that they were able to check and review 81% to 100% of the homework assigned, 13 responded 61% to 80% of the time, 10 responded 41% to 60% of the time, 5 responded 21% to 40%, and 4 responded 0% to 20% of the time. The four who responded 0% to 20% taught one of the following courses: English II, Geometry, Pre-Algebra and Algebra I. The five responding 21% to 40% taught these courses: General Math, Advanced Math, Algebra I, Life Science, and U.S. History. One of the participants, a home economics teacher, wrote the following comment to this question: "If students find you do not grade and count, they do not do work. They feel it is a waste of time. They want a grade if they do the work."

*Amount of Homework Graded.* Of the 77 participants, 87% noted that they graded their homework and 13% noted that they did not. Of the ten individuals who checked "no" for their answer, six were academic, two were general, and two were vocational teachers. Of the 66 teachers who graded homework assignments, 50% graded 81% to 100%, 14% graded 61% to 80%, 9% graded 41% to 60%, 8% graded 21% to 40%, and 5% graded 0% to 20% of their assignments. Fourteen percent, or nine teachers, did not respond to this part of the question.

*Grading Assistance.* Few teachers in this study had any help in grading student homework. Of the 68 teachers who completed this item, only two responded that they had a teacher aide to help with grading. Fifty-two of the teachers reported that they completed all the grading themselves. The only method other than self-grading that

was noted by eight of the teachers had students grade homework during class time. A comparison with Table 6 reveals, however, that even when students graded homework in class, teachers often felt the need to review those grades.

*Feedback to Students.* Strother [26] has argued that students should receive quick feedback on completed assignments. Of the 70 teachers in this study who answered the survey questions in this area, 41 (59%) responded that assignments were graded and returned within one day, 19 (28%) responded to a length of two days, 8 (11%) responded to a length of three to five days, 1 (1%) responded to a length of more than a week and 1 (1%) responded that homework was not returned, just recorded.

We studied the responses to the question of how long it took to grade and return homework for the 45 teachers who said that they were able to check and review 81 to 100% of homework assigned. Forty teachers were included in this sample because four checked more than one response, and one did not respond. The findings, which are quite consistent with the numbers presented above (58% responded one day, 30% responded two days and 12% responded three to five days), indicate that teachers who graded higher percentages of student homework did not take longer than their colleagues to mark and return that work.

*Success Rate.* A good deal of research shows the connection between high student success rates and student learning [2]. In this study, 66% of the teachers (51) reported success rates of 80% or higher—8% at 90% and 58% at 80%, 19 (25%) reported an average success rate of 70%, 6 (8%) of 60%, and one (1%) of 50%. None of the 77 participants reported a success rate of less than 50%.

Responses regarding the average success rate for their individual students were analyzed for the 67 teachers who responded “yes” to grading homework. Thirty-eight (57%) responded 80% correct, 16 (24%) responded 70% correct, six (9%) responded 90% correct, six (9%) responded 60% correct, and one (1%) responded 50% correct. No one in this sample responded with a success rate of less than 50%. These findings closely parallel findings on success rates for the total sample.

Next, the average accuracy rates for individual students of the 45 teachers who responded that they checked and reviewed 81 to 100% of assigned homework were analyzed: 30 teachers (67%) responded 80% correct, 10 (22%) responded 70% correct, four (9%) responded 90% correct and one (2%) responded 60% correct. No teacher checked 50% or less correct.

An analysis of the total responses regarding the percentage of assignments graded was then made for the 67 teachers who responded affirmatively to grading homework. Thirty-eight (58%) responded 81 to 100%, 11 (16%) responded 61 to 80%, seven (10%) responded 41 to 60%, six (9%) responded 21 to 40%, and four (6%) responded 0 to 20%. One participant (1%) in this sample did not respond to this item.

The responses concerning how teachers managed to

complete the amount of grading required were analyzed for the 38 teachers who reported that they graded 81 to 100% of their assignments. Four were not included in this portion of the sample because they responded with more than one answer. Twenty-eight (82%) of the respondents indicated that they completed all grading themselves and six (18%) filled in “other” and wrote in their responses. Five of these six teachers wrote that the class graded the homework assignment during class time.

A fifth analysis was made of the answers to the question regarding the length of time it took to grade and return assignments for the 38 teachers who said that they graded 81 to 100% of their assignments. Thirty-six of the responses were analyzed because two teachers responded with more than one answer. Of these, 22 (58%) responded one day, 10 (28%) two days and five (14%) three to five days.

*Inclusion in the Grading System.* Methods by which homework assignments are incorporated into the grading system vary. Strother [26] has suggested that as grading standards become more stringent and the amount of homework assigned increases, the importance placed on homework grades should probably be greater. Lee and Pruitt [12] have suggested that when practice assignments are given to insure mastery of content or skills, students should be quizzed on homework content to ensure that mastery has been obtained.

Of the 77 participants in this study, 36 (47%) computed some or a portion of homework into their final course grade, 34 (44%) computed all and 6 (8%) computed none. One teacher (1%) did not respond to this question.

To see if any of the teachers within the same departments responded in a similar fashion, participants were grouped by departments and by schools. Analysis revealed that three schools seemed to have consistency within their departments regarding how homework was computed into the final course grade as well as consistency regarding student success rate, monitoring procedures, and feedback. This finding is consistent with other studies which show the department to be the basic and oftentimes defacto unit of curricular and instructional decision-making at the secondary school level [4; 7; 13].

#### *Value and Significance of Assigning Homework*

Of the 35 respondents who commented on this item, seven stated that homework was very important and necessary. Nine of the interviewees commented on how much homework was worth in students’ final grades, with six assigning it a value of between 25 and 33%. Respondents wrote the following comments to explain the significance they placed on homework assignments:

- “Homework is a way for students to keep current on in-class projects. For various reasons such as illness, lessons, or just a slow worker, the homework helps relieve the pressure some feel trying to keep up with others. Some students work better at home and should be allowed time to work in that location.” (Art)

- “Some students do not do well on tests and for this type of student homework is my best gauge for success. I feel this motivates students to open the book and at least hunt for the answers. When writing the answer they have an opportunity to gain some knowledge.” (Home Economics)
- “It’s a good way for me to see how well I have presented materials.” (English-Special Education)
- “Homework assignments help students identify important aspects of a problem area. Also allows me to monitor their progress and allows students to recognize areas where they may need more work.” (Agriculture)
- “If the students do not complete the assignments, they will have difficulties passing tests and the course.” (Math, Science, Driver Education)
- “Homework is where the student learns to draw, where he makes his mistakes and learns from them.” (Art)
- “Cannot learn a foreign language without daily practice.” (Spanish)
- “Key to the learning process.” (Social Studies)
- “Viable teaching tool if used correctly.” (English)

Two respondents voiced concern about students cheating on homework assignments. One stated: “Because of comparing (I call it cheating) I question the independent completion of homework assignments.” The second respondent stated that s/he considered the significance of homework to be “very little—too easy to cheat.” Some of the respondents who noted that homework was not graded explained that students were quizzed on homework assignments. This could be one method for alleviating the problem of cheating. Many of the respondents who considered homework to be significant described homework assignments as a method of independent practice on material covered in class or as a preparation of materials to be taught during the next class period.

The interviews indicated that grading policies were not uniform. Four of the teachers (33%) did not include homework in any way in final grades. Their perception was that test scores and class performance indicated whether or not students had completed the assignments. Two teachers (17%) had a grading policy of spot checking, either reviewing all homework for the class once out of several assignments or examining a small portion of completed work for each class. The other six teachers (50%) in the interview sample used the grades from weekly homework assignments for one-quarter to one-third of the semester grade. Thus, half of the interview group felt that the time spent by students on homework was significant and should comprise a substantial proportion of the final course grade.

### SUMMARY

An analysis of the data revealed that the majority of teachers:

1. Answered “no” to the existence and enforcement of

- a homework policy at district, school, and department levels;
2. Assigned homework;
3. Most commonly assigned homework for the purposes of mastery of objectives and review of class materials taught;
4. Most commonly assigned textbook and questions, and worksheets for homework;
5. Assigned homework three to five times a week;
6. Expected the students to take 20-45 minutes to complete the homework assignment;
7. Used oral instructions when assigning homework;
8. Checked and reviewed 81-100% of the homework;
9. Used some portion of the homework grade when computing the final grade;
10. Did not have assistance with grading homework;
11. Generally took one day to grade and return homework assignments.

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