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AUTHOR Diersen, Kimberly  
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## ABSTRACT

Recognizing the relationship between homework completion and academic achievement, this action research project targeted eighth graders in all subject areas who failed to complete homework assignments and provided them with creative strategies to improve homework completion. Participating in the project were eighth graders from a small, suburban, Midwestern town. Homework completion problems were documented from existing grade reports, teacher anecdotal records, and surveys from parents, students, and teachers. The intervention program emphasized student personal responsibility by requiring assignment notebooks to be completed with current assignments. All homework assignments were graphed in the assignment notebook to show students and parents the students' personal homework progress. Afterschool study sessions were required for students receiving failing grades. Creative homework options replaced traditional worksheet methods that made it more attractive for students to complete their homework independently. The impact of the intervention was assessed by means of student surveys, grades, homework records, and teachers' anecdotal records and journals. In addition, student pre-algebra grades from the 2000 class were compared to those from the 1999 class that had not used assignment notebooks. Post-evaluative measures indicated that students completed more homework when required to keep a daily assignment notebook and when given homework options in place of traditional homework. Pre-algebra grades were higher and the number of missing assignments were fewer for the 2000 class than for the 1999 class. Graphing of homework results and use of after school study sessions were not perceived as useful in reaching the goal of increasing homework completion. (Four appendices contain the surveys used in this project. Contains 26 references.) (KB)

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# IMPROVING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL HOMEWORK STRATEGIES

Kimberly (Hoppe) Diersen

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This project was approved by

*Amy S. Hanson Ph.D.*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

*Marguerite VanLeoyoc C.A.S. Nancy Christy Ma*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

*Beverly Gulley*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean, School of Education

## ABSTRACT

Research shows there is a significant relationship between homework completion and academic achievement. The program that is described targets eighth grade students in all subject areas who fail to complete homework and gives creative strategies to improve homework completion. The students involved in this research project come from a small, suburban, midwestern town about one hour from a major metropolitan area. Their interaction with homework was documented through existing grade reports, teacher, parent, and student surveys, and anecdotal records.

Analysis of probable cause of the lack of homework completion revealed that students did value homework as a high priority but had non-school related time commitments, forgot to bring it home, and did not understand it once they arrived home. Parents claimed that their students spend too much time doing homework. In addition to these reasons, teachers reported that students lack organizational skills and therefore have difficulty completing homework. Review of current literature also supported these causes.

The program developed in this project emphasized student personal responsibility by requiring assignment notebooks to be filled out with current assignments. All homework assignments were graphed in the assignment notebook to show students and parents their personal homework progress. Afterschool study sessions were required for students receiving failing grades. Creative homework options replaced traditional worksheet methods that made it more attractive for kids to be self-motivated to complete their homework independently.

Post evaluative measures indicated that students completed more homework when required to keep a daily assignment notebook and given homework options in place of traditional homework. Graphing homework results and after-school study sessions did not prove useful in reaching the goal of increased homework completion. For these strategies to be deemed successful, additional research would need to be done.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

#### General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted eighth grade class exhibit a lack of commitment to independent, out-of-school learning displayed through daily homework and long-term projects, which affects academic achievement. Evidence of the existence of the problem includes existing grade and homework reports, and teacher and student surveys.

#### Immediate Problem Context

The demographic information for the intermediate site involved in this project was taken from the 1998 School Report Card, the Village 1997 Special Census (March 21, 1997) Summary Sheet, the Full Data Report of Census Updates & Projections by National Decision Systems, and the Demographic Trends and Enrollment Projections for the Community High School District and its Consolidated Sending School Districts prepared by Demographer John D. Kasarda, Ph.D.

The junior high site researched is part of a small but rapidly growing district which has one junior high building housing seventh and eighth grades and five elementary school buildings, each housing grades Kindergarten through six. The junior high building houses 654 students with an average class size being 26. The ethnic background of the students population within the junior high is as follows: 95.1% White, 0.5% Black, 3.1% Hispanic, and 1.4% Asian. Students identified as "low-income" amount to 3.8%. Only 0.6% of students are identified Limited-English-Proficient, but that percent is quickly increasing as growing numbers of

first-generation Hispanic families move into the district. Ninety-five point two percent attend school regularly. The school has a mobility rate of 5.9%. No students at this site were identified as chronic truants, as reflected by the 0.0% statistic.

There are 65 full-time staff employed at this junior high site. Fifty-two of those 65 staff members are full-time teachers. Eighty-seven point one percent of these classroom teachers are female, 12.9% of them are male. The ethnic background of the teachers at this location are 98.9% White, 0.0% Black, 0.6% Hispanic, 0.6% Asian, and 0.0% Native American. The average teaching experience is 11.7 years. Twenty-nine percent of teachers at this site have a Bachelor's Degree only, while 71% have Master's-level education or above. The pupil-teacher ratio is 21.4:1.

The school program has adopted many middle school principles that are meant to maximize academic success for each student. These strategies include but are not limited to smaller teams of students assigned to four core subject teachers, consistent standards and expectations passed down from the teachers, and management of student issues within a team before utilizing administration support. These things all provide greater student and teacher identity within a "family". The school program includes the following core subjects and daily time allotments: Math (60 minutes), Science (60 minutes), Language Arts (80 minutes), and Social Science (60 minutes). The following enrichment courses required for all students meet daily for one trimester, 40 minutes each day: Home Economics, Industrial Arts, Foreign Language, Art, and Health. Physical Education meets 40 minutes each day, every day. The school encourages all students to get involved in after-school activities by providing numerous clubs (Recycling, Yearbook, Art, Drama, Science, Newspaper), formal sports programs (seasonal), and Intramural

sports (entire school year). Teachers frequently have students in their classrooms after school for academic improvement reasons. A late bus is provided Tuesday through Friday to allow students the chance to meet with teachers or be involved in extra-curricular activities.

School-wide standardized testing done in 1998 suggests that the majority of students at this site meet or exceed state goals in mathematics, reading, and writing. Their achievement ranks them as the number one school in the county. Table 1 reflects the degree to which these students meet state goals.

Table 1

Grade 8 State Performance Test Results for the Year 1998

	% Does Not Meet Goals	% Meets Goals	% Exceeds Goals
Reading	9	60	31
Writing	3	48	49
Mathematics	0	55	45

Because of the state achievement success shown on the performance assessments, students in this school and district have earned an "exempt" status in state on-site quality review procedures. The amount of testing success that this school has had can be attributed, in part, to the surrounding community, which is growing in numbers of white-collar workers and financial prosperity.

#### The Surrounding Community

The population of this site as of the 1997 Special Census was 14,931 people in 4,900 households. In 1990, the Census reflected 10,043 people in 3,539 households. Between 1990 and 2010, the Planning Commission forecast a 65% increase of people in the community. They predicted that 6,520 residents would be added in 2,809 households. It appears that the

community is rapidly surpassing the original growth estimates. This continued growth seems to be a direct result of a recent agreement to construct a large sewer interceptor in the village. This current course of action has encouraged there to be single family homes and townhomes built in price from \$140,000 to \$350,000.

To accommodate the increasing enrollment, the school district added one new 30-classroom elementary school in the fall of 1993 and one new 30-classroom elementary school in the fall of 1998. The district is currently using all available classroom space. Because of the increasing enrollment at the elementary levels, there is great concern that the single junior high facility will be unable to meet the community needs at the intermediate level. Plans to either build an addition onto the existing junior high, or build a second junior high are currently being reviewed by the school board. This decision is crucial since the completion of the sewer interceptor could result in the development of over 700 acres of land in the county being annexed to the village, therefore contributing to further significant student growth.

According to 1998 estimates, the average head-of-household income is \$74,699, while the median income is \$63,645. The per capita income is significantly lower, marked at \$25,122. An estimated 1% of households live below the poverty level. Twenty-eight percent of the people have a Bachelor's degree or higher level of education. Although the average travel time to work is 31 minutes, 48% of those employed travel more than 30 minutes. This suggests that a significant majority of residents are white-collar professionals, traveling from this suburban site towards the city for their daily work. The train, which runs through the center of town, also encourages residents to commute to city locations. Employment within the town itself is very

limited as it has small numbers of retail and service businesses, with almost no industrial or professional business base.

The site being researched boasts a community that values education very highly. Parents show overwhelming support for the targeted junior high by coming to two open houses a year. Every referendum in the past ten years related to the school district has passed the first time. One hundred percent of teachers at this site initiate some sort of parent contact each quarter. The support of the community has been essential to the academic success of the school itself.

In the spring of 1999, the targeted site experienced teacher-contract negotiation meetings. Significant increases in salary were being requested from the school board. Several reasons explain why teachers were growing increasingly more unhappy. The starting pay was at \$7,000 less than nearby elementary districts. The pay increases over the last ten years have lagged 8% behind the inflation rate. New teachers at this site were unable to live alone anywhere in the county on the current salary. Starting salaries at the high school, just one year greater than where this study was being done, reflect a \$9,000 difference. If the school board was unwilling to bend to the requested pay increases, the teachers would have taken a strike vote. The growing decision of teachers to stand firm in receiving fair wages will, for the first time in a long time, create new feelings in the community about education. These feelings could affect students' attitudes about school, and homework for that matter, as they absorb the culture's educational perspectives around them. Nation-wide, there are cultures that promote different educational ideals. The academic goals of a nation drive the educational curriculum and have direct effects on the way homework is viewed and pursued.

### National Context of the Problem

The question of whether or not homework affects achievement in any way has been approached by many researchers. Carol Huntsinger, an education professor at the College of Lake County, compared the academic performance of local Chinese-American children with that of European-American kids. In the early grades, the Chinese-American students outperformed their white counterparts in math and mastery of vocabulary words. After examining a host of other factors, Huntsinger concluded that homework made the critical difference (Ratnesar, 1999). Not only do research studies cite homework as influencing academic achievement in the primary grades, but junior high and high schools also show a correlation between students doing homework and increased academic achievement. The research of Betts (as cited in Ratnesar, 1999) further revealed the pay-off of doing homework; she:

examined surveys on the homework habits of 6,000 students over five years and found that students who did an extra 30 minutes of nightly math homework beginning in seventh grade would, by eleventh grade, see their achievement level soar by the equivalent of two grades. (p. 61)

A contrasting study based on twenty years of national samples revealed that it takes ". . . less time among highschool seniors" to complete homework (Freedman-Doan & Libsch, 1997, p. 97-98). This could be due to the fact that many seniors have mastered good study habits or that they have planned fewer courses that require time and skill for their senior year. Researchers agree with Betts (as cited in Ratnesar, 1999) who argues that the amount of homework is a better indicator of how students perform than the size of class or the quality of teachers.

Teachers have many reasons for assigning homework. Palardy (as cited in Black, 1999) argues that schools should rethink the idea of requiring homework. He believes that there are three main purposes of homework--to allow kids to practice new skills, to prepare students to learn new information in class, and to apply new learning by doing projects and other extensions (Black, 1999). Without a doubt, these purposes support the strongest argument for assigning homework--the assumption that doing homework raises students' achievement. This assumption motivates teachers to factor homework into the final report card grade (Black, 1999). While doing the homework can result in increased achievement and therefore successful grades in all areas such as tests and quizzes, the lack of doing it can be detrimental to academic achievement and overall school success.

Students who don't do homework are oftentimes unable to learn the content in class, are unequipped to share in class discussions, and can result in total dropout from school altogether. Eleven public school districts in Boston have recently given homework such low priority that many students no longer carry backpacks (Morse, 1999). Frustrated teachers complain that few students complete the homework, making it impossible to discuss course material. The *Boston Globe* reported that "As many as 20% of teachers have stopped assigning homework" (Morse, 1999, p. 59). If homework is not assigned, students achieve less and teachers are unable to move deeper into subject content. If homework is assigned, there is the recurring problem that students cannot keep up with it. In the early nineties, Kralovec (as cited in Morse, 1999) studied and surveyed Maine high school dropouts. She recorded that they "all cited their inability to keep up with homework as a major factor in the decision to leave school" (Morse, 1999, p. 59). The fact that homework seems to have such significant effects on achievement in positive (when it is done)

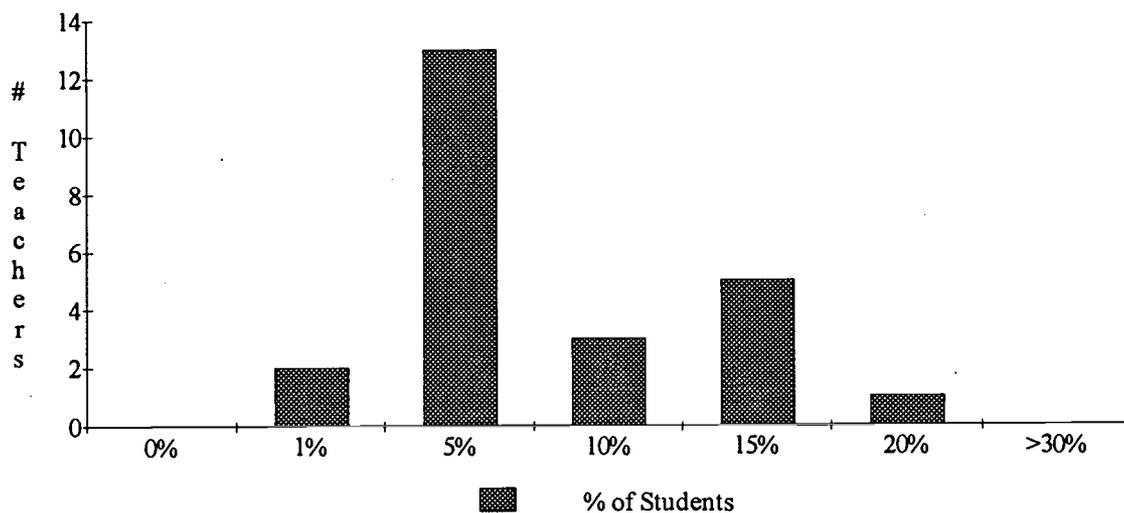
and negative (when it is neglected) ways shows that it is an ongoing problem that should be addressed by teachers and school administration. Furthermore, the correlation between completing homework and academic achievement has been documented at the site being researched. Chapter 2 will describe such evidence.

## CHAPTER 2

### PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

#### Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent of the problem of lack of completion of homework, student surveys, teacher surveys, and homework records from the previous year were evaluated. Of the 50 teachers receiving the survey (Appendix A), 30 teachers responded. Figure 1 shows the number of teachers and the percent of students they reported as failing to complete homework.

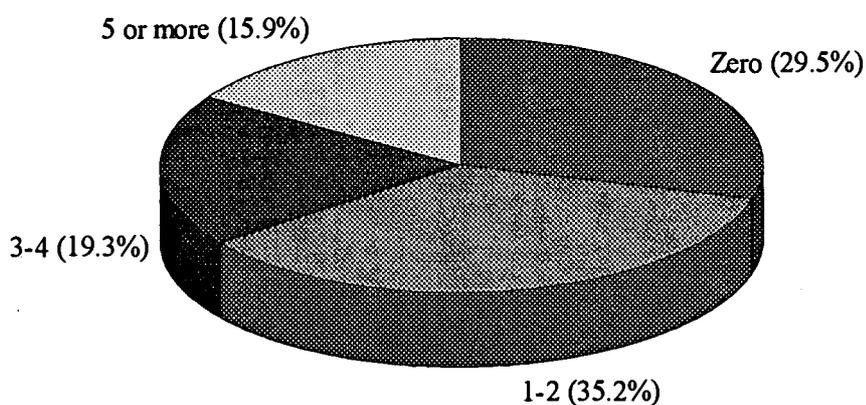


**Figure 1.** What percent of your students fail to complete homework assignments?

The majority of teachers reported that 5% to 15% of their students do not have their homework completed on time. From the teacher's perspective, this is evidence that some students are not completing homework. Although the percentage of students not doing homework may seem small, it is significant in the context of all the students within a school. At the site being researched (725 total students), 5% of the students not doing homework would mean about 36

students, while 15% of the students would mean about 109 students not doing homework. If teachers are corporately unable to motivate 109 out of 725 of the students, then there is a problem! In addition to teacher surveys indicating a problem with students completing homework, there is also the evidence of grade reports.

Homework records from the previous year were reviewed to document the premise that homework completion is a problem and that there is a correlation between homework completion and academic success. Although the students are not identical to the ones being studied this year, the records establish proof of basic patterns and connections. Homework records were tallied to determine the number of assignments eighth grade Pre-Algebra students failed to complete. Figure 2 displays the number of assignments that were not completed over the course of a semester.



**Figure 2.** Number of missing assignments by Pre-Algebra students during second semester.

These grade reports show overwhelming evidence that students fail to complete homework assignments. There is further evidence that shows the link between failure to complete homework and academic achievement. Table 2 shows the average quarter grades for students in contrast to the number of assignments missed.

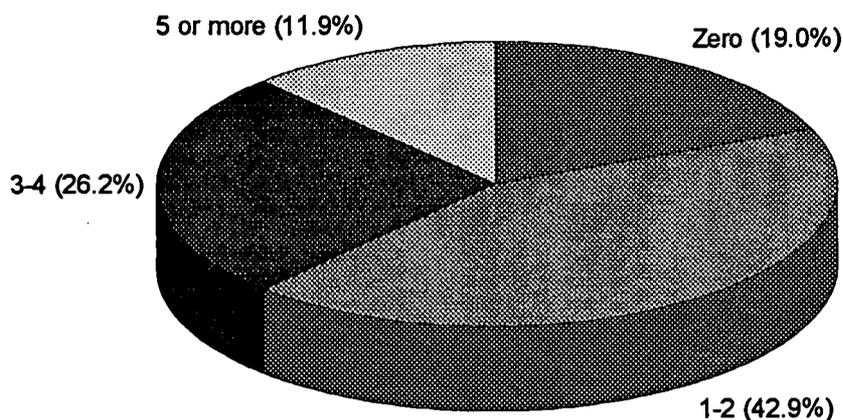
Table 2

Grade 8 Comparison of Homework Completion to Quarter Grades

Number of Missing Assignments	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 or more
Quarter 1	85.8%	83.9%	83.8%	79.9%	79.8%	75.8%	65.0%	55.1%
Quarter 2	85.2%	76.9%	79.0%	72.3%	75.5%	62.9%	64.0%	68.1%
Quarter 3	85.6%	83.6%	80.3%	78.2%	69.4%	76.0%	67.0%	71.0%
Quarter 4	82.4%	76.3%	78.4%	71.9%	70.4%	70.5%	N/A	64.4%

From this table, several observations can be made. First, there is an overall pattern that links no or few missing assignments to higher grades. Likewise, student averages for students missing 7 or more assignments differed 14.6% to 30.7% when compared to students missing no homework assignments. In the classroom, that difference translates into a difference of one to three letter grades less for students who do not regularly complete assignments (7 or more). This evidence reinforces the premise that completing homework does affect academic achievement.

Finally, a student survey (Appendix B) was given to determine if students themselves believed that turning in homework was a problem. This data reflects the perceptions of students on their own homework habits. When asked, "In math, how often do you turn in your homework on time?", 52.4% reported "Sometimes", while 7.1% reported "Never". This shows that over half of all students surveyed reported not handing in their homework all the time. Students were then asked to report how many assignments between their core classes they turn in late or miss each month. Figure 3 shows their responses to that question.



**Figure 3.** Number of missing assignments each month for all subjects each month.

Nearly 80% of all students surveyed reported having missing assignments each month. Since students themselves are the ones doing homework, their perception of the number of homework assignments not turned in on time each month is especially useful. The data voiced by students reflects one thing: that students struggle with homework completion.

In summary, evidence showing there is a problem of homework completion was documented through teacher surveys, student surveys, and grade records. Homework records further showed that academic achievement decreases as the number of missing assignments increases. For every missing assignment, there must be a reason why that assignment was not completed. In fact, those reasons are many.

#### Probable Causes - Site-Based

Homework attitudes and habits of students were documented by the researcher through teacher, parent, and student surveys; existing grade reports, and anecdotal records. Data was recorded and analyzed from 45 students, 38 parents, and 30 teachers. The following results show the tendencies concerning homework among this sample.

### Student Survey Data

A student survey given to 41 eighth grade students (Appendix B) at the research site revealed many reasons why students fail to finish their homework. Fifty-three percent of the students reported that one of the reasons for not completing their homework was "I forgot my materials", or "I forgot that I had homework". In addition to the problem of forgetfulness, 41.5% of students reported that they, "Didn't understand the homework because it was too hard". The final and most common excuse students gave for not completing homework was that they "are very involved in non-school related activities such as lessons, church, or community sports". Out of 41 students completing the survey, 23 of the students, or 56.1%, claimed their non-school commitments pulled them away from homework.

In summary, students reported forgetfulness, lack of understanding, and involvement in out-of-school activities as the main reasons why homework was not completed. Parents also had ideas about why their children fail to follow through on their assignments.

### Parent Survey Data

The parents of these same students were surveyed (Appendix C). Thirty-eight parents participated. When asked why they believe their student might not finish their homework, 55.3% reported that "There is too much homework to do each night". This might seem inconsistent with earlier data. Only 24% said their children spend more than 2 hours of time on homework daily. While over half of parents surveyed report that there is too much homework, just under one-quarter of these same parents report their child spending more than 2 hours on homework. In anecdotal reports, students reported doing other activities at the same time as doing homework.

These activities included watching TV, talking on the phone, and listening to music. This could explain why parents feel their child is doing too much homework and the student does not.

Parents also noted that besides having too much homework each night, their student doesn't understand the homework because it is too hard. Of those parents responding in the survey, 39.5% agreed that students not understanding the homework was one of the factors in failing to complete homework. The final major reason given by parents for students not completing homework was out-of-school commitments. Forty-seven percent reported that their child was "very involved in non-school related activities such as lessons, church, or community sports. The large numbers of parents that believe their students don't understand homework given (39.5%) and are committed to after-school activities (47.4%) further reinforces what students reported in their surveys (41.5% of students didn't understand, 56.1% of students reported over-involvement).

Parents cited many reasons to explain why their children do not complete assignments. One of the reasons was that there is too much homework assigned. In agreement with the students' surveys, parents reported that the homework was often too hard and that their children do not have time because of out-of-school activities. In addition to parents' perspectives, teachers revealed causes for the problem.

#### Teacher Survey Data

Teachers reported the number one reason for poor report card grades as homework (46%). The second most common reason given by teachers for poor report card grades was organizational skills (36%). These results are very revealing about the true difficulty in homework completion. According to the anecdotal records by teachers, students receive low

grades because they have poor organizational skills. This includes keeping track of assignments, remembering what assignments are due, and remembering books for class and home use. In Forgetfulness was the reason given by 53.7% of students in their survey. The likelihood of forgetting, coupled with the lack of organization would severely impact the ability to complete homework. Students' informal comments are yet another way of revealing clues to the missing homework problem.

### Anecdotal Records

As I listened to students talk about why homework is not completed, several themes were repeated. First, students verbalized that they "didn't get it". Students reported wanting to be done with the lesson and therefore giving verbal indication that they understood without truly understanding. A second explanation by students of why they may lack understanding once they arrive home is that they were not given enough variety in examples to be equipped to do all the homework problems. Instead of working through challenging problems, students reported "giving up" or just choosing to get those problems wrong. Students also reported that they didn't see the connection between studying for a test or quiz and getting higher grades. They reported that they could do just as well on the test without working on the material at home. The final excuse heard by students for failing to complete homework is that they "were busy". The issue of time and priorities has been repeated by several survey results. They appear to be the biggest competition to the idea of completing homework.

From the data collected at the target site, students appear desirous of completing their homework. Their biggest reasons for not completing it were accidentally forgetting it, not understanding it, and having non-school related activities that bargain for their time. Parents also

reported that students don't understand their homework and have other activities that demand their time. However, parents also commented that students spend too much time doing homework. Teachers, on the other hand, received anecdotal comments from students that indicate they are doing other things at the same time as completing their homework. Teachers reported that a major reason why homework is not being done is that students don't have organizational skills. Although these are the probable causes for lack of homework at this school, there are many causes reported by researchers around the world. Their insight is crucial in understanding what the problems are, and how to remedy them with appropriate solutions.

#### Probable Causes

Understanding why students choose not to do homework is at the root of understanding how solutions can be implemented. According to Cooper (1989), there is a "complex interaction of multiple causes" (p. 87) that explain why homework is not completed. Reasons why homework is not completed have changed as our society has changed. With increasing numbers of women returning to the workplace in the last decade, the work day growing beyond the "normal" eight hours, and with the increasing emphasis put on students to participate in sports and clubs, it is no wonder why homework completion is a number one problem teachers face. Homework has taken on a low priority due to other values pervading, lacking home support, growing attitudes that homework is "intrusive", growing opinions that it takes up too much time, and a lack of importance as perceived by students.

#### Low Priority

Students today have been given many choices about how to spend their after-school time. According to Hootstein (1994), students are not motivated to do homework because too many

other things crowd it out. This is evidenced within the school setting at the junior high level being researched. At this site, the opportunities for non-academic involvement are endless: competition sports such as volleyball, basketball, wrestling, cross country, and track; intramural sports such as ping pong, golf, Frisbee golf, basketball, and floor hockey; clubs such as newspaper, yearbook, drama, recycling, science, and academic club; and music opportunities that involve two thirds of the student body in chorus, band, and private music lessons. Outside of these school opportunities, students are encouraged to participate in church activities such as youth groups, clubs such as boy scouts, sports such as pee wee football, and private lessons that range from dance to instrument to art. It is very understandable, then why Hinchey (1996) would cite students as using the excuse, "I have other real things to do" as a reason why homework is not a priority. Outside of all these expectations for activity put on students, they complain that they do not have time to do the homework and want a social life (Hinchey, 1996). At the target site, 33% of students surveyed listed "wanting a social life" as taking priority over homework. Students cited having home responsibilities as a reason why schoolwork was not completed. For others, TV took precedence over any drive to fulfill academic responsibilities. The rise of non-academic opportunities and pressure from society to keep up with the media and develop in all areas of talent have clearly prescribed a new place for homework completion--at the bottom of the totem pole. Who, then, is the "force" that pulls students up to completing academics, away from their bad decisions, and helps them become disciplined contributors to the classroom and society? This reveals the second link in homework completion: home support.

### Missing Home Support

Teachers have long since realized that besides non-academic activities attracting student involvement, that also "aspects of family life influence students' homework completion" (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1997, p. 33). Families seek to build togetherness by spending time together enjoying recreational activities or by working together towards a common goal. When they are not devoting this time to each other, the parents are oftentimes consumed by the demands of work. Students, then, must be self-motivated to complete their homework. Parents magazine has noted the problem students have in getting the help they need: "The lengthening of the workday, longer commutes, two working parents, and the breakdown of the American family: all of that has a tremendous impact on whether kids can get help with their homework" (Anderson, 1999, p. A12). The complaint that students need "help" with homework is further complicated by students coming from so many different backgrounds. Morse (1999) claims that, "Homework is done in radically different environments and is biased against poorer kids" (p. 59). Students that come from poorer families tend to have parents that lack enough educational background to help them with junior high level homework, such as Algebra. The reasons why home support lacks are many, but the truth is still the same: students get less help on their homework and therefore struggle in completing it. Students who come from parental backgrounds where home-help is not found, may also find that those homes view homework as non-essential, worthless, and intrusive.

### Viewed as Intrusive

In more recent years, homework has received an increasingly bad reputation. According to a recent NBC news broadcast focusing in on homework completion, American families view homework as a chore (Rosati, 1999). It is seen as an intruder--of fun, sleep, and social

experiences. Wildman (1968) believed that, "Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents" (p. 202-203). Homework is therefore seen as denying students of life experiences that they deserve to have. Gardner (1999), on the other hand, believes that if homework was not seen as an intrusion, but rather as a "daily occasion where major tasks and opportunities of growing up could be worked through" (p. 63), then homework would not become the first battleground when a child is not performing well. The perspective one takes on the role of homework is crucial to the patterns of homework completion. If it is viewed as a waste of time, the student will less likely be motivated to attempt it. Time, then, becomes the enemy.

### Time

Time is oftentimes seen as the enemy of intrusion when homework is approached. Studies show that younger students are receiving more homework at earlier ages (Anderson, 1999). Many explanations are given that rationalize the assigning of large amounts of homework. For one, the school day is shorter than it used to be, so students need time outside class to accomplish tasks that could not be finished within the confines of the school day (Rosati, 1999). Increasing emphasis on standardized testing and competition with other countries require that more must be learned, and therefore more homework must be given (Anderson, 1999). Teachers are also blamed as underestimating the amount of time needed for students to complete their assignments (Black, 1996; Bryan, 1997). If teachers rush students through the homework, they might very well assume that it is not valued by the teacher and therefore not worth doing at all.

### Homework is Not Worth Doing

A national educational longitudinal study of 25,000 eighth graders sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that students believe schoolwork is boring (Hootstein, 1994). To some students, it is viewed as busywork (Black, 1996). To others, the completed homework is not valued by teachers in any way. Hinchey (1996) cited students claiming that, "Teachers who assign homework don't seem to value it in any way. They don't collect it, don't read it, don't grade it, don't use it in class. As a result, students wonder, 'What's the point?'" (p. 243). Teachers also devalue the completion of homework by not creating a relationship with it to student's grades or test scores (Diamond, 1999). Black (1996) found that:

teachers too frequently jot down a homework assignment on the chalkboard or cram it in at the last minute as students are packing up for their next class. The result? Kids don't have the expectations, skills, and motivation to complete their homework successfully. (p. 50)

Students who do not feel like homework is emphasized, will less successfully complete their homework.

### Summary

According to professional literature, experts claim there are five major reasons why students fail to complete homework. These probable causes are as follows:

1. Homework has taken a lower priority due to increasing demands of students to be involved in non-academic activities.
2. Students lack the home support needed to complete homework successfully.
3. Homework is viewed by society as intrusive to the value of other life experiences.

4. The amount of homework is viewed as so significant that students do not have the time needed to complete it.

5. Homework is not viewed by students as worth doing because it is boring and teachers do not demonstrate its value by their actions.

All of these reasons still leave the students with the opportunity to make a choice, "Will they, or will they not complete their homework?" Solutions that are sought after, therefore, must take this premise into account. The solutions that are addressed must provide extra incentive for students to choose it over all the other life demands that face them.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

#### Literature Review

A review of the current literature surfaced a plethora of solutions to the homework completion problem. Before describing the varying solutions, it must be noted that researchers differed on the foundational value of giving homework at all. Out of 20 studies done by Cooper, 14 produced effects favoring homework and 6 favored no homework (Cooper, 1989).

While students would no doubt favor no homework, teachers present a unique perspective. Their goal is to teach skills that will enable students to be better thinkers, and therefore better community contributors. Many researchers studying the importance of homework noted that ". . . homework improves students' attitudes toward school, promotes study habits, facilitates understanding and retention of the material, and involves parents in the educational process" (Gajria, & Salend, 1995, p. 291). Holmes and Croll (as cited in Patton, 1994) emphasized in their research findings that homework provides a home-school connection that allows parents to exert a positive influence in their child's life. The symbolic involvement of parents meshed with the practical results of homework give the concept of assigning homework even more credibility. The most significant research findings in support of homework is no doubt made by Cooper (1989). Cooper (1989) revealed the importance of homework, especially at the junior and senior high levels, by showing that the greater amount of time students spent doing

homework, the higher their grades and achievement scores. It is clear that, from a research perspective, homework has many positive effects on students who take it seriously.

Homework appears to be the key reinforcer in academic success. Is it essential for teachers to reach these goals by assigning large amounts of homework each night? Ratnesar (1999) reported that parents oftentimes receive the effects of the assigned work in that "the sheer quantity of nightly homework and the difficulty of the assignments can . . . transform the placid refuge of home life into a tense war zone" (p. 56). Some teachers believe that students can prove their proficiency in an area by completing 5 problems instead of 25. Other teachers believe that assigning large quantities of homework builds in students self-discipline and the skill of goal setting (Tovey, 1997). Palardy (as cited in Black, 1996) suggests that there are three time-consuming problems that defeat the purposes of homework:

loading students up with five or six major assignments one night and hardly anything on the next; having students practice mistakes by doing drill worksheets over and over; and assigning homework solely in one subject area instead of integrating homework among various subjects. (p. 50)

Homework that focuses strictly on repetition is not consistent with the goals of homework.

Palardy (as cited by Black, 1996) suggests that the main purposes of homework are to "allow kids to practice new skills, to prepare to learn new information in class, and to apply new learning by doing projects and extensions" (p. 50-51). These purposes are not accepted by all educators, however. Some educators do not believe homework has a purpose. The idea that homework is useless was first tested by the state of California.

In 1901, the state of California voted to eliminate homework for students under the age of 15. This trend lasted 28 years until 1929, when homework was reinstated as an appropriate extension of school learning (Tovey, 1997). Nearly 100 years later, in 1994, the concept of banning homework was proposed once again. A school board member in the Cabrillo school district in California proposed banning homework as a solution to the lack of completion (Hinchey, 1996). His opinion was so unpopular among faculty in the school district that he was dismissed on account of it. This action shows that our academic community still believes in the value of homework, even if it does not get done by students. It further demonstrates that, "...the movement to do something about homework is driven more by public and professional opinion than by empirical evidence" (Patton, 1994, p. 570). Homework will continue as long as there are teachers to assign it and students to whine about it (Tovey, 1997). The issue, then, is in finding ways to motivate students to complete homework so that they experience overall school success. This success could come through rewards, changing the way homework is done, teaching students study skills, or by arranging more time during the class to complete assignments.

### External Motivators

External motivators can encourage students to complete homework. Rosenberg (1989) found that "merely assigning homework with little or no consequences for compliance or non-compliance will lead to equivocal outcomes" (p. 323). The most successful completion of homework occurs in a classroom where the teacher expects, values, and rewards it (Rosenberg, 1989). Therefore, a teacher with high expectations about homework is likely to receive a higher response to homework completion. Students who know their teacher will reward them for their homework efforts are likely to respond with greater homework completion frequency.

In-class rewards for homework completion are many. It can be as simple as a weekly homework lottery (Partin, 1986). Students who complete homework assignments receive a ticket on which they write their names and enter it into a lottery. The teacher, then, draws out a certain number of names (randomly) at the end of the week and those winning students receive a reward of some sort. The researcher used this strategy in a sixth grade classroom in 1998 and it seemed to be very effective. Students were proud of the number of tickets they had acquired and eagerly awaited the weekly drawing. The rewards were as varied as prize box of trinkets to a Pizza Hut lunch. Some people would liken giving a student an award for completing homework to giving an adult a bonus or salary increase for quality performance. Morse (1999) believes that students should be "paid" to do their homework as if it were a job. In his perspective, this earned money, whether real or fictitious, would motivate students to complete homework just as adults are motivated to go to work each day (Morse, 1999). A closer look at the idea of external rewards reveals that students might be tempted to rush through it only to get the prize. The researcher believes that instead of building intrinsic motivating strategies, students then become reliant on "required" perks to be willing to do anything. In this way, students become dependent learners who act out of selfish ambition, rather than independent desire to do their best work. If rewards are to be used, they must be used with caution. When used in small and sporadic amounts, they can be very motivating without building reward-dependant learners. This is the most effective use of external motivators. Although external motivation provides incentive to complete homework, students might actually be more motivated to finish their homework if they knew immediate, adult help was easily available.

For students who have trouble getting after-school help from parents, after-school tutor centers and homework-help phone hot-lines are possible solutions (Anderson, 1999). Required after-school help is another option for students receiving low grades due to lack of homework completion. At Hawthorn Junior High in Vernon Hills, Illinois, a program called "Hawthorne Horizons" targets students who lack homework completion skills by requiring them to complete the homework with teacher supervision (K. Alexander, personal communication, September 14, 1999).

Lamare (1997) cites a larger-scale version of this program in Sacramento, California called START. Within this program, student performance soared after daily supervised homework completion sessions. Students in the Sacramento City Unified School District were once among the lowest in reading ability compared to others in the state, ranking below the twenty-sixth percentile. Of those enrolled in the START program, "83% improved dramatically, improving an impressive 22 points (Normal Curve Equivalent Points) for third and fourth grades and 15 points for fifth and sixth grade students" (Lamare, 1997, p. 3). Not only was homework completion and quality improved, but teachers in the district reported that START also improved, "self esteem, social skills, and respect for learning" (Lamare, 1997, p. 3). Although it would seem at first glance that the START program was a wonder-cure for homework completion, it did have its weaknesses. Because this program was used in a low-income area, and because low-income areas tend to be associated with mobility, there were a significant number of students who dropped out of the program and therefore did not receive its benefits. In addition to the drop-out problem, some teachers seemed to disagree as to the extent of the involvement that the START teacher-monitors would have in assisting students. These drawbacks seemed minimal compared

to the overall success of the program. Students experienced the discipline of daily homework completion and saw an improvement in their scores. Higher achievement was their reward.

One final external motivation for students completing homework is the reward of verbal or written praise. Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment" (Chapman, 1992, p. 39). His keen observation reminds listeners that positive feedback boosts the soul. Compliments received by students are far greater motivators than nagging words. Salend and Schliff noted that "poor motivation to complete homework may be due to a combination of poor academic skills and teachers' failure to give feedback on homework assignments" (as cited in Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994, p.75-76). In a study done by Keith:

achievement gains were associated with homework that (a) was graded or commented on, (b) contained positive comments, (c), was followed by consequences (vs. no consequences), and (d) was reviewed or checked by parents.

(as cited by Jenson, Sheridan, Olympia, & Andrews, 1994, p. 540)

Verbal praise is a reward that motivates students to complete homework in greater quantity and with greater quality.

Students repeatedly complete more homework when a reward is issued. At the same time, the danger in giving a reward is that students will just as quickly stop doing homework simply because the reward is not offered anymore. For this reason, teachers must appeal to other strategies to enforce the daily discipline of homework. Teachers have in their control to create the homework structure to be anything they desire. Effective teachers will set up the type and amount of homework to maximize student success.

### Change Homework Structure

Besides offering extrinsic motivation for homework completion, changing the constraints and style of homework from the traditional worksheet can motivate students to choose to do their homework. "Changing the constraints" might mean allowing students different time schedules to have it completed, by rewarding effort grades for progress towards a project goal, and by giving students choices about how much and when homework is to be completed. The style of homework should vary, also. Instead of completing a worksheet or reading assignment everyday, students might feel more motivated to complete assignments that target their unique style as categorized by Gardner's eight multiple intelligences (Lazear, 1991). Instead of teaching and learning with the premise that there is one form of cognition, Gardner proposed, "there are multiple intelligences with autonomous intelligence capacities" (Lazear, 1991, p. v). These independent intelligences such as logical/mathematical, verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, naturalist, bodily/kinesthetic, and intrapersonal all function individually as ways of learning and teaching and yet intertwine dependently on each other (Lazear, 1991). Intelligence does not exist in a vacuum, but in a larger context of a person's family, culture, and experiences (Tovey, 1997). Students that pursue an interest in a comfortable style of learning will be more likely to complete it because their motivation is more intrinsic.

Creating limits on the amount of time can also change the "burden" feeling of homework. Diamond (1999) believes that by limiting the amount of time for homework, students will be more motivated to complete it. Teachers assigning a mix of mandatory and voluntary work will have a higher success rate of receiving homework because students will have greater choice in what they are doing (Cooper, 1989). This work written in the form of a contract that indicates the amount

of homework to be done and who is responsible for which parts helps students to take responsibility for their own actions (Rosati, 1999). If homework is more reasonable, interesting, and clear, students will want to complete it (Black, 1999).

Partin (1986) believes that, "Such 'fun with purpose' assignments can greatly increase students' motivation. The relevance of the skills you are teaching becomes apparent" (p. 119). The idea of transferring school knowledge to home application is one that Perkins has termed, "teaching for understanding" (Tovey, 1997). Students that can use what they have learned in school become not only engaged learners but excited as they realize they are making meaning out of their knowledge. A study by Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1998) showed that "students who never handed in an assignment became actively engrossed in real-life assignments" (p. 5). From my experience, if teachers create homework assignments that are application-oriented, then students will naturally be more curious and willing to complete it. While changing the homework can improve student motivation, actually teaching students how to study smarter, not harder, will result in a transferable skill. Study skills taught in the classroom have the potential of traveling with students wherever they go.

#### In-class Teacher Interventions

Teachers can not only change the way homework is assigned, they can build habits and skills in students that encourage homework completion. Students would be more motivated to complete homework if teachers taught students how to make a time schedule and gave them strategies that utilized "short-cut" methods (Bryan & Sullivan, 1997). Study skills instruction gives students tools needed to be successful in completing their homework with less frustration. One study skill that has been effective at the site being researched is that of a daily assignment

notebook as a place to record and update all academic expectations. At the researcher's school, there is a policy that every student must have an assignment notebook with them in every class. The teachers have agreed as a whole to address assignment notebook needs every class period. If assignment notebooks are a school-wide expectation, the overall use will potentially be greater. One study by Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1998) revealed that "homework planners had a particularly positive effect on students with learning disabilities and average-achieving students who had homework problems" (p. 6). Teachers saw so many positive results, including increased home-school communication, that they voted to continue the homework planners for at least two years past the completion of the study (Bryan & Sullivan Burstein, 1998). Besides the visual reminder of an assignment notebook, graphing homework results would also show each student's progress.

Bryan (1997) suggests that graphing homework results can be a visual reminder to students of how missing homework affects their overall grade. Shortly after homework is graded, the teacher would instruct students to take out their individual homework graphs (which could easily be stapled in an assignment notebook) and record their personal score for that day. The recording could be as complex as the student's ability allowed, ranging from recording the assignment as done/not done to a specific percent grade. The graph visually reinforces to students that their overall grade will take into account all their homework scores, both good and bad. It also gives students a clearer baseline for which to set academic goals. Students with learning disabilities in one research study not only graphed their homework-completion data, but then were taught to set personal goals for the next 3 days of homework completion (Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994). These students were permitted to establish any goal level, so long as it

exceeded the average level for the previous 3 days. This form of self-monitoring resulted in each student showing improvement in homework completion. Instead of completing 0 to 2 assignments each day, students completed 4 to 6 assignments per day, even after teacher participation was removed (Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994). The effectiveness of self-monitoring and self-evaluation in the form of graphing assignments and goal-setting proved to be effective in increasing the amount of homework that was completed. While this intervention required that students complete work with 70% accuracy, some researchers would claim that the success of this method is not so much based on the accuracy of each assignment, but rather on the effort being shown.

When it comes to grading work, Holler (1999) believes that focusing on the effort done and not necessarily accuracy will better motivate students to follow through with homework completion. The researcher has found that this encourages students to take short cuts that hurt their overall academic understanding. Instead of trying their hardest, they begin to develop the habit of "getting by" with as little as is needed and "putting down any answer" to say they tried instead of honestly striving for the correct answer. There are times, however, when it is appropriate to reward students' hard-earned efforts instead of accuracy. The researcher also has found that students respond favorably to spontaneous efforts rewarding their effort. In addition to the reward of effort, students who receive their homework back that has been graded promptly with comments are more likely to complete it because they see the effort having paid off in teacher recognition. In this way, the teacher strategically acts as the motivator for a great deal of homework completion.

Students also feel valued when teachers silently acknowledge their differing ability levels. When teachers think about different levels of ability, the dilemma is expressed in the form of these questions: "Should all students of different abilities be compared to the same ruler or standard of correctness? Is it fair for teachers to give the same assignment to an identified gifted student and an unidentified learning disabled student?" The controversy involved in answering these questions is great. In one study done by Bennett on the ability of teachers to provide assignments that appropriately match the ability level of the student:

teachers underestimated the abilities of their high-achieving students on 41% of the tasks and overestimated the abilities of their low-achieving students in 44% of the cases. This means that the teachers being researched saw their highest achievers as less able than they really were, and their lowest achievers as more able than they really are.

(as cited in Berliner & Casanova, 1996, p. 6)

What are teachers to do? If they force all students to complete the same assignment, then some students will be bored. Teachers' attempts at prescribing appropriate ability-matched homework has been shown to be minimally successful. In order to meet students at their performance levels, teachers should encourage students to come up with ideas for their own homework (Black, 1996). Students will be more motivated to complete homework that they have selected because it would more likely fit their style and level of learning. A teacher wishing to give students this opportunity could issue contracts with product selections that the student makes (such as making a mobile, writing a song, creating a costume) and then allow the student to suggest the area they wish to research within the confines of the subject matter.

Individualization can take on other forms. It happens easily on the computer (Winters, 1999). Computers can work at the student's pace on the skills needed so that a student is fairly challenged without being overwhelmed. Performance levels can also be differentiated by giving students choices in their learning. If a teacher establishes learning goals, then what does it matter if a student accomplishes that goal by writing a poem, acting it out in dramatic fashion, or by writing an essay? The student wins and the teacher wins, for both are achieving their goals. If it is possible for the students to complete this homework at school, that would even more ensure that students are learning on their own, without external enabling, in their own learning styles.

### In-School Homework

Individualization has become an issue not only because of individual learning differences, but because of home-help differences. Morse (1999) has solved this inequality by suggesting, "Homework should be done in school by all students--poor, middle, and upper class--so that they all have the same access to computers and teachers" (p. 59). Instead of always giving students homework to take home, in-class supervised study time would be used (Cooper, 1989). This study time would differ from study hall in the nature of the freedom given students. Instead of having the option of completing homework, students would have their work pre-checked by the supervising teacher. This could be reflected in their assignment notebooks. In this way, all students would be treated equally and given equal access to help. This would also solve the "homework crisis" and keep students from receiving low academic grades simply because of missing homework. On the contrary, it makes it very difficult for students to complete major projects that might need outside assistance or supplies. It limits the creativity of the student and forces all students to complete the work at a pace that may be unsuitable for some who cannot or

do not work at that pace. Students, then, might be limited in their creativity and kept from investing additional hours into a project or assignment that naturally interests them. While there will always be pros and cons to any approach used to motivate students in the homework process, there is great value in the standard of daily homework. Unless there is an agreement within a school about the purposes and procedures of homework, it will lack in effectiveness.

### Lack of Standards

Ratnesar (1999) proposes that the only way that homework trends in students will change is for there to be standards developed at the national or local level. Without expectations set for the purposes and procedure of homework, students will no doubt receive mixed messages on the value of homework. If standards are to be set up, who will decide what is appropriate? What if it contradicts a teacher's deep-rooted beliefs about how learning should be done? These questions will no doubt affect the way that homework guidelines are set up. Each teacher would best serve students by thinking carefully about the purposes and practicality of the homework they assign.

In summary, the literature revealed numerous approaches in improving homework completion. Motivating students to complete homework can be done by providing external motivators, changing the homework structure, implementing in-class teacher interventions such as teaching study skills, and creating a time during school hours to complete all homework. Within the action plan, I have selected one strategy to implement from each approach. I have done this in an attempt to be balanced in my approach to motivating students to complete their homework. Not only do I hope to improve the quantity of homework completed, but I also hope to see an improvement in the quality.

### Project Objective

As a result of implementing different approaches to traditional homework methods during the period September 1999 through December 1999, the eighth graders at this site will achieve and maintain higher rates of homework completion. This will be evidenced through a revised student survey (Appendix D), academic performance as measured by homework records and grade reports, and finally student and teacher anecdotal records.

### Process Statements

In order to see this marked increase in homework completion, the teacher will do the following:

1. Require that students maintain a current assignment notebook.
2. Require that students graph homework results for math class.
3. Require that students receiving "F" grades stay afterschool for a mandatory study time two days a week or until grades are raised to at least a "D".
4. Make homework more choice-oriented by requiring a mix of mandatory and voluntary work.

### Project Action Plan

I. Students will be required to maintain a current assignment notebook.

- WHO?** All students in math, science, language arts, and history on the team of the researcher
- WHEN?** At the beginning of each class period  
August 24, 1999 through December 17, 1999
- WHERE?** All assignments will be written on the chalkboard at the beginning of each week for the students to copy down in their assignment notebooks.
- WHY?** To ensure that students know what is due and when it is due.  
To encourage parent/teacher communication of classroom expectations.

- HOW?** A weekly grade will be recorded throughout the time stated above that indicates on a scale from 1-5 whether or not the student has written the assignments down correctly and legibly. Students without their assignment notebook will receive a "0" for that grade.
- II. Students will graph homework results in their assignment notebooks.**
- WHO?** All eighth grade math students in the researcher's classes
- WHEN?** Daily, whenever a homework grade is recorded.
- WHERE?** The graph paper will be stapled in each student's assignment notebook.
- WHY?** By graphing their current grades, students and parents will be able to see their progress in completing homework.
- HOW?** The teacher will provide graph paper and provide instruction to show students how the graph should be made. After an assignment has been graded, the teacher will have each student "chart" that day's personal homework grade on the graph.
- III. Students receiving an "F" in any class will be required to stay in a mandatory study session afterschool two days a week until the grade raises to a passing grade.**
- WHO?** Any students on the researcher's team receiving an "F" grade in math or science.
- WHEN?** Every Friday, student grade printouts will be done to show the researcher who will be required to stay afterschool the following week. Students will be notified on that Friday and given a chance to do the missing homework over the weekend.
- WHERE?** On Wednesday and Friday of each week, the students receiving failing grades will stay until all missing work is made up.
- WHY?** Students who do not do their homework need additional attention afterschool to learn study skills. They also need a structured time when they are expected to take responsibility for missing work. In this way, they learn that missing assignments really do "count".
- HOW?** When students actually do their homework, they will see improved academic achievement and experience greater school confidence and school success.

IV. Students will have more choices in completing their homework by receiving mandatory and voluntary options.

- WHO? Eighth grade students in the researcher's science classes.
- WHEN? When it seems appropriate, homework will be given in such a way that students have mandatory and voluntary options.
- WHY? Students will be more motivated if given choices in their learning.
- HOW? I will provide a guidelines sheet each time that clearly states what parts of the assignment are mandatory and what parts are optional.

#### Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of these interventions, students will answer survey questions that pertain to their perception of their academic achievement compared to the action plan elements. Grade and homework records will be used to also note this relationship. Students will also be asked to share verbally their opinions concerning the homework completion strategies attempted, while the teacher records them as anecdotal notes. Finally, the teacher will note any patterns that seem to be present as a result of journaling over the course of the semester.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROJECT RESULTS

#### Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase homework completion. Numerous strategies were used to achieve this goal such as use of an assignment notebook, graphing of homework scores, mandatory after-school study sessions, and choice-oriented homework options.

#### Assignment Notebooks

Consistent emphasis was put on the importance of the use of the assignment notebook. On the first day of each week, the teacher pointed out the homework board, where the assignments for that week were written. Students were instructed to write down the entire week's assignments and class activities for that week. If there was no homework for a particular day, students were required to write the activity that was to be completed during that class period instead. If the teacher was unsure about the activities being done on a particular day, special attention to the assignment notebook was made on the day of the activity. This procedure occurred in each subject area of the student group being researched. Assignment notebooks were then checked once a week on a randomly selected day for completeness and accuracy. Each student's assignment notebook received a rating 0-5 that portrayed the completeness and accuracy of the previous week's assignments. Students that did not have the assignment notebook received a "0". Students received one point for each day that the assignment notebook was filled in completely. If that particular school week had less than 5 days, then the amount of the notebook

filled in correctly was compared to the fractional parts out of 5. The number 3 on the rating scale was considered to be the mark for "half" of the notebook being filled out accurately and completely. A 4 on the scale represented more than half, a 2 on the scale represented less than half, a 5 represented completely filled in and accurate and a 1 was given to any student that had a book but had nothing or almost nothing written down. The weekly rating for each student's assignment notebook was then recorded and averaged together as 5% of the student's grade. Because the assignment notebook was used with such great frequency, it was also a mechanism through which parents made contact with the teacher. Some students who had difficulty with homework completion asked the teacher for a weekly update on missing assignments and the current grade for that class. In addition to the use of assignment notebooks, graphing math homework results was used to alert students to the effect of low or missing homework assignments.

### Graphing Homework Results

The second strategy used to increase homework completion was graphing homework grades. Originally, the researcher was going to have students record their homework grades daily in the form of a line graph that was stapled inside their assignment notebooks. This plan was slightly altered to better meet the time demands of the class. The timing was altered after the researcher observed that the following would interfere with its success: lack of classtime to allow teaching and practice, the problem with students losing or forgetting their charts, and the lack of emphasis that could be given it by the teacher due to time constraints. Instead, the homework charts were completed on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Students were given a copy of their individual grades (made possible by a computer grading system) and instructed to "create a line

graph that showed their grades for each homework assignment." They were also reminded to title the graph correctly and label each axis correctly. Following the graphing, students were instructed to write a paragraph reflecting on the following three questions: "Does your graph display any trends that can be explained? What are they?", "What do you need to do differently in order to increase your lowest scores?", and "What is something you would like me to do that would help me teach you better?" These graphs and reflections were then turned in to the teacher for an effort grade. The insights given by students were used by the teacher to assist struggling students and to modify teaching strategies. Students who struggled were then targeted as those who would benefit from afterschool study sessions.

#### Afterschool Study Sessions

According to the original action plan, "Students receiving an 'F' in any class will be required to stay in a mandatory study session afterschool two days a week until the grade raises to a passing grade." This goal was modified as "interruptions" prevented it from being used consistently. These interruptions would include the teacher not having the time to grade assignments by Thursday; the teacher not able to print out reports on Friday due to that week's assignment being graded, entered into the computer, and averaged into the grade; students not receiving adequate notice due to these issues and not being able to plan for the afterschool time. Instead, students who did not complete an assigned project, or did an inadequate job on the project, were requested to stay the following day afterschool for one hour. Only larger projects were reinforced this way, as the bookkeeping required to hold all students with missing assignments was overwhelming. Students were also not "required" to stay as first suggested in the action plan. This was due to the fact that students had other commitments or parents that

wanted them home. As a result, students were "strongly urged" to stay afterschool for the "second chance" to do the project correctly. Students who did choose to stay afterschool following the teacher contact were given one-on-one attention and guidance through the steps of the project. Students who were staying afterschool asked many questions for clarification on the project requirements and showed high motivation to complete the project with frequent teacher check-ups. Students received external motivation by having teacher promptings. Further internal motivation was demonstrated when students were given homework options.

### Homework Options

The final strategy presented in the action plan was the introduction of mandatory and voluntary homework options. This was most clearly integrated into a unit called "Dynamic Earth". Students were given a multiple intelligence unit plan to follow as their homework guideline (See Appendix D). On this plan is clearly listed the required activities for all students. Some of the options could be completed with a partner. The teacher explained the required activities in detail and the appropriate grading rubric that would be used for each assignment. Each week, students were instructed to select one "optional" activity from eight multiple intelligence categories. One day a week was designated as a "Conference Day" in which students would work independently or with a partner on the required or optional assignments and speak with the teacher about the project. Any assistance they needed to complete the optional project was given at that time. Two days after the Conference Day was the due date for that project. On the day it was due, students shared their "Independent or Partner Projects" and shared any interesting insights they learned while completing the project.

In summary, the action plan had several parts that were implemented into the classroom. These parts were requiring that all students keep and maintain an assignment notebook, having students graph homework results for each chapter, students being urged to stay afterschool for one-on-one homework help, and the teacher offering homework options as an alternative to traditional homework. The reason these strategies were implemented was to affect academic achievement. Patterns of academic achievement will be observed in the following analysis of results.

### Presentation and Analysis of Results

Several methods were used in order to assess the effectiveness of the action plan. Grade records were used to compare the average grades and the number of missing assignments in math for first quarter with that of the initial record without the classroom modifications. In addition, student anecdotal records were recorded as possible explanations for the grade results. The teacher's reflective journal also gave clues explaining what methods worked best. Finally, students reported observations about their own perception of homework in the form of a student survey. These methods combined gave an adequate picture of patterns found as a result of the action plan being implemented.

#### Grade Records

In order to assess the effectiveness of the action plan on academic achievement, students' grades were compared from the same quarter in different years. The class of 1999 received Pre-Algebra instruction with traditional homework methods while the class of 2000 was required to maintain an assignment notebook and required to stay for an after-school study session if the work was not completed. The same Pre-Algebra concepts were taught both years, the only

differences were the introduction of the action plan during the second year. Table 3 shows a comparison between the average grades of each unit for each year.

Table 3

Comparison of Average Grades for Pre-Algebra students of the Class of 1999 and Class of 2000

Year	Average Grade For Quarter 1	Average Number of Missing Assignments For Each Student
Class of 1999	80.5%	2.44
Class of 2000	84.7%	0.76

During first quarter, students during the year 2000 received higher grades when the action plan was implemented versus the use of traditional methods. In fact, this difference amounted to a 4.2% grade increase. Not only did the grade increase for the class of 2000, but the number of missing assignments went down by 1.68 average assignments per student.

Not only did the amount of homework assignments completed increase, but the quality of homework also increased. Students reported reasons why they felt motivated to complete homework in recorded anecdotal records.

Anecdotal Records

Students gave a lot of positive feedback when asked about having homework options. One trend was that students felt they learned more from the optional, weekly projects. One student suggested about homework options, "You can go your own way. I remember things more because I have created it." Another student reported, "It's good because it lets you choose and I can put my knowledge into effect; I become stronger in what I know; It's way better than a test!"

Other students commented on the opportunity of choice. Some comments were, "There's more room for variety" and "Some categories may have stuff I don't like at all, so my choices are limited". Finally, concerning homework options, students noted that the amount of time for each project could work to one's advantage or disadvantage. As one student commented, "If you have extra time, you can work on ahead" while another student commented, "It has to be completed in a week. That makes it hard to get together with a partner". No students disliked having the required and optional homework options. As one student summarized her classmates' ideas, "It's easier than doing tests! I'd rather put all my efforts into a project than to hold all that stuff in my head". In addition to asking students about homework options, they were also questioned about their views in using the assignment notebook.

When asked, "Do Assignment Notebooks help you remember what is due?", 67% reported with a show of hands that it did help. Thirty-three percent of the students said it does not help them remember what is due. Students who felt the assignment notebooks were helpful reported that "They do help, but some kids don't even look to see the homework." Of the students who reported not benefiting from assignment notebooks, the reasons were varying. Their responses could be summarized as they view the notebook as "inconvenient". The comments made to show these views are as follows: "It's too hard to remember to bring my Assignment Notebook home", "I don't like to write everything down because it's too confusing", and "I don't like how the Assignment Notebook is graded". While students' views concerning the areas of homework options and assignment notebooks were varying, the teacher's view in the form of a reflective journal revealed other trends.

### Reflective Journal

In the teacher's day-to-day journal, one thread of truth ran through it: students perform better when given individual attention. In the context of the "Conference Days", the teacher was able to guide wandering students towards a goal. The students also knew that the teacher was going to hold them accountable individually for their performance. On a Conference Day, each student had to describe what progress was made on the weekly project. Students who had not made any progress were given a shorter deadline by which to make some choices. The teacher then checked the progress of the student at that deadline. If no further progress was made, the student either had to stay afterschool to select a project and make progress on it, or, if the student couldn't stay, the parent was contacted so that they were aware of the problem.

In addition to the verbal conferencing that went on, there was also written conferencing. When students wrote their reflections following their homework graphs, they revealed information about their learning that the teacher would never have known. Students reported their perception of what they understood and didn't understand. They gave clues about ways they learn best that made the teacher change certain instructional words or methods. It also alerted the teacher to any students that had an area where they lacked understanding. The individual reports allowed the teacher to be tuned in to the individual needs of the students. After-school study sessions also aided in individual teacher attention.

The after-school study session helped students get started on their self-selected projects. However, the teacher noted that this consistent attention given to students who failed to meet project requirements proved tiresome and cumbersome. It was difficult to continually keep track of the numbers of students that needed individual attention. As students continued to stay for the

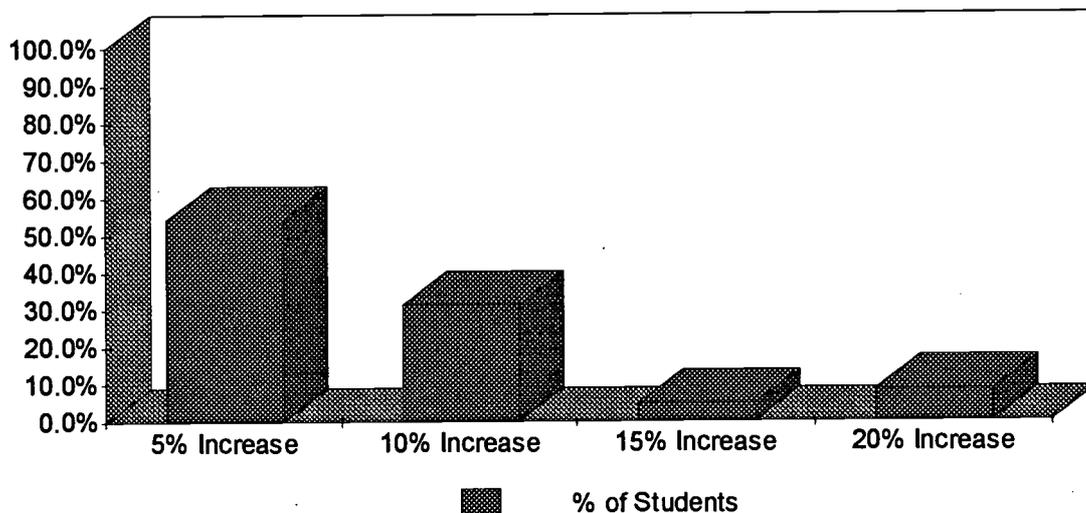
help they needed, it began to defeat the purpose of having the one-on-one time because soon students were so numerous that they couldn't have the individual attention that they needed. This, combined with reported fatigue by the teacher, rendered the teacher less effective over time. The final indicator of action plan results was found by analyzing student survey data.

### Student Survey

Students were issued a new survey (Appendix D) that gathered information to show the effects of the implemented action plan. The students surveyed were the same students that were surveyed at the beginning of the year. The new survey focused on students' perceived success of themselves with the action plan tenants enforced. In the survey, students responded to the question: "Do you believe the emphasis on keeping an assignment notebook has helped you remember to do homework assignments?" Out of 42 students completing the survey, 66.7% reported "Yes", while 33.3% reported "No". Although two-thirds of students surveyed believe the assignment notebook helped them with homework completion, only one-fourth said that graphing homework scores motivated them to complete more homework. In summary, the majority agreed that they did more homework when assignment notebooks were enforced, but not when homework scores were graphed.

In addition to asking about the assignment notebook and graphing homework scores, students were also asked questions about their perception of homework options. When asked if students believed they had higher homework completion when homework options were offered, 81% agreed and 19% disagreed. Eighty-three percent of the students also reported that their grades went up as a result of having homework options. There were differing opinions about how

much students felt their grade had raised. Figure 4 shows the differences students reported seeing in their overall grade as a result of doing homework options.



**Figure 4:** Overall grade average increases that students perceive as a result of doing homework options.

This graph reflects that students believe that having homework options was the reason they received higher grades. The degree to which students perceived their grade raised was 10% or more for almost half of all students. Regardless of the extent to which students perceived their grade increasing, 83% of students believing their grades went up due to homework options. This shows that they see a difference in the format through which homework is given.

In addition to the student survey, student anecdotal records also showed that they liked having homework options. They also indicated that a majority of students agree that assignment notebooks aided in remembering to do homework. The teacher's reflective journal also gave clues that although one-on-one attention for students is beneficial, if done for extended periods can result in teacher fatigue. Finally, students reported observations about their own perception of

homework in the form of a student survey. These methods provided the information that is needed to determine the successfulness of the action plan. That success or lack thereof will be documented in the following conclusions and recommendations.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The solution strategy consisting of four parts--use of an assignment notebook, graphing homework results, afterschool study sessions, and homework options--did not result in equal outcomes. Each strategy varied in its success in reaching the goal of increased homework completion. The measurability of the success or lack thereof was also dramatically different from strategy to strategy. It is for these reasons that each strategy will be evaluated independently.

#### Assignment Notebook

The required use of an assignment notebook was perceived by students to be of great assistance in remembering to do homework. Two-thirds of the students reported in anecdotal records and on the student survey that the assignment notebook assisted them in remembering homework deadlines. It can therefore be safely assumed that if students believe that keeping a record of due dates in a set book helped them remember to do homework, then they actually did more homework. Data indicated a relationship between between doing homework and grades. Academic achievement is improved if more homework is completed.

After looking at the evidence in support of assignment notebooks, the researcher endorses the practice of required assignment notebooks. By using them regularly, students get in the habit of staying organized and being aware of upcoming due dates. Although the assignments were listed on the board for the entire week, the researcher believes that students would benefit even

more if verbally prompted to take out the assignment notebook and reminded of the up-coming due dates.

Keeping track of student accuracy of the assignment notebook also proved to be effective. It was used on multiple occasions during parent-teacher conferences to show parents why their son or daughter was not completing the assignments on time. It served as evidence to explain at least in part why students were or were not experiencing academic success. This strategy is one of the best that was tried and will be implemented by the researcher into classes for all time. Graphing homework results did not appear to be as effective in reaching the goal of homework completion as assignment notebook use.

### Graphing Homework Results

It was very difficult to evaluate whether or not graphing homework results had any effect on academic achievement. Part of the difficulty was that it was not used on a weekly basis in the classroom. It was not used because it was too time consuming. For this reason, the researcher did not feel that this strategy had many effects on the goal of academic achievement.

Besides the teacher finding this strategy overbearing, the majority of students also did not like graphing homework scores. They did not report seeing a connection between grades and doing the graph. However, the teacher found that student graphing of homework scores revealed information about student learning that might not otherwise be acquired. In several cases, students described specific math concepts that they still did not understand. In other cases, students reported areas where they understood the concept being taught because of a specific strategy that was used. These things gave the teacher insights that gave direction about how topics should be taught and what topics needed to be revisited. Furthermore, the teacher found

this activity to be useful in giving the students a personal connection with which to find meaning in the graphing. That is, because students were graphing their own scores, they were more interested in the results. It would be interesting to experiment with different graphing techniques to find out if any one method involving time, consistency, or type of graph would affect the overall success of its implementation. Like graphing homework results, after-school study sessions also fell short of meeting the goal of homework completion.

### After-School Study Sessions

After-school study sessions were very effective for students who chose to stay in that they "forced" students to complete homework immediately, with the assistance and watchful eye of the teacher and without a chance of students "forgetting about it". Students who were urged to stay did complete more homework. However, there were large numbers of students who chose not to do the assignments as explained and then stayed for after-school assistance in either getting started or doing the work over. While the satisfaction of getting an improved product was great for the teacher, it became increasingly difficult to keep all students productive. This was due to the fact that the teacher had difficulty meeting with each student individually for routine "check-ups". The teacher then felt the effects of being unable to reach all the students. The result was the feeling of fatigue and burn-out. For these reasons, the strategy of after-school study sessions for all students failing to meet the requirements did not prove effective. It may have assisted a small few students in completing an assignment, but there were too many drawbacks involving time and energy of the teacher.

Although this strategy did not work for the researcher, it is possible that only a very select number of students might stay afterschool and get the help they need. The teacher would have to

have great discretion in what students were asked to stay. The attitude toward learning of the student being asked to stay could determine which students were requested. By limiting the number of students staying, the teacher could have greater success with all students actually staying. Although after-school study sessions had limited success, homework options had great success in helping students complete more homework.

### Homework Options

Giving students homework options proved to be a success for many reasons. First, the majority of students reported that they liked having homework options. Second, an overwhelming 83% of students perceived that their grades went up because of homework options. These two reasons support the continuation of homework options in the everyday classroom.

There are many reasons why homework options are an excellent way of increasing homework motivation. Students get to choose a subject area or project that is closest to their realm of interest. They also get to apply their own uniqueness by choosing a product form that naturally fits within their personal comfort zone. When students become interested in the topic and product, they report producing a better, "deeper" product. That is, students reported wanting to "do more" research and put more effort into it because they liked it. These reasons add up to make homework options one of the most successful aspects of the action plan.

Although students report liking homework options, not all students believe they should be integrated into every unit. About 45% of students responding to the student survey reported wanting to see homework options included in every science unit. About 48% reported wanting to see a variety of homework options included into some, but not all of the science units. Only 7%

reported that they do not like homework choices. This data shows an overwhelming response from students that homework options are well-liked, but not necessarily desired for every unit. It is a reminder that students like having variety in the way homework is done.

The goal of this research project was to increase homework completion of eighth grade students and thereby increase their academic achievement. In order to meet this goal, an action plan was created that approached the issue of homework completion in different ways. The action plan included mandatory assignment notebook use, graphing of homework results, after-school study sessions, and the opportunity to choose homework from a list of options. The goal of increased academic achievement in Pre-Algebra was met with the overall implementation of the action plan. On a more individual level, the graphing of homework results did not appear to have a direct effect on increased academic achievement. The one positive result that came out of implementing this strategy was that it alerted the teacher to potential areas of academic weakness. Besides graphing as a strategy, having after-school study sessions did not prove to be effective. If there are too many students who stay afterschool for help, then the teacher will have a difficult time reaching any of them effectively. It is possible for the teacher to be effective only if the number of students is limited so that each student gets the attention needed.

Although it was revealed by the researcher that graphing and after-school study sessions proved ineffective, it was found that use of assignment notebooks and homework options were very effective. Requiring that students keep an assignment notebook creates a framework of organization for all students. In the end, the majority of students reported liking the assignment notebook because it helped them remember to do their assignments. Students also reported liking homework options because it gave them the freedom to choose something of personal interest and

in the form of a preferred product. Not only did they like the homework options, but students perceived that they were getting higher grades because of them. These two strategies will continue to be used in the researcher's classroom. They target students' needs by helping them learn organizational skills and follow through by personal desire on the subject being studied. Educators everywhere should learn the lesson from this study: kids need to be taught the art of organization and given the freedom to explore the world as independent learners.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A Teacher Homework Survey

*As part of my Master's Program research, I am gathering information concerning attitudes and expectations about homework. Please complete this survey and return it to my mailbox by Friday, September 10. I value your input and comments! Thanks! -Kimberly Diersen*  
*Your response to this survey will be completely anonymous and voluntary.*

Circle the answer that BEST applies:

**How often do you assign homework?**

Daily    4 days/week    3 days/week    2 days/week    1 day/week    I don't give homework

**When you assign homework, approximately how long do you suspect it should take?**

10 min.    20 min.    30 min.    40 min.    50 min.    60 minutes or more

**What percentage of students in your classes do not have their homework on time and done correctly? (Circle the percent closest to your estimate)**

40% or more    35%    30%    25%    20%    15%    10%    5%    1%

**How important is homework completion to academic success in your class?**

VERY IMPORTANT ----- NOT IMPORTANT

5                      4                      3                      2                      1

**What percent of your total grade is attributed to homework? \_\_\_\_\_**

**Do you personally find that your involvement in checking assignment notebooks helps increase homework completion?**

\_\_\_\_\_ YES, it helps                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO, it doesn't really matter

Think about times when your students received their report card and got a lower grade than you know they are capable of earning. Rate each area below (there should be a number in each blank) according to the reason why the grade was lower than you would have liked (in general) for all classes.

- 1 - Seldom the reason they do poorly**  
**2 - Sometimes the reason they do poorly**  
**3 - Always the reason they do poorly**

\_\_\_\_\_ Tests  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Quizzes  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Homework  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Teamwork Activities  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Class Participation  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Projects  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Organizational Skills  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B Student Homework Survey

***Your honest feedback is very important!***  
*This WILL NOT in any way affect your current grades or class standing.*  
*Answers to this survey will be completely confidential.*

My family (on the weekdays) would best be described as . . .

(choose one by putting an "X" in the blank)

- Two natural parents
- One natural parent, one step-parent
- One natural parent, no step-parent
- One or more relatives, such as grandma, grandpa, aunt, uncle, etc.
- Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

Who plays the BIGGEST role in your academic success? (choose one by an "X")

- Mom
- Step-mom
- Dad
- Step-dad
- Grandma or grandpa
- Aunt or uncle
- No one at home helps me have academic success
- Friend
- Other: (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

Is there someone at home who monitors (checks up on you) your homework on a daily basis?

- YES  NO

If you marked YES, do you LIKE it when they check up on your homework?

- YES
- NO

If you marked NO, do you think it would be helpful to have someone at home monitor your homework?

- YES
- NO

How important to you is finishing your homework each night?

Very Important-----Not Important

5                      4                      3                      2                      1

On average last year, how much time did you spend doing homework each night? (for all subjects)

(Put an "X" in only ONE blank.)

- None
- 1 to 30 minutes
- 30 to 60 minutes
- 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes

- 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours  
 2 hours to 2 hours 30 minutes  
 2 hours 30 minutes to 3 hours  
 3 hours to 4 hours  
 Over 4 hours

How important to **your parents** is finishing your homework each night?

Very Important-----Not Important  
 5                      4                      3                      2                      1

Give the top three reasons (for last year) why you did not finish or do your homework at home:  
 (Rate your top reason as #1, your second reason as #2, etc.)

- I was very involved in school-related sports and clubs.  
 I was very involved in non-school related activities such as lessons, church, or community sports.  
 I had a lot of home responsibilities (such as taking care of a younger sibling).  
 I really didn't care about homework and would rather do something else.  
 My friends were more important than doing my homework.  
 I didn't understand the homework because it is too hard.  
 There was too much homework to do each night.  
 I didn't have a place to do homework.  
 I watched TV instead.  
 I forgot my materials or I forgot that I had homework.  
 No one at home cared whether or not I did homework.  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about times when you received your report card and got a lower grade than you would have liked. Rate each area below (there should be a number in each blank) according to the most common reason why your grade was lower than you would have liked in your classes.

**1 - Never the reason I do poorly**

**2 - Sometimes the reason I do poorly**

**3 - Always the reason I do poorly**

- Tests  
 Quizzes  
 Homework  
 Teamwork Activities  
 Class Participation  
 Projects  
 Organization  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any other comments you would like to make about why you do or do not do homework?

## Appendix C Parent Homework Survey

***Please complete this survey and return it with your student on or before September 10.  
Answer these questions based on last year's homework patterns. Thanks!***

*Your response to this survey will be completely anonymous and voluntary.*

Last year, did you monitor your child's homework on a daily basis?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/> YES</p> <p>If your answer was "YES", then answer the following question:<br/>"Is there any routine/rules you follow in the homework completion process?"<br/>(Describe this, please.)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/> NO</p> <p>If your answer was "NO", please indicate why not (someone else does, you have a tutor, your child is responsible and does not need prompting. . . ):</p> |
|---|--|

Would YOU personally find it helpful to be able to look at your child's assignment notebook and determine at a glance what homework was due the next day?

- YES, it would help me                       NO, it would not matter

How much homework do you think your child should have each night? (Check one)

- None
- 1 to 30 minutes
- 30 to 60 minutes
- 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes
- 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours
- 2 hours to 2 hours 30 minutes
- 2 hours 30 minutes to 3 hours
- 3 hours to 4 hours
- Over 4 hours

How much homework did you actually see your child do at home each night (on average)?

- None
- 1 to 30 minutes
- 30 to 60 minutes
- 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes
- 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours
- 2 hours to 2 hours 30 minutes
- 2 hours 30 minutes to 3 hours
- 3 hours to 4 hours
- Over 4 hours
- I don't know

Circle any of the subjects below that you (or someone at home) helped your student complete his/her homework:            Math            Science            Social Studies            Language Arts

How important to you is it that your son/daughter finishes his/her homework each night?

Very Important-----Not Important  
5                    4                    3                    2                    1

How important to your student is finishing his/her homework each night?

Very Important-----Not Important  
5                    4                    3                    2                    1

Give the top **three** reasons why your student might not finish or do his/her homework at home:  
(Rate your top reason as #1, your second reason as #2, etc.)

- \_\_\_\_\_ He/she is very involved in school-related sports and clubs.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she is very involved in non-school related activities such as lessons, church, or community sports.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she has a lot of home responsibilities (such as taking care of a younger sibling).  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she really doesn't care about homework and would rather do something else.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ His/her friends are more important than doing homework.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she doesn't understand the homework because it is too hard.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ There is too much homework to do each night.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she doesn't have a place to do homework.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she watches TV instead.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ He/she doesn't care whether or not the homework is done.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Think about times when your student received his/her report card and got a lower grade than you would have liked. Rate each area below (there should be a number in each blank) according to the reason why the grade was lower than you would have liked (in general) for all classes.

- 1 - Never the reason he/she does poorly**  
**2 - Sometimes the reason he/she does poorly**  
**3 - Always the reason he/she does poorly**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Tests  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Quizzes  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Homework  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Teamwork Activities  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Class Participation  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Projects  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Organization  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any other comments you would like to make about why your child does or does not do homework?

Appendix D  
**Revised Student Homework Survey**

***Your honest feedback is very important!***  
***This WILL NOT in any way affect your current grades or class standing.***

In math, how often do you turn in your homework on time?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

How many assignments do you turn in late or miss each month?

- 0 I never miss an assignment.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

Do you believe the emphasis on keeping an assignment notebook has helped you remember to do homework assignments?

- Yes
- No

Did graphing your homework scores motivate you to complete more homework?

- Yes
- No

Which style of homework do you feel most motivated to do?

- traditional, daily worksheets
- homework options in the form of weekly projects
- assigned projects (no choices, you are assigned)

Do you think you had higher homework completion when homework options were offered?

- Yes
- No

Did your homework grades go up as a result of having homework options?

- Yes
- No

If you said yes, how much did it raise your average homework score?

- 5%       10%  
 15%       20 or more percent

Would you like to see a variety of homework options (in place of traditional homework) included into every science unit?       Yes

- No  
 Some, but not all (3 of the 6 units)



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Organization/Address: <i>Saint Xavier University E. Mosak 3700 W. 103rd St. Chgo, IL 60655</i>	Telephone: <i>708-802-6214</i>
	Fax: <i>708-802-6208</i>
	E-Mail Address: <i>mosak@sxu.edu</i>
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