Dear C&C Families,

Homework—how much, at what age, what is assigned—these topics are frequently debated among researchers, parents, educators and students. Although there isn’t consensus about any of these topics, research shows that certain kinds of homework assignments are beneficial, especially when time spent doesn’t significantly detract from non-school activities.

A recent article in *Education Leadership* suggests that teachers should “assign purposeful homework...design homework to maximize the chances that students will complete it...involve parents in appropriate ways...carefully monitor the amount of homework assigned...”* This practical approach to homework is well-established at City & Country School, and this issue of *Currents* is devoted to sharing our philosophy and approach—as well as some examples of homework in the Middle/Upper School—with the community.

At C&C, all aspects of learning are considered opportunities for the children to have a meaningful experience with their world, and homework is no exception. Because we believe in emphasizing learning as a social process at school, much of the work at C&C is done collaboratively, therefore, homework not only provides a time for children to further develop their skills and knowledge of a topic, but it provides a quiet time for them to develop their understanding, as an individual. The focus on internal motivation and self-directed learning that is inherent to our philosophy is also present in the kind of homework we assign; homework is a time for children to develop their voice and challenge themselves—and then share that knowledge with their groupmates at school.

I hope this issue gives you a greater understanding of why we approach homework as we do. Please feel free to speak with me if you have any other thoughts or questions about homework at City & Country School.

Sincerely,

Kate Turley

*"The Case For and Against Homework" by Robert J. Marzano and Debra J. Pickering in *Educational Leadership: March 2007.*
Younger Children

Homework at City & Country School begins in the VIIIs. C&C teachers do not assign homework to students in the Lower School for a variety of reasons. The school day for children in the Lower School is very physically and cognitively engaging, challenging and action-packed. The children work hard and have a very rich experience during their school day. They benefit from the free time and space they have after school to focus on family and individual interests, engage in outdoor play, and unwind and rest at home. It is important for the children in the Lower School to return to school refreshed and eager to continue their work.

In other settings, homework might begin at younger ages than at C&C. We believe that when children are pushed to develop skills too early, they can be burdened by the anxiety or stress that might accompany homework at a young age. Our goal is for children to have a deeper, more positive learning experience, as they will be fully ready to engage in skill development if they are not rushed.

Homework at an early age can also often present the kinds of challenges to children that require a large amount of involvement from an adult. This does not support C&C’s philosophy that children should be fully engaged with and take responsibility for their work, as independently as possible. As they make the transition into the Middle School, we believe that the children are ready for the added responsibility of homework.

There are often times in the Lower School when it is meaningful and appropriate for children to do some homework in connection with their Social Studies work; for example, while the VIs study food, they might be asked to report what kind of food is in their refrigerator at home. And, while studying electricity, the VIIIs may need to find out the cost of their family's electric bill. These discreet assignments are considered an extension of their school day and provide a sense of the responsibility that homework entails.

Homework in the Middle/Upper School is thoughtfully designed to be integrated into the lives of the VIIIs without stress or anxiety. This process begins each September by meeting with the VIIIs families to discuss City & Country’s approach to homework, good homework routines, expectations of parental involvement and overall time spent on homework. What follows below is an in-depth discussion of those issues, and some examples of homework assignments at City & Country School.
C&C’s Approach to Homework

I. Keeping with the School’s philosophy of providing meaningful learning environments, homework is always clearly connected to work done in school.

Homework is seen as an integral part of the educational process at C&C. Work done at home is related to the school-day work of the Group and it reflects the day-to-day work of the children, so that it is relevant to what’s happening in the classroom. Thus, the work is somewhat unpredictable from day to day, as teachers tailor the assignments to reflect work done that day or week. Because of the connection between homework and schoolwork in each assignment, children are more apt to understand homework’s importance. It is the goal of C&C for the children to have ownership of their knowledge and to understand why they need to learn – in this way, homework that is geared toward enriching their daily experience with their Group provides genuine motivation to complete and give one’s full attention to each assignment. For instance, homework that is practice for working in the Store, or is preparation for a conversation in Book Group, provides meaningful ways for children to practice and develop skills, in anticipation of using them at school.

II. Homework provides an opportunity to practice and solidify a skill learned in school.

There are many skills and concepts that are introduced at school that work at home can help a child practice and solidify. Reading and writing are practiced in nearly all assignments, with more or less focus on mechanics, voice, comprehension and decoding. Math and foreign language skills benefit greatly from at-home practice. Research skills are practiced for many subjects, by consulting the Internet, books, periodicals and materials provided by teachers.

III. Ideally, an assignment allows the child to stop after a reasonable level of effort, or go deeper into the assignment, if time, interest and ability allow.

Many homework assignments include an open-ended question and/or allow for a variety of stopping places. This is known as differentiation; the assignment provides a challenge for all of the children at their varying levels of knowledge and ability. An example of this type of assignment is the “connector” job in Book Group. A child who particularly enjoys finding connections between the world and fiction can take this assignment as deeply as she likes, while another student can gain experience with a concept that might not come as easily. For any child, the quality of attention that is given to the assignment, no matter what her ability, will be reflected in the next
day’s discussion with the Book Group at school.

IV. Homework is often an opportunity to work on something, previously only worked on as a group, as an individual at home.

Most work at C&C is done in small and whole groups, and there is less quiet, individual work time. Homework is an excellent complement to this group work; it allows the children an opportunity to develop their voice and focus on developing their knowledge and skills, in preparation for sharing them at school. Highly collaborative group projects, such as the end of year Play, benefit greatly from the children’s work at home, as their unique perspective can be developed and articulated at home, and shared and integrated into the Play at school.

Good Homework Routines

It is important that children establish a homework routine that is predictable and includes a quiet, appropriate workspace. The first homework assignment each VIII completes is to choose a spot in the home that is good for doing homework, considering: noise, light, distractions, materials and privacy. The VIIIIs draw this workspace and explain why they have chosen it. In keeping with children taking ownership of their learning, the second homework assignment asks the VIIIIs to create a schedule for each day of the week that includes one half-hour for homework, after school activities in and out of school, snack and dinner times, time to relax or play, and bed time.

In the VIIIIs, homework is on a predictable weekly schedule that, for the most part, doesn’t vary, so that the children can plan more easily. In the IXs, a homework schedule is established for each week at the beginning of the week, so they can learn to plan ahead. In the Xs, the homework schedule is variable and written on the board for the first time, as opposed to being given out as a handout. Each X has an assignment book where they practice their note-taking skills by noting their assignments and important details. This practice continues through the XIIIs, when communication about homework through e-mail is introduced.

Expectations

I. Time Spent on Homework

The amount of time spent on homework each night is a controversial topic in the education field. A good guideline adopted by many practitioners is to multiply 10 minutes by the number grade and gradually increase that time by the end of the year. So, a “third” grader would start with 30 minutes of homework and, by the end of the year would be spending closer to 40 minutes each night, as they will be in the next grade, and so on through
the years. C&C places an emphasis on not overloading the children, as time to be social, be with family, play and relax are integral to the development of a healthy, well-rounded person.

II. Quality of Work
It is expected that children will do their best work at home, as at school. Homework assignments that offer a variety of stopping places and levels of challenge accommodate this expectation. For assignments that have a clear stopping point, it is expected that a child will concentrate on working through the assignment, for no longer than the suggested homework time. If it takes your child significantly more or less time to complete the assignment, this is a good indicator to the teacher that they need to have a greater challenge or have an area in which more attention is needed.

III. Help from Adults
Our expectation at C&C is that children should be able to work on their homework without their parents’ help, aside from minor and occasional assistance. This ensures that children maintain ownership of their work; if they feel that they cannot attempt their homework without assistance from an adult, this is also a good indication to the teacher that there is an area that needs more attention.

Examples of Homework in the Middle/Upper School
A look at some assignments that exemplify C&C’s approach to homework

In the Vlls, Social Studies homework is often a way for children to solidify their understanding of concepts learned at school, such as: artifact/new item, ancient customs/modern customs, etc. For example, the Vlls are asked to find the oldest artefacts in their homes and describe and draw them. Making connections between home life and school life helps bring personal context to the children’s understanding of concepts, which in turn helps them make mental connections and develop conceptual relationships. Caroline Pratt says it plainly in I Learn from Children: “Facts related are facts learned.” While practicing their understanding of Social Studies concepts, the children practice observation and representation, something that might provide a meaningful challenge for some, and for others, an exciting opportunity to practice a favored skill.

In the Vlls and IXs, all of the children participate in small Book Groups of four to six children. The children read a story at home and at school, and Book Group homework is a time for the children to reflect on their reading and express it through one of five to six rotating jobs: discussion director, passage finder, connector, illustrator, summarizer and word-finder. These jobs allow children to focus on a skill in the
context of a story and to develop their “favorite” job skill, or challenge themselves in a job that does not come as easily. The children know that in order to have a satisfying group discussion at school, they must give the job their full attention and effort at home. The intrinsic motivation involved in these tasks allows an enthusiasm for their work to occur naturally.

Each group has a teacher who spends extra time reviewing their work and providing written comments. In this way, each child receives meaningful feedback, which allows them to have more awareness of their development and growth as a learner. Feedback also encourages children to challenge themselves, with their teacher guiding them alongside.

Social Studies homework in the Xs focuses on their study of medieval culture and society. The Xs learn to decode and interpret the iconography of medieval artisans and artists throughout their yearlong study. After a visit to the Cloisters Museum, where the children observe medieval art firsthand, they are asked, for homework, to use their skills of observation to interpret two pieces of art reproduced by their teacher. Using their notes from their trip to the Cloisters, they must decide whether each piece is religious or secular and write a paragraph for each piece that explains what art elements in the piece helped them to draw their conclusions. Their writing must also state what story they think the art piece is telling. In this assignment, concepts worked on at school are further developed at home, writing is practiced and analytical skills are utilized. Each child has the opportunity to quietly, individually, reflect on the art; the open-ended nature of the question allows the children to self-direct and elaborate on the “story” of the art piece with more or less detail, depending on their interest and ability.

In Spanish, after the Xls finish their study of food, they are assigned a long-term homework project to create a menu. The menu can be for a specific kind of eatery, or a menu that is a reinforcement of foods that they have already learned. The results have included dessert menus, ballpark fare, and even a kosher Mexican food restaurant! Some Xls work in groups of two (in which case, more detail and effort is expected), and some of the children prefer to work alone. After the drafts and final copies, when the assignment is “publication ready,” the Xls present their menus to each other, and they practice ordering in a restaurant scene. The assignment reinforces vocabulary work, communication skills, is loads of fun, and encourages children who want to go deeper into the assignment, to do so.

In Math, the Xlls study unit quantities and rates, a topic that lends itself well to the everyday
world. A typical assignment asks them to practice their study of these concepts by calculating speed in miles per hour and feet per second, compare the unit price of food items per ounce, and create ratios based on measurement, for example, the number of pages in a book as compared to the thickness of that book. These concrete examples of an abstract mathematical concept provide context and meaning to their study, and allow the XIIIs to see the relationship of these concepts and skills in a variety of everyday scenarios.

The XIIIs have a short précis assignment that is done several times throughout the year. It requires that the children follow their own interests—they choose a *New York Times* article that they find interesting; they must read with comprehension so that they can distinguish between main and subordinate points—they have to write a summary of the article; they have to polish their sentence structure so that they can incorporate the main ideas of the article into their summaries; at the same time, they include subordinate ideas in phrases and dependent clauses; they have to form and express an opinion about what they have read, and they have to appreciate that a summary does not contain their opinion, while the evaluative portion of the assignment does. In short, it is an assignment that seems to be deceptively easy and simple, but which covers a number of important bases simultaneously. The big advantage is that the XIIIs themselves choose the article that they must write about. Another advantage is that the children get used to reading the news for information and interest. That, in some cases, turns into a lifetime habit.

This assignment highlights all of the facets of homework at C&C: Keeping abreast of current events is linked to the XIIIs’ work at school—they cover current events as part of their curriculum (civil rights, civics, race issues as a legacy of the Civil War), and as part of their job of publishing the Newspaper. Self-directed learning (differentiation) is at the heart of the assignment, as those XIIIs who are more skilled will pick more ambitious articles, while those who are less skilled will pick something that they can handle competently. This is an assignment for the children to practice work done at school as individuals: XIIIs practice writing précis in class as a Group—they all read the same article and then each student writes his or her summary on the board and the Group discusses them. Solidifying skills and concepts within reading and writing are inherent to the task, and it is also a good way for the XIIIs to practice taking notes for research papers.

**Homework for Life**

As children at C&C grow older and move through the School, they
become more invested in their own progress and take advantage of the opportunities to self-direct through homework. Their organization skills and study habits are developed within the context of their interests, which enables them to “own” these skills and bring them with them—not merely as tools, but as experiences they can draw on—as they continue to learn in high school and beyond.

Alumni often cite the most important aspect of their experience at City & Country was learning how to learn: how to identify their own interests, pursue that interest and turn it into knowledge. It is with work at school and independent work at home that the children of C&C develop this deep understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world.

Edited by Jennifer Marck