

# Insight

## Homework

Each year in September, October, and November, we help many of our new students adjust to the study habits necessary for an excellent education.

Among the many tools we use in our form of education, homework plays an important role. For older students, homework allows us to spend time on dialog in the classroom to build reasoning skills. Students are also able to practice conceptual work and spend time thinking on their own.

Younger students learn to be diligent while practicing and memorizing. They also develop habits of concentration, prioritization, and diligence.

For all age-groups, the most important purpose of homework is personal discipline and independent discovery.

By almost every measure—historically and internationally-- America's schools do not meet the grade when it comes to performance or homework. Studies show the two are related. Historically, homework played a more prominent role than it now does in American schools. Our contemporaries around the world today also require more homework of students. Studies of countries with world class schools consistently point to homework as a key factor in successful education. On average, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students internationally do 2.4 hours of homework each night. Singapore, considered to offer one of the

best educations in the world, has an 8<sup>th</sup> grade average of 4.6 hours of homework.<sup>1</sup> At The Ambrose School, our goal is to require around 3 hours or fewer per night for the upper grades. This amount may be less depending on the student. Many upper school parents have told us they had

little or no homework in their previous school. Our homework is designed to meet academic needs while allowing time for other activities.

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**The Ambrose School secondary students typically do less than 3 hours of homework on an average night.**

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### Acclimating to The Ambrose School

Students who begin at The Ambrose School in Kindergarten are acclimated to our homework system. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades our students develop the homework skills that will serve them throughout life.

In K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, students often do their homework with their parents nearby, often at the kitchen table. Parents help with the work and encourage the children to improve their effort.

Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students need to develop more independence. By the end of this time, students should take responsibility for their own homework. They should go to a quiet place designated for homework during a predetermined block of time. They should budget their own time and remain focused for the required time-period.

They should stop at the end of the time-period allotted. They need to be independent as they do their work, relying on their own resources.

Once a student has reached this level of self-sufficiency in their homework, the “hassle” ends and homework becomes a routine. This habit may be one of the most influential ways that your student is prepared for later success in college and in the discipline of life.

Of course, the big question is how do we get to this point? Students at other schools may never need to. In fact, as Dr. Rosemond points out in his book, it is attainable if parents are willing to hold students accountable.

### “Ending the Homework Hassle”

We recommend Dr. John Rosemond’s book *Ending the Homework Hassle* because it is consistent with our philosophy and because it is very practical. Put more simply, it works. We do not agree with everything the book says. Dr. Rosemond designs his program around public education and even criticizes some Christian educators who claim to offer better educations. We do make this claim, but we also understand and appreciate his position. He also advocates lower homework levels than we believe are consistent with good education. He’s not a classicist, nor is he an educator. Regardless of these disagreements, his program is excellent.

The program seeks to instill three values in children - respect, resourcefulness, and responsibility. Dr. Rosemond uses a system of careful time management, eliminating crutches, and natural consequences to develop good study habits.

Dr. Rosemond advocates that students develop this independence as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This is one area where we adjust his program. Different

students are able to become independent at different ages because they mature differently. Moms and dads may need to continue helping younger students plan their time and complete their homework through the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and into the 4<sup>th</sup>. However, by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students should have mastered independent homework skills.

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Transfer students simply need to get a crash course on what existing students already learned—how to do homework efficiently. Once they catch on, the homework is not a problem.

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We offer this book in our parent library and we offer it for sale. You can also obtain it from Amazon or your favorite bookseller.

### Transferring to The Ambrose School

Many students transfer into The Ambrose School between their 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years. By the end of September, these students are often discouraged as they struggle to keep up with the homework load. They notice other Academy students taking the homework in stride, and begin to wonder if they are just incapable of the work. Frustration can turn into despair if the problem is not corrected.

In fact, transfer students simply need to get a crash course on what existing students already learned - how to do homework efficiently. Once they catch on, the homework is not a problem. New students commonly complain of more than six hours of homework every night. They think they are being diligent but frustration quickly sets in.

Almost all transfer students who make a concerted effort to develop these skills adjust by November of their first year. However, this is not an inevitability. Parents and students must take an active role. Simply working harder, longer will only lead to burnout.

Here are some suggestions:

- 1) Parents should obtain and read Dr. Rosemond’s book (the following

suggestions come from *Ending the Homework Hassles*).

- 2) Find a quiet place, distant from the central hubbub of the home, without distractions (windows with interesting views, television, radios, siblings, pets, etc.) and provide a desk, chair, light, and all materials necessary for doing homework comfortably.
- 3) Furnish a clock that can be easily read without redirecting the student's gaze too far from their work.
- 4) Have the student take a notecard or piece of paper and make two columns. Make a list of homework assignments on the left, and a budgeted time to complete them on the right. The student MUST budget all assignments into a 3 hour timeperiod. After a student has mastered this process for about 6 weeks, they can extend the time beyond 3 hours on exceptional occasions.
- 5) The student must collect himself, get comfortable, obtain water, and record the time they begin working on the top of the notecard. The student may plan a few (2) 5 minute breaks into his time, using the notecard. The times must be strictly followed.
- 6) The student must pace himself and use the time pressure to work quickly. Skipping questions, deciding when good enough is good enough, and accelerated reading can help students make their goals.
- 7) The parent's only role is to enforce a strict 3 hour limit and check the student's papers upon the student's request. Parents of older children may say, "I think there are some errors in this assignment" but should avoid telling the student what those errors are.

In some cases, it simply takes some time for the student to catch up. Our school is academically advanced relative to other local educational options and this can make transfers somewhat

challenging. However, students are usually caught up with the class within their first semester.

Parents must allow students to fail if necessary to reinforce individual responsibility.

If the student is a slow reader and finds the reading assignments to be taxing, we strongly recommend *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler. This book will help any student become a better and faster reader.

Transfer students who have followed this plan will generally struggle during September and October, but by November, they begin to become acclimated. Before long, they are as comfortable as our long-time students with the homework load.

## Questions and Answers

Q: I'm spending hours with my grammar school student doing homework. I don't even know how to do some of this stuff! (Latin).

A: Throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students should work toward independence. Parents often make students dependent by being too involved in their homework. While this may make one feel needed, depending on the student it can be counterproductive. We encourage parents to gradually but continually put pressure on students to do their own work.

Q: If I don't check my student's work, he makes lots of careless mistakes. What do I do?

A: On the contrary, if you continually prevent your child from turning in assignments with careless mistakes, they will not learn to be more careful. Let them make the mistakes and learn from their failures.

Q: My child gets very stressed if he or she doesn't get high marks on every assignment. We spend hours trying to get everything "just right."

A: This "perfectionism" is best addressed at a young age. Students develop healthier practices overall when they learn to do work that is less than "perfect." If not addressed, your student will likely

develop difficulties accepting their performance in many areas of life. No one is perfect. Students need to accept B's and C's when they have done their best in the allotted homework time. This is addressed in *Homework Hassles*, but is resolved through strictly limiting homework time.

Q: My older student spends between 4 and 6 hours every night doing homework. He is really frustrated, even to the point of sneaking time in the middle of the night to do homework. Sometimes he even cries. I'm not sure how long he can keep this up. What can we do?

A: 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students are expected to do up to 3 hours of homework nightly. When students exceed this amount on a regular basis, a problem needs to be addressed or they will be overwhelmed. First, speak with the teacher to verify that the student is doing their work in class and is approaching it correctly. The most common reason for this problem is a lack of diligence, even if this does not seem to be the case. Many students are prone to distractions: they take breaks when the work becomes difficult; they rotate between activities (homework, practicing an instrument, eating, drinking, playing, etc.); or they rotate between subjects too frequently (although this can sometimes help when the student is stuck on a problem).

Even when it appears that the student is working diligently, his concentration may be scattered. He may be putting a lot of energy in, but accomplishing very little. Diligence requires structure and self-discipline. In our experience, this is a gradual process that takes 2 to 3 months to develop. The key is not to allow the student to spend more than 3 or 3 ½ hours on homework during this adjustment time. The overall time restriction will help them budget their time and move more quickly. The pressure actually makes them more efficient. This prevents the “doldrums” that occur when a student labors without being productive. Students need a time incentive to “run for the prize” rather than just labor, seemingly in vain.

Q: My student seems to be doing well, but I'm not! He's only in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and he's already asking questions I can't answer—particularly in Latin, English grammar, Science, and Math.

A: Our curriculum challenges students, and often parents. Our teachers realize this and will gladly help with questions after school or on break. Encourage your student to plan their work so that they have time to ask questions of their teacher.

Q: My student has many activities that keep him from doing homework on certain nights. How can we manage this?

A: Many of our students have busy activities. This provides an opportunity for them to learn how to plan in advance. Teachers publish homework assignments on a weekly basis and in advance by several days (often over a week). These are available on RenWeb, our internet parent information system. Students can also obtain these directly from teachers. Students should be encouraged on Friday or Saturday to plan the upcoming week. For example, if a student has activities on Tuesday and Thursday, they should plan on the previous Friday to get at least one of the assignments for each of those days done over the weekend.

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<sup>1</sup> Study of World Class Schools, American School Board Journal, 1997