

# IT'S TIME TO GET REAL ABOUT HOMEWORK

Putting our Progressive Philosophy in Action



By Holly Novick, Head of School

For over a century, the topic of homework has been an ongoing source of debate among educators and parents. Is it really effective in elementary grades, or does it put too much pressure on kids and families in the evening hours? Should middle and high school students have more or less of it? When is it truly helpful, and when is it just busywork? Attitudes toward homework – and research supporting its pros and cons – vary depending on era, geography, and who you're asking.

Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, educators commonly believed that homework was necessary to create disciplined students. Beginning in the 1940s, a surge in progressive education shifted that belief. Then in the US, starting in the 1980s with *Nation At Risk*, followed in the 2000s by *No Child Left Behind*, there was increasing pressure for students to perform at high levels on tests in order to get into colleges. Research shows that this approach may be having an adverse effect on students' ability to think critically, find and solve problems, and work well together.

In recent years there have been many studies and education experts that have come out against homework in elementary schools, arguing that it cuts down on valuable family time, does not show a clear connection to improved test scores and academic achievement, and may even be detrimental to students' mental health.

So, where does The Country School stand on this issue that has generated so much research that a

study can be found to support any position? With our roots firmly planted in progressive education, we place an emphasis on learning by doing, through hands on projects and teachers who engage students in understanding and experiencing – rather than just memorizing and regurgitating for tests. I believe this approach creates students with a lifelong love of learning, and the skills and confidence to succeed both inside and outside the classroom – academically, socially, and emotionally.

I am confident that our amazingly capable, creative, and well-organized TCS teachers can teach effectively during the school day, and eliminate the perceived need for our students to work a “second shift” when we send them home. Prominent research shows no evidence linking homework in elementary school to achievement. The correlation begins in middle school, but after an hour of homework, that correlation disappears. By high school the correlation becomes stronger, but after two hours of homework, that correlation drops off significantly too.

Based on careful analysis of the leading research and considering our school's unique attributes, the Country School has decided to stop giving daily homework assignments in grades K-4 at TCS. However, in these early elementary grades, your child's teachers may assign some in-depth, longer-term projects that students will be expected to work on at home, which support and enhance the learning that occurs in the classroom. Then, beginning in 5<sup>th</sup> grade – when research indicates that homework begins to have more of an effect on test scores, grades, and skills development – we plan to assign small amounts of daily homework, designed to maximize comprehension of the lessons taught in class and get students acclimated to the organization and discipline required to complete homework tasks in middle school and beyond.

I have attended numerous educational conferences in recent years where the subject of homework was a hot topic. The majority of educators and administrators I communicate with regularly are convinced that a no-homework policy in elementary school is the right way to go, but few have been willing to take the plunge and institute such a policy. Public schools are limited by district and federal mandates; and in private schools are often hampered by the fear that parents may mistakenly believe that an absence of homework means the curriculum is not rigorous enough; or that once their children are in high school, they may not be equipped to compete with students coming from other elementary and middle schools where copious amounts of homework were assigned. There is absolutely no convincing evidence that this is the case, and our goal at The Country School is to provide your children with an educational experience that is exciting, challenging, enjoyable, and prepares them for what's next.

Often forgotten in the quest to give our children the best possible education is the fact that play, rest, creative and recreational interests outside of school, and time spent just doing nothing are key parts of maturing that are important for children of all ages. Homework for homework's sake should not deprive them of this essential time. We will all benefit from the new policy: TCS children, parents, and the high schools and colleges where we eventually send our capable, confident and engaged students.

