

EDUCATION BUREAU CIRCULAR NO. 18/2015

Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools – No Drilling, Effective Learning

[Note: This circular should be read by -

- (a) Supervisors and Heads of all secondary and primary schools - for action
- (b) Heads of Sections - for information]

Summary

The purpose of this circular is to provide the updated “Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools” for schools’ reference and application.

Background

2. In 2000, the Education Bureau (EDB) implemented the education reform to foster students’ whole-person development and lifelong learning. The curriculum reform was also launched with the aim of developing students’ interest in learning, and learning to learn capability. In the same year, the EDB issued the “Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools” to explain the principles and measures of effective homework. The guidelines are also included in the chapters on “Assessment” (Chapter 5) and “Meaningful homework” (Chapter 8) of the “*Basic Education Curriculum Guide – To sustain, deepen and focus on learning to learn (Primary 1-6)*” which was updated in 2014 (2014 Guide).

Learning and homework time

3. The school curriculum aims at providing students with diversified and precious learning experiences within and outside the lessons, including homework, life-wide learning activities/extra-curricular activities and family learning activities to create opportunities for students to consolidate and apply knowledge and skills learnt and cope with daily challenges. These learning experiences can sustain students’ learning motivation as well as increase their learning interest and confidence, preparing them to embark on self-directed learning. As whole-day schooling has been fully implemented, schools should refer to the

school context and student needs, and try to arrange time within lessons as far as possible for students to complete part of their homework (e.g. that involves more writing or is more difficult) under teachers' guidance. Students can complete other homework, such as preparation for lessons, reading and collection of information after school, have spare time to participate in other meaningful social or extra-curricular activities conducive to whole-person development, and have time to gain sufficient rest and sleep.

Policy, quality and quantity of homework

4. It is the quality rather than the quantity of homework that counts. There should be clear targets and expected learning outcomes for homework. The mode and content of homework should cater for students' learning needs and abilities so that students are supported to extend and consolidate their learning based on the existing knowledge. The school management should, therefore, formulate an appropriate policy according to students' background and the principles mentioned above for all the stakeholders to discuss and implement collaboratively. The Principal can work with or appoint the primary school curriculum leader/class teachers to monitor and review the implementation of homework policy at different classes as a whole to ensure that students can make good use of the time after lessons to read, do physical exercises, play, and establish good relationships with their family members, peers and friends. Teachers should exercise their professional knowledge to handle homework issues according to students' needs. All kinds of exercises which focus on mechanical drilling, repeated copying and rote learning should be avoided. Schools can make reference to Chapter 5 "Assessment" and Chapter 8 "Meaningful homework" of the 2014 Guide, the webpage of the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) and the EDB Circular Memorandum No. 176/2015 on "Selection of Quality Textbooks and Curriculum Resources for Use in Schools (Supplementary Notes) – Prudent Selection and Use" to formulate a school-based homework policy that caters for students' abilities, needs and capacity development, understand the relationship between learning, teaching and assessment, establish the assessment policy and review regularly.

1. Basic Education Curriculum Guide – To sustain, deepen and focus on learning to learn (Primary 1-6)
<https://cd.edb.gov.hk/becg/english/index-2.html/>
2. Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA)
<http://www.bca.hkeaa.edu.hk/web/TSA/en/Introduction.html>
3. EDB Circular Memorandum No.176/2015 "Selection of Quality Textbooks and Curriculum Resources for Use in Schools (Supplementary Notes) – Prudent Selection and Use"
<http://applications.edb.gov.hk/circular/upload/EDBCM/EDBCM15176E.pdf>

Learning and assessment

5. Assessment is to collect evidence of students' learning process and outcomes as reference in order to review the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, enhance the quality of learning and teaching, and understand students' learning progress. Learning is a continuous process and activities such as tests, project learning, group discussions, oral presentations and reading can be the evidence of students' performance in their learning process. There should not be over-reliance on pen-and-paper tests and related drills, or homework which focuses on mechanical drills, which will lead to students' loss of interest and motivation in learning.

School assessment and Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA)

6. The Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) is designed to gauge students' attainment of the Basic Competencies (BC) in the three subjects of Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics in the three key stages of learning administered at Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3. It is a low-stakes assessment which does not assess individual students' performance. With the incorporation of the curriculum targets into daily learning activities, schools could understand students' learning needs and difficulties, and devise effective strategies for learning to help students build a strong foundation and make progress. It is not necessary for schools to change their pedagogy and assessment mode for TSA. Neither is it necessary to use supplementary exercises or TSA mock papers which focus heavily on mechanical drills. Such measures will only kill students' learning interest and cannot contribute to making progress in learning.

Communication and co-operation

7. School sponsoring bodies and school management committees should support schools to make arrangements for an appropriate homework and assessment policy. Schools should timely explain to parents the school homework and assessment policy (can include the types of effective homework, frequency of tests and examinations, arrangements of supplementary lessons and whether there is a need to purchase supplementary exercises, etc.), and consult them for their views and encourage them to give feedback to their children's performance in homework. In addition, schools should inform all parents of the school homework and assessment policy and upload it at the beginning of every school year. Schools can also advise parents to read "Parent Pamphlet on Meaningful Homework" to understand more about their children's learning needs. Website:

http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/primary/materials/meaningfulhomework_html.htm

Support measures

8. The EDB will continue to provide professional development programmes, exemplars and support services for schools, and collaborate and communicate with schools, families and other stakeholders to further enhance students' interest and effectiveness in learning.

9. The EDB officers will continue to urge schools to formulate an appropriate school-based homework and assessment policy through different channels and means (including external school review, focused inspection, school development visits, curriculum development visits and daily contact etc.). Professional advice, support and reports on school practices and students' learning needs will also be provided to facilitate schools' self-improvement and sustainable development.

10. The "Guidelines on Homework and Tests – No Drilling, Effective Learning" is attached to this circular as a reference to heads of schools and teachers on the measures to be taken. For enquiries, please contact the Kindergarten and Primary Section of the Curriculum Development Institute, Education Bureau on 2892 5871.

Stephen YW YIP
for Secretary for Education

Guidelines on Homework and Tests in Schools – No Drilling, Effective Learning

The purpose of these guidelines is to outline some guiding principles and practical measures for teachers to make effective use of homework and tests as supplementary learning activities to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness in accordance with a curriculum that promotes whole-person development.

(I) HOMEWORK

1. Relationship between homework and learning

Homework is an important component of the learning and teaching process. It allows students to extend learning outside class hours and prepare for the lessons ahead. Meaningful homework can achieve the following:

- Consolidate classroom learning while preparing students for new learning; and facilitate self-learning with appropriate design and guidance.
- Help students understand their own progress and problems; and encourage them to find ways to solve problems.
- Enable teachers to identify students' learning problems and adjust the teaching plans and strategies accordingly, and provide timely feedback to students to enhance students' learning effectiveness.
- Evaluate students' performance in acquiring knowledge, mastering skills, and developing positive values and attitudes, and provide effective feedback on curriculum planning and implementation.
- Enable parents to understand their children's learning progress and styles so as to provide their children with timely support.
- Enable parents to understand the requirements of the school curriculum so that parents and schools can work together to help students make improvement in learning.

In this connection, teachers should design diversified and motivating homework and strike a balance between the quality and quantity to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

2. Effective homework

Effective homework can enhance learning. It is usually diversified in the design and serves to:

- Keep pace with the teaching schedule in class and help students consolidate and develop concepts;
- integrate interesting and motivating tasks but avoid rote learning;
- stimulate learning motivation, provoke thinking and active learning;
- develop students' self-motivated learning and creativity;
- cater for students' individual needs;
- offer a challenge to students; and
- develop good reading habits.

Teachers should design homework which encourages students to think, express creatively and learn actively. Mechanical drills, repeated copying or rote learning only make students feel bored and thus should be avoided. Teachers should refer to the learning objectives of each lesson, select areas that should be strengthened through homework and assign homework purposefully.

3. Setting and giving homework

- a. Type - Homework should vary in accordance with the learning objectives and teaching needs.
 - It may be preparation work, which is done at home before a lesson. Teachers should take into account the abilities of students and the objectives of the subjects and provide adequate guidance.
 - It may be short-term or long-term tasks that consolidate learning.
 - For lower primary level, homework should be motivating and encourage creativity. undue emphasis on writing should be avoided.
 - For upper primary level, homework should encourage thinking and analysis, promote life-wide learning, relate to students' life experience and provoke creativity.
- b. Quality - Assignments should be well designed to help students reinforce classroom learning and realise their abilities. If doing homework is pleasurable and rewarding for students, it is regarded as an effective learning activity.
 - Homework should not be mechanical drills or rote learning exercises. Homework should not be given merely for training students to attain the Basic Competencies in TSA. Inappropriate TSA exercises available in market should not be selected without discrimination as homework.
 - Homework should be designed according to students' needs and abilities. For students with special talents or academically low achievers, homework should be appropriately set at their levels so that they are encouraged to do their best.
 - Assignments should not be used as a means of punishment.
- c. Guidance - Teachers should make flexible use of whole-day schooling to assign homework and provide appropriate guidance for students. "Self-learning" assignments without teachers' guidance or feedback should be reduced to minimum.
 - Homework should be clearly explained by teachers with regard to the purpose, expectation, how and when the homework is to be completed.
 - If necessary, the extent of parent participation in completing the homework shall be stated clearly.
 - For whole day schools, tutorial periods can be arranged to help and support students who have difficulty in completing their homework.

- d. Frequency - Frequency of different assignments should be carefully regulated.
- Teachers teaching the same class should ensure a balance among different subjects and moderate the amount of work given to students so that they are not unduly overburdened with homework on certain days of the week or cycle.
 - Homework should be regulated according to the needs of individual classes through the collaboration between the curriculum leaders and different subject teachers.
- e. Quantity - Homework should be reasonably assigned without causing physical or mental fatigue in students.

As the situation of schools and individual students (such as their abilities, home environment, and the amount of free time at home) is different, it is inappropriate to set a strict rule on the amount of homework for each class level of all schools. Teachers should assign appropriate amount of homework taking into account students' abilities (in different classes/levels). With the implementation of the whole-day schooling, schools should take both students' learning and balanced physical and mental development into consideration. Schools should regulate the amount of homework given to students each day to ensure that students have enough time to rest, play and develop their own interests.

- f. Feedback - Provide teachers and parents with a means to monitor students' progress and hence facilitate the teaching-learning-assessment cycle.
- Teachers should mark homework properly with grades/comments or suggestions for improvement, and record students' performance. Students with outstanding performance should be recognised and encouraged.
 - Records of homework for primary classes should be signed at regular intervals (e.g. once a week) by parents or guardians.
 - Students who have good reasons for not completing their homework should be given opportunities to improve. Where necessary, teachers should give support and help to students in need.
 - Where there is a persistent failure to submit homework, parents or guardians should be notified to seek their assistance as early as possible.

4. Homework policy of school

To ensure that homework is properly regulated, an overall policy should be drawn up by the school heads and curriculum leaders in consultation with the teaching staff and parents.

- Schools should also take into account students' after-school time when setting the type, frequency and amount of homework for each class or class level. The agreed policy should then be implemented under the supervision of the curriculum leaders.
- The homework policy should be explained carefully to all students and parents, particularly parents of new students, at the beginning of the school year.
- Guidelines should be given to students and parents to help them understand their responsibility and enlist their co-operation.
- There should be a close partnership between schools and parents. Through

constant home-school communication and co-operation, parents can participate in improving student learning and also the school homework policy. Schools should be open to consider and accept the suggestions of parents in the course of reviewing their homework policy.

- The homework policy should be monitored and reviewed regularly. Teachers from different subjects should participate in the evaluation process of homework policy and have a thorough review with reference to the quality, quantity, variety and balanced allocation of homework.

Schools should timely explain to parents the homework and assessment policy as well as the types of meaningful homework. Parents should be consulted regarding the policy and encouraged to give feedback on their children's homework performance. In addition, schools should inform parents and upload their homework policy on websites at the beginning of every school year.

5. Role and responsibility of parents

As most of the homework will be completed at home, parents play an important role. Schools should communicate with parents regularly, for example, through the Parent-Teacher Association, to propose ways to support the students in completing homework.

- Parents have to create a favourable environment for their children at home, e.g. setting a regular time for doing homework, providing stationery and resources, and removing distractions such as noise and disturbances.
- Parents are expected to familiarise themselves with what is expected in the assignments so they can provide suitable guidance for their children.
- Parents should carefully review teachers' comments on homework that has been returned.
- Parents should contact teachers frequently to understand more about their children's progress. Parents should report children's learning attitude at home, seek help from teachers and discuss ways to resolve if there is a problem.
- Parents should arrange various activities for their children's diversified development and teach them to make use good of time by setting up a timetable. Sending children to organisations or places outside schools for excessive mechanical examination drills should be avoided.

Parents can read the "Parent Pamphlet on Meaningful Homework" on our webpage to understand more about their children's learning needs:

http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/pri_mary/materials/meaningfulhomework_html.htm

(II) TESTS

1. Functions of tests

Assessment is to collect evidence of students' learning process and outcomes for reference in order to review the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, enhance learning and teaching quality and understand students' learning progress. Learning is a continuous process. Tests, project learning, group discussions, oral presentations and reading tasks can

also be the evidence of students' performance in their learning process. Tests, therefore, are only one kind of the school assessment. Though tests reflect students' learning outcomes over a period of time, the importance of test results should not be over-emphasised or else undermining the confidence of lower achievers. Details can be referred to Chapter 5 "Assessment" in the *Basic Education Curriculum Guide – to sustain, deepen and focus on learning to learn (Primary 1-6)*.

- Tests reflect students' strengths and areas for improvement.
- Teachers can use the test results to give feedback to students: encouraging them to self-evaluate, reflect and improve their learning while assisting them in developing good study habits for effective learning. Test results also provide feedback for teachers to make reasonable adjustments in the teaching schedule according to the needs and abilities of the students.

2. Administration of tests

Heads of schools should ensure that an appropriate policy is formulated to delineate the impact of tests on learning effectiveness.

- Teachers should pay attention to the purpose and frequency of tests and amount of materials to be tested. Besides, the number of tests administered each day and each week should be strictly controlled.
- To avoid undue pressure and anxiety on students caused by tests, the frequency of tests should be reduced. Apart from formal tests, teachers should also use other forms of assessments from time to time in order to obtain information about students' progress.
- Dictations or tests which only require rote learning or which are unnecessarily demanding should be avoided.
- Tests should be designed with reference to the focused learning targets and objectives. Open-ended questions which require thinking from multiple perspectives should be set to assess students' lifelong learning capabilities (e.g. critical thinking, knowledge transfer, problem-solving, and creativity).

3. Coordination of homework, tests and other assessment tools

The complexity of student performance can only be described by a range of holistic, comprehensive and purposeful assessment activities and reporting system.

- Teachers should not assess students' effort and performance based on merely test results.
- Test is one of the tools of assessment. It has to be coordinated with other forms of assessments in order to reflect students' learning achievements.
- Other informal assessments such as tests, classroom observations, project work, worksheets or work-cards are different modes for evaluating students as long as they are align with the learning objectives. They all provide useful learning experiences and evidence of learning.
- Teachers should use evidence of student learning for monitoring, recording and reporting students' performance, and as a basis for planning progression and

remediation in the next stage of learning. In this way, the cycle of “teaching-learning-assessment” will be fully sustained and students will be encouraged to progress further.

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