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## Homework Hubbub Too much? Too little? Too mind-numbing?

By Kate Maier

(03/08/2007) A student's independent study project invoked lively discussion at the Hayground School on Feb. 28, when students and parents from districts across the South Fork gathered for a forum on Alfie Kohn's "The Homework Myth."



Kate Maier

Morgana Keller-Tetherow, left, and Soren Hope, who organized a discussion of the "homework myth" at the Hayground School, were excited about the turnout on Feb. 28.

Published last summer, the book caught the eye of Soren Hope, a Hayground eighth grader who had recently learned the hard way that

two to three hours of out-of-school work is a daily reality for many of her peers. She attended a Quaker school last year, where she was assigned regular homework for the first time in her life.

When she returned to Hayground for her final year of studies there, she set out to evaluate homework's usefulness as part of her final project. She had organized the forum to facilitate her research.

At the Hayground School, which was established in 1996 as an "innovative learning" option for students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, homework is rarely assigned, although independent, long-term projects and nightly reading are part of every student's experience.

But the shell shock that many Hayground students go through when they graduate and assimilate into more traditional schools was a concern brought up frequently by parents at the meeting, along with questions about the quality and amount of work assigned at other schools. About 50 people showed up to talk about homework, and after a brief introduction they were asked to break into three smaller groups for discussion.

Several parents of children at the John M. Marshall Elementary School in East Hampton complained that dittos and handouts have changed little since the time they attended the school. Most expressed anxiety that their children were being deprived of time they need for social development by an increase in work resulting from the No Child Left Behind initiative.

Eric Casale, the principal at the Springs School, agreed on Monday that the federal mandate's "demands have forced teachers to have to give extra homework," but said that "new programs, and the incorporation of technology," are just as culpable.

Like most school administrators, he sets guidelines for homework, referring to a "national standard of 10 minutes per grade level," meaning that a fifth-grade student would be expected to have about 50 minutes of homework per night.

Thomas Lamorgese served as principal at the John M. Marshall Elementary School for 10 years before taking on that position last fall at the East Hampton Middle School. He said the amount of work hasn't increased, but that the type of work has evolved.

In recent years "we encourage meaningful assignments," he said, recalling a rash of complaints a few years ago from elementary student parents who noticed that their kids' work intensified somewhere around the third grade. The teachers "started to increase that type of homework in second grade so they'd be ready," and the complaints stopped, he said.

"I have struggled with the homework question," said Gary Buckner, who teaches high school social studies at the Mattituck public school and sends his daughters to the Hayground School.

"The questions that I'm choosing I feel are relevant questions," he said, estimating that of the 30-some-odd kids in each of his classes, "only about four or five actually do the reading. I really think that if they do some of the reading, [or even] do one iota of the reading, and it sits with them, then something has been achieved."

On the other end of the spectrum, a growing set of students, whom he referred to as overachievers, "can be overwhelmed. Some kids come in very tired, after staying up until 12, or 1 at night," he said. Like many teachers, Mr. Buckner is caught between the mandates of his school's administration, his personal beliefs, and his job to reach all of the diverse students in his classes.

Lisa Zust, a parent of a former Hayground student, said she agrees with her daughter, who now attends East Hampton High School, that homework can be "insulting" to the smarter kids. "They have actually taken away her art class and given her a study hall to catch up with homework," she said, because her daughter has "flat-out refused" to complete her assignments.

At the Child Development Center of the Hamptons Charter School, Ms. Zust said, "it's just insane" that her autistic son has two to three hours of work every night. "Without question, he has never played after school, in his entire life," she said of her son. "He doesn't have the time."

She said that because he has autism the work is useless. Rather than burden him with rote memorization, she said, she wants the school to "teach him how to think."

"You might as well put a pile of pennies on the table and tell him he has to count them every night," she said of his assignments. "Both of my children feel like they're

in jail, in a place where people don't trust them."

Other students expressed similar feelings of confinement, including Christian Scheider, who spent eight years at Hayground before graduating to the Ross School. "I can't stay here and talk to you about why homework is bad, because I've got so much homework to do," he announced when he burst into the meeting late.

Christian said he was horrified that an administrator had told him to "prioritize" in response to his complaints about homework, and painted a picture of an academic environment that encourages students to ignore the details that make learning worthwhile.

At a recent trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, he said, he was "robbed" by being forced to rush through exhibits and memorize dates, rather than stop and appreciate the art. Christian plans to be bogged down in homework at the Ross School for another two years, and then hopes to escape to an alternative school like Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., or Reed College in Portland, Ore.

Some parents who have taken matters into their own hands have suffered the consequences. "He got detention because his mother said he didn't have to do his homework," said a distraught mom who had tried to override the instructions of her 12-year-old's teacher. Other homework critics have taken a more evenhanded approach. "Without homework, I can't imagine where she would have been. The teacher didn't have the time to teach the class," said Genevieve Willock of her daughter's experience at her previous school.

Her daughter now attends the Ross School, where she is thriving, but Ms. Willock noted that there are times when she finds herself telling her two children, "No. Not this weekend, it's for family," or "Stop, it's dinnertime."

"As parents, we need them to be educated, but we need to establish boundaries," she said, adding that socioeconomic challenges make homework difficult for some families where parents don't have time to sit with kids and walk them through it.

That is why Glynis Edmunds, a single working mother whose daughter is at John Marshall, is a huge proponent of Project Making the Most of Out of School Time, an after-school program at the John Marshall and Springs Schools where homework is interspersed with fun activities. She called the majority of her child's homework "fluff work," asking, "What good is copying to anyone?"

But, she said, "I cannot say enough for Project MOST. It's fabulous, not in this sort of prissy, Hollywood sort of way, but it's there, and it gets the job done."

Two hours into the discussion, Soren, who had handed out surveys to everyone, began to collect her data, and she is likely to spend hours compiling it before turning it into a completed project. At least she will have something to stimulate her young mind, unlike the student at the East Hampton Middle School whose mother said he has between one and a half and three hours of homework every night.

"He's 12 and he says, 'Can I go out and play?' and then he has to bring his head back into what he's been doing all day at school," she said. "He has no long-term

projects, nothing that he could sink his teeth into and have ownership of.”

Ms. Zust suggested that children should be subjected to the same standards as their adult counterparts. “Eight hours a day, that’s all that adults do,” she said. “Why do we expect our kids to do more work than we do?”

