

“ High school is often where homework falls apart. When students don't know what to do or how to do it, they become frustrated and unmotivated. — Todd Cunningham, assistant professor of the teaching stream, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education



Students at TFS - Canada's International School benefit from many homework supports, including a homework club with peer mentors. PHOTOGRAPH ANITA GRIFFITHS

Individuals

who reflect,

CULINARY SCIENTIST

citizens

INTERNATIONAL VISIONARY

who act.

SEE THEIR STORIES TFS.CA

TFS

CANADA'S
INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL

L'ÉCOLE
INTERNATIONALE
DU CANADA

BILINGUAL · IB WORLD SCHOOL · CO-ED · AGE 2 TO GRADE 12
OPEN HOUSE OCT 18 · OCT 30 · NOV 1 · NOV 29

How to beat the homework blues

KATHRYN BOOTHBY

The homework battle has been fought at kitchen tables around the world for decades. Is it possible to ease the tension and turn homework from bore to boon?

Changing the mindset starts with understanding the purpose of homework.

For kindergarten and elementary students, homework takes the form of reading and inquiry. “Parents can ask questions about what might happen on the next page of a book, or why a character is happy or sad. When these types of questions are built in to reading, they can help with language skills and allow more letter-sound associations to be developed,” says Todd Cunningham, assistant professor of the teaching stream at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

In high school, homework is to help consolidate knowledge. It is not about learning a new subject, nor should it mean completing something that was left unfinished in class. “This is often where homework falls apart. When students don't know what to do or how to do it, they become frustrated and unmotivated,” says Cunningham, who is also a school and clinical psychologist.

Where homework excels is in activities that can be done in isolation or as an extension of a project. “In class you have an hour with an expert who can give immediate feedback. Taking home the key concepts learned and applying them to a problem is a much more effective use of time. It comes right back to the purpose of homework,” notes Cunningham.

The homework policy at TFS - Canada's International School is constantly under review and updated based on the latest research, feedback from faculty, students and parents, and the use of technology, says Susan Elliott, executive director of the school's Learning

Forum. “We teach in French at the school, and we live in a multi-lingual society where many languages are spoken in the home. As such, we do not expect that parents can help with homework. Our students need to be able to do the work independently,” she says.

The keys are communication, engagement, and in providing additional support where needed. “If a student is struggling it means they have not fully understood or mastered a subject,” says Elliott. “Feedback at all levels helps us ensure students know what to do and have done enough in class to work independently, and that we are giving the right amount of homework (TFS uses 10 minutes per day per grade level as a general rule). It also helps identify areas where we may need to do things differently for the individual child and/or the entire class.”

We want our students to feel powerful

TFS also has a homework club where students who may be struggling learn from peer mentors how to do homework effectively.

“We teach students time management and organization skills, and how to break work into manageable tasks. When they graduate from homework club they have the tools and skill sets necessary to do their work at home,” Elliott says. “Ultimately, we want our students to feel powerful because they understand the work, have accomplished their goals, and are prepared for class.”

In addition to open communication and support, Cunningham and Elliott offer these straight-forward tips to help achieve homework nirvana:

FOR PARENTS

1. Don't over-program your child. “It's about balance and understanding the power of downtime,” notes Elliott.

2. Understand what happens before homework. “Brain research shows that after two hours of video games, students are not able to sustain attention. It is better to do physical activity to oxygenate the brain prior to homework,” advises Cunningham.

3. Have a scheduled routine in an area with limited distractions.

4. Do a time check. “If homework is taking longer than expected, voice concerns to the school so it can be quickly addressed,” says Elliott.

5. Monitor behaviour. “If there are always tears or anger, talk to the teacher and work as a team to develop a better plan to address homework,” suggests Cunningham.

FOR TEENS

1. Ditch the video games prior to homework (see above).

2. Find a quiet place away from the distractions of television, ringing phones, playing siblings and family gatherings.

3. Choose a time of day when you have your optimal amount of energy. “That may be as late as 10 p.m., but it is certainly not at one in the morning,” emphasizes Cunningham.

4. Plan it out. Do not wait until the night before it is due. Leave enough time for research and to complete all the steps necessary to achieve the goal. Organization is an essential life skill, after all.

5. Do not be afraid to look online. “There are a lot of places online to get information, including videos that can help consolidate the knowledge you already have,” says Cunningham.