

Using Weekly Assignment Packets to Improve Student Performance

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Introduction

The Freshman Foundations Program at Wakefield High School is designed to provide a smooth transition to high school for our incoming freshman. The program is based on the middle school teaming approach. Our teams are referred to as houses and they consist of five core teachers, a special education or ESL resource teacher, and an intern. The students take English, math, history, technology, and biology in the house and two electives outside the house. Within the house, students meet with each core teacher three times a week for two 70-minute sessions and one 90-minute session.

The house provides a very nurturing and supportive environment for our students. As a house, we try to provide structure for our students and equip them with the tools needed to be a successful student. Organizational skills are a major focus within the house. For most freshmen, staying organized is like a labor of Sisyphus. No matter how successfully they complete the task of "rolling the rock [of their school work] to the top of the hill," it rolls back down on them the next day. In effect, there was a constant looming worry of becoming overwhelmed with all the work they had to do. However, we feel that organization is a must and we try to assist our students by providing them consistency within their house classes.

Focus of this Project

At the semester point, I found approximately 30% of our students were failing one or more of their house classes. As a result, I surveyed my students regarding their grades, study habits, homework completion rates, and class behavior so that they could reflect on these items. I hoped to have my students recognize the connection between their study/work habits and their grades. Fifty surveys from my regular biology students were completed. I found that almost 80% of the students surveyed were not satisfied with their current grade.

One tool we have used to assist our students with organization is an assignment sheet. Students are given an assignment sheet for each subject. The assignment sheets are kept in the front of the binder and the students use them to record assignments and due dates. Upon completion of the assignment, the sheets are initialed or stamped by the teacher. This provides a consistent and convenient method for recording assignments and tracking progress. These sheets provide up-to-date information regarding assignment completion rates for parents, students, and teacher. For students with good study/work habits, the assignment sheets alone are effective. However, it has been my experience that

students who lack good study/work habits struggle to stay organized and on top of their assignments.

Phase I: Taking Stock of the Situation

As a second year biology teacher, I am continually searching for ways to help my students succeed in science. When I first began this project, I had three primary goals:

1. Focus on long-range planning;
2. Develop a core collection of instructional resources;
3. Maximize the untraditional 70-70-90 minute block of our house.

As things proceeded, I found myself focusing on the first two. I chose to work on long-range planning for two reasons. I hoped to help my students with their organization to improve their performance and to work on my own organizational skills to reduce stress. In addition to planning, I worked on organizing a collection of instructional resources.

Of the fifty students surveyed: 20% said they always completed their homework, 32% said they almost always completed their homework; 26% said they completed their homework about half the time; and 22% said they rarely ever did their homework. Although, 48% of students reported a 50% homework rate or less which is a failing grade, it is notable that no students reported a complete lack of homework.

When the students with a 50% or less homework completion rate were asked to identify reasons for not completing homework, the following were the most common responses: forgetting to do the assignment, forgetting to bring the assignment to class, the assignment was lost or misplaced, not wanting to do the work. While some students indicated a lack of motivation, most reasons related to a lack of organization. In my opinion, many of the students who forgot to do the work, forgot because they didn't record the assignment on their assignment sheet.

Phase II: Implementing Homework Packets

I began my long-range planning by mapping out each unit and breaking it into weekly segments. I would then prepare weekly homework packets for my students. This provided them with a written record of upcoming class topics and homework assignments with explanations and due dates. In addition, the packets included worksheets, guided note sheets, important dates, etc. In the packets I used a combination of prepared worksheets from the textbook as well as self-generated sheets. I hoped that this would be a tool to help students who struggled with organization.

I found that many students were failing to write down assignments on their assignment sheets. In the past, I tried to write assignments on the chalkboard before students left class, but more often than not, assignments were shouted out as students were packing up for the day. As a result many students neglected to write down the assignment, opting instead to pack up and get ready

to leave class. For many students an oral announcement was not enough, especially the special education and second language students. I hope to help my students by giving them a written record of their assignments one-week at a time. This would provide all my students with a reference should they forget to write down an assignment listed on the board or announced at the end of class.

Because the weekly packets included a week's worth of homework and class topics, students were able to prepare for upcoming lessons and get a head start on assignments. The students' responses to the weekly packets were overwhelmingly positive. Many students told me that they felt the packets were very helpful. In a house of approximately 90 students, only 2 students expressed negative comments regarding the packet.

These two students both mentioned feeling overwhelmed when given a week's worth of homework. I spoke with them and reminded them that although they had a week's worth of homework, they could still do it one assignment at a time. Otherwise, many students found it helpful to know what the upcoming class topics were and many students did the assignments in advance to prepare for the upcoming classes.

I used the assignment packets for the entire third quarter. I found that the packets require more up front planning on my part, but I also found they helped reduce my stress levels during instruction. As I prepared the packets, I would sort through all my files picking and choosing the most appropriate worksheets, study guides, diagrams, etc. I would then compile the student packets. Once the weekly packet was prepared, I had more time to catch my breath and focus on instruction at hand rather than scrambling each morning to prepare a lesson.

Phase III: Evolution of Homework Packets

Over time, the packets evolved. They started out with simple outlines of assignments, dates, and homework worksheets. I then realized I could put the assignments on in reverse order to keep the packets intact. I put the first assignment at the end, so as they did the assignments the students would tear them off the back and the remainder of the packet stayed intact. I was so proud of myself for thinking of this, until my students pointed out that the history teacher had been doing that for months! I also added relevant comics and inspirational quotes. I even had one student tell me she enjoyed the quotes more than the comics!

Findings and Reflections

I truly believe the packets made me more effective in the classroom. Instead of rushing around in the morning to prepare lessons, I spent time focusing on the lesson I had pre-planned. I also managed to get all the necessary paperwork photocopied in advance. The only drawback of this system was that I sometimes felt pressured to cover the material I had planned so that I didn't fall behind schedule. This sometimes forced me to cut short interesting tangential discussions. I still need to not feel controlled by the pre-planned lessons and be flexible enough to change a few due dates here and there so as not to hamper lively discourse in the classroom. However, because I create one

packet for five different classes, it can be confusing to students when the packet dates change.

Now the question still remains, were the weekly packets effective in improving student performance as measured by increase assignment completion? For two of my regular biology classes, the class averages for assignment sheets increased after the implementation of weekly packets. In one section, the class average increased from 74.5% (C) to 82% (B). In the other section, the class average increased from 67.5% (D) to 76% (C). In my third class, there was a minor decrease in the class average. It fell from 68.5% (D) to 66% (E). Overall, the trend was towards improved assignment sheet scores.

There was an overall increase in homework completion (as measured by assignment sheet scores) while the homework packets were in use. However, I am not sure that there is a causal relationship between the two items. The numbers may merely represent a natural fluctuation in student homework completion rates. To determine if this is the case, it would be useful to look at scores from the year prior. The increase may also be related to our annual parent-teacher-student conferences that occur at the beginning of third quarter (the same time the weekly packets appeared). During these conferences, the students and their parents met with the house teachers to discuss the student's progress to date. Having mom and dad get first-hand information from the teachers often has an effect on student performance. At this conference, we stress the importance of homework and recommend that parents monitor their student's assignment sheets. It is possible that increased parental involvement caused an increase in scores.

While I cannot definitively say that the homework packets caused the increase in scores, I do believe they helped. I think having a written record of class topics and assignments was useful for most, if not all, of my students. For the students who neglected to record assignments on their sheets, these weekly packets ensured that they always knew what their homework was. Unfortunately, it didn't ensure that they would do it!

I also think the weekly packets were beneficial to parents. Many parents at our conferences commented that they never knew if their child had homework because the assignment sheets were blank. I was able to tell parents about the packets so that they could see their child's homework for the week and take a more active role in monitoring their work habits.

I also feel the packets improved my teaching. In preparing the packets, I forced myself to sit down and map out the upcoming lessons and create a "big picture." This allowed me to focus the material and not let units drag out indefinitely or become unwieldy. It also allowed me to focus on the lesson at hand rather than rush each morning to create a lesson on the fly. I definitely felt less stressed while using the weekly packets. I hope to spend some time this summer organizing my lessons and creating weekly packets for the upcoming year.