

# College Gardens Elementary School

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Principal's Updates from School: 2-3-12

This is one in a series of updates from College Gardens ES. Our "Principal's Updates from School" are scheduled for distribution weekly on Friday afternoons.

## **Chinese Immersion Program Student Performances**

Congratulations, thank you and kudos to our Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade Chinese Immersion Program students. You recently performed not one, not two but three performances in celebration of the Lunar New Year, and what a great job you did.

You performed for our students here at College Gardens as well as the community at Lake Forest Mall. Also, thank you to our Chinese Immersion Program Coordinator, Mrs. Molly Murray, Chinese Immersion Program Teachers, Mrs. Yanting Xia, Mrs. Charlene Hernandez, Mrs. Kuang-Tzu Gretz, Mrs. Kristen Chen, Mrs. Tong Yao and Mrs. Emily Floyd and additional staff and parents for your commitment to our students in preparations for this event. Again, congratulations, thank you and kudos for three great performances!

## **Instrumental Music Student Performances**

Congratulations, thank you and kudos to our College Gardens musicians! You performed before a standing room audience of parents, staff and community members here at College Gardens. You sounded fantastic! Also, thank you to our Instrumental Music Teachers, Mrs. Jennifer Bryan, Dr. Al Hunt and additional staff and parents for your commitment to our students in preparations for this event. Again, congratulations, thank you and kudos for three great performances!

## **5<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Information Night**

Our 5<sup>th</sup> grade team is planning a 5<sup>th</sup> grade parent night scheduled for Monday, February 6. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 7:00 p.m. in our All Purpose Room. Topics to be presented and discussed include our 5<sup>th</sup> grade students' Family Life unit, Math and IB Exhibition. We hope you will be able to make it.

## **February PTA Meeting; February 7, 2012**

We hope you will join us at our next College Gardens ES PTA meeting scheduled for February 7 at 7:00 p.m. in our All Purpose Room. Our Staff Development Teacher, Mrs. Dian Rubiera, will be presenting on our Positive Behavior Interventions Strategies (PBIS) program during the Principal's Presentation portion of the meeting. We hope you can make it.

## **Richard Montgomery High School Cluster Choral Concert; February 8, 2012**

This Wednesday, February 8 is our annual Richard Montgomery HS Cluster Choral Concert. Students from each of our four cluster elementary schools will be performing. It promises to be an evening of exceptional music from our cluster student chorus'. We hope you will join us this Wednesday, February 8 at 7:30 p.m. at Richard Montgomery HS for this year's Cluster Choral Concert.

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## **Julius West Middle School Information Night for Parents of 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Students**

Do you have a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student attending College Gardens ES? If so, we encourage you to attend this year's Parent Information at Julius West MS scheduled for February 9 at 7:00 p.m. at Julius West MS. This night is expected to provide an overview of middle school for our parents of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## **County Council Hearing; February 9, 7:00 p.m.**

As you may know, the County Executive's spending plan delays the construction of the new Richard Montgomery Elementary School for two years. However, in the public schools' recommended budget, the school is scheduled for completion in August 2015.

To address this delay, our Richard Montgomery Cluster PTA Representative will testify before the County Council at their Public Hearing, for discussion of MCPS facilities, on the County Executive's Recommended Capital Improvements Budget scheduled for;

- County Council Public Hearing
- Thursday, February 9
- 7:00 p.m.
- County Council Building, 100 Maryland Avenue, Rockville, MD.

As always, I encourage you to participate in the process, be present and be proud, wearing your College Gardens green and yellow or other school spirit wear.

As you may know, College Gardens ES is in County Council District 3, Phil Andrews, 240-777-7906, councilmember.andrews@montgomerycountymd.gov. Thank you for your attention to this information and for your continued support and partnership in the education of our children.

## **Valentine's Day Classroom Celebrations**

Classroom Valentine's Day Celebrations are scheduled for Tuesday, February 14, 2012 from 2:45 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. Please contact your child's teacher for more information.

## **Hoover Middle School Information Night for Parents of 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Students**

Do you have a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student attending College Gardens ES in our Chinese Immersion Program? If so, we encourage you to attend this year's Parent Information at Hoover MS scheduled for February 15 at 7:00 p.m. at Hoover MS, which is housed at Tilden MS. This night is expected to provide an overview of middle school for our parents of Chinese Immersion Program 5<sup>th</sup> grade students.

**Are You Down With or Done With Homework?**

The article below was recently Tweeted by our Superintendent, Dr. Joshua P. Starr. I subsequently Re-Tweeted the article. It was originally published in Ed. The Magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

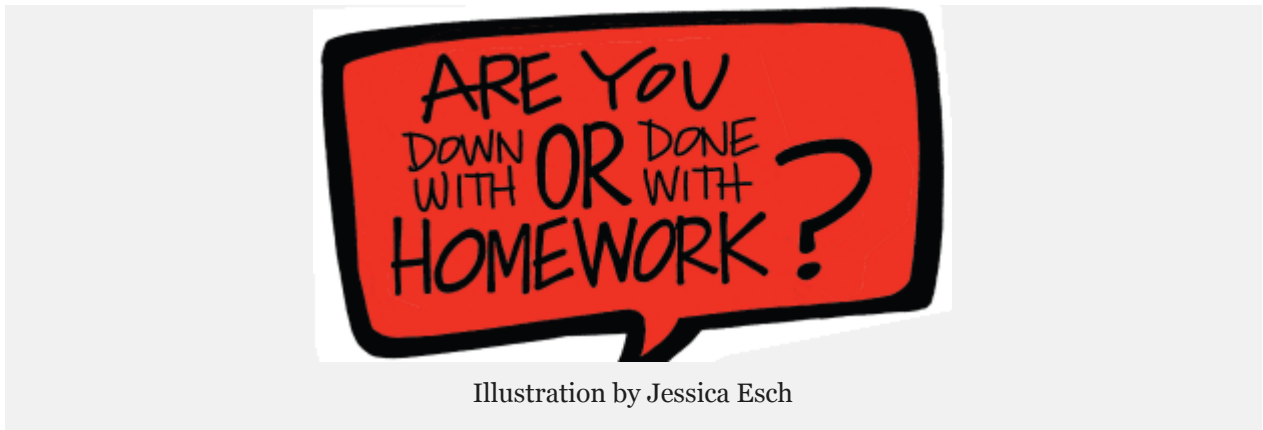
I am sharing the article here for parents to read, discuss and think about whether they are down with or done with homework? I think it raises some good questions. I hope you enjoy it. The article can also be found on the internet at;

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news-impact/2012/01/are-you-down-with-or-done-with-homework/>

## *Are You Down With or Done With Homework*

BY LORY HOUGH

**The debate over how much schoolwork students should be doing at home has flared again, with one side saying it's too much, the other side saying in our competitive world, it's just not enough.**



It was a move that doesn't happen very often in American public schools: The principal got rid of homework.

This past September, Stephanie Brant, principal of Gaithersburg Elementary School in Gaithersburg, Md., decided that instead of teachers sending kids home with math worksheets and spelling flash cards, students would instead go home and read. Every day for 30 minutes, more if they had time or the inclination, with parents or on their own.

"I knew this would be a big shift for my community," she says. But she also strongly believed it was a necessary one. Twenty-first-century learners, especially those in elementary school, need to think critically and understand their own learning — not spend night after night doing rote homework drills.

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Brant's move may not be common, but she isn't alone in her questioning. The value of doing schoolwork at home has gone in and out of fashion in the United States among educators, policymakers, the media, and, more recently, parents. As far back as the late 1800s, with the rise of the Progressive Era, doctors such as Joseph Mayer Rice began pushing for a limit on what he called "mechanical homework," saying it caused childhood nervous conditions and eyestrain. Around that time, the then-influential *Ladies Home Journal* began publishing a series of anti-homework articles, stating that five hours of brain work a day was "the most we should ask of our children," and that homework was an intrusion on family life. In response, states like California passed laws abolishing homework for students under a certain age.

But, as is often the case with education, the tide eventually turned. After the Russians launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, a space race emerged, and, writes Brian Gill in the journal *Theory Into Practice*, "The homework problem was reconceived as part of a national crisis; the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter." Many earlier laws limiting homework were abolished, and the longterm trend toward less homework came to an end.

The debate re-emerged a decade later when parents of the late '60s and '70s argued that children should be free to play and explore — similar anti-homework wellness arguments echoed nearly a century earlier. By the early-1980s, however, the pendulum swung again with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which blamed poor education for a "rising tide of mediocrity." Students needed to work harder, the report said, and one way to do this was more homework.

For the most part, this pro-homework sentiment is still going strong today, in part because of mandatory testing and continued economic concerns about the nation's competitiveness. Many believe that today's students are falling behind their peers in places like Korea and Finland and are paying more attention to Angry Birds than to ancient Babylonia.

But there are also a growing number of Stephanie Brants out there, educators and parents who believe that students are stressed and missing out on valuable family time. Students, they say, particularly younger students who have seen a rise in the amount of take-home work and already put in a six- to nine-hour "work" day, need less, not more homework.

Who is right? Are students not working hard enough or is homework not working for them? Here's where the story gets a little tricky: It depends on whom you ask and what research you're looking at. As Cathy Vatterott, the author of *Rethinking Homework*, points out, "Homework has generated enough research so that a study can be found to support almost any position, as long as conflicting studies are ignored." Alfie Kohn, author of *The Myth of Homework* and a strong believer in eliminating all homework, writes that,

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“The fact that there isn’t anything close to unanimity among experts belies the widespread assumption that homework helps.” At best, he says, homework shows only an association, not a causal relationship, with academic achievement. In other words, it’s hard to tease out how homework is really affecting test scores and grades. Did one teacher give better homework than another? Was one teacher more effective in the classroom? Do certain students test better or just try harder?

“It is difficult to separate where the effect of classroom teaching ends,” Vatterott writes, “and the effect of homework begins.”

Putting research aside, however, much of the current debate over homework is focused less on how homework affects academic achievement and more on time. Parents in particular have been saying that the amount of time children spend in school, especially with afterschool programs, combined with the amount of homework given — as early as kindergarten — is leaving students with little time to run around, eat dinner with their families, or even get enough sleep.

Certainly, for some parents, homework is a way to stay connected to their children’s learning. But for others, homework creates a tug-of-war between parents and children, says Liz Goodenough, M.A.T.’71, creator of a documentary called *Where Do the Children Play?*

“Ideally homework should be about taking something home, spending a few curious and interesting moments in which children might engage with parents, and then getting that project back to school — an organizational triumph,” she says. “A nag-free activity could engage family time: Ask a parent about his or her own childhood. Interview siblings.”

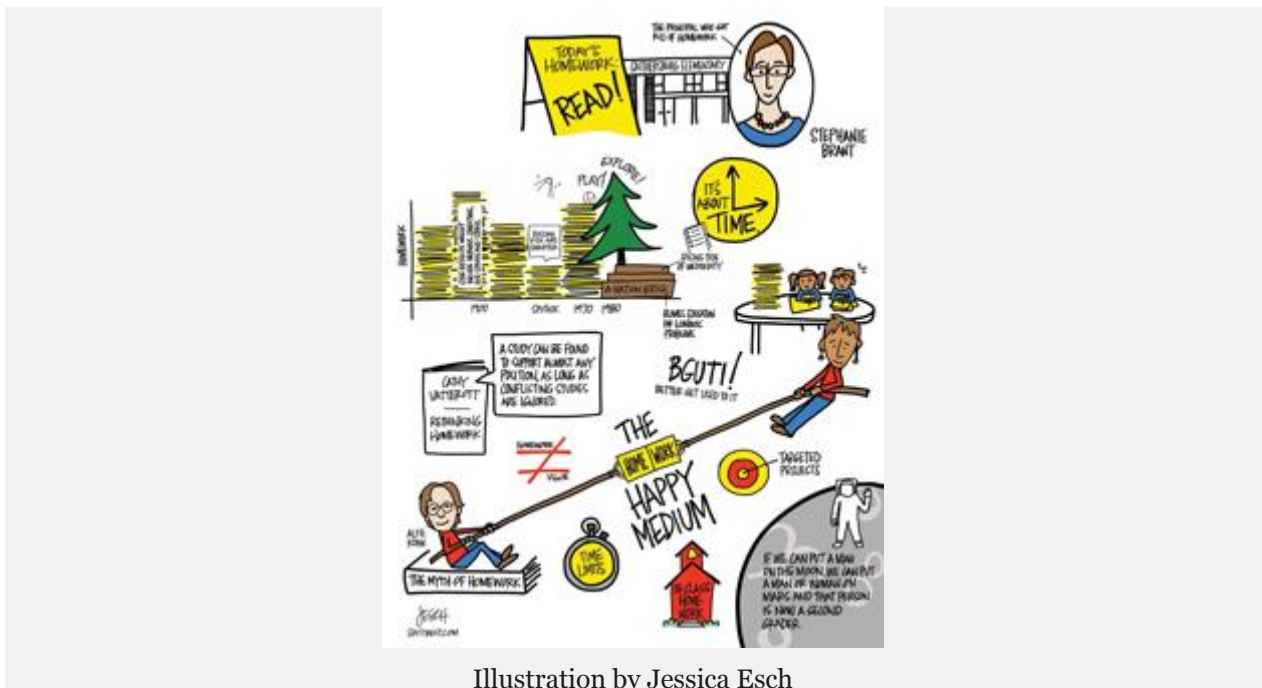


Illustration by Jessica Esch

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Instead, as the authors of *The Case Against Homework* write, “Homework overload is turning many of us into the types of parents we never wanted to be: nags, bribers, and taskmasters.”

Leslie Butchko saw it happen a few years ago when her son started sixth grade in the Santa Monica-Malibu (Calif.) United School District. She remembers him getting two to four hours of homework a night, plus weekend and vacation projects. He was overwhelmed and struggled to finish assignments, especially on nights when he also had an extracurricular activity.

“Ultimately, we felt compelled to have Bobby quit karate — he’s a black belt — to allow more time for homework,” she says. And then, with all of their attention focused on Bobby’s homework, she and her husband started sending their youngest to his room so that Bobby could focus. “One day, my younger son gave us 15-minute coupons as a present for us to use to send him to play in the back room. ... It was then that we realized there had to be something wrong with the amount of homework we were facing.”

Butchko joined forces with another mother who was having similar struggles and ultimately helped get the homework policy in her district changed, limiting homework on weekends and holidays, setting time guidelines for daily homework, and broadening the definition of homework to include projects and studying for tests. As she told the school board at one meeting when the policy was first being discussed, “In closing, I just want to say that I had more free time at Harvard Law School than my son has in middle school, and that is not in the best interests of our children.”

One barrier that Butchko had to overcome initially was convincing many teachers and parents that more homework doesn’t necessarily equal rigor.

“Most of the parents that were against the homework policy felt that students need a large quantity of homework to prepare them for the rigorous AP classes in high school and to get them into Harvard,” she says.

Stephanie Conklin, Ed.M.’06, sees this at Another Course to College, the Boston pilot school where she teaches math. “When a student is not completing [his or her] homework, parents usually are frustrated by this and agree with me that homework is an important part of their child’s learning,” she says.

As Timothy Jarman, Ed.M.’10, a ninth-grade English teacher at Eugene Ashley High School in Wilmington, N.C., says, “Parents think it is strange when their children are not assigned a substantial amount of homework.”

That’s because, writes Vatterott, in her chapter, “The Cult(ure) of Homework,” the concept of homework “has become so engrained in U.S. culture that the word homework is part of the common vernacular.”

These days, nightly homework is a given in American schools, writes Kohn.

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“Homework isn’t limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important. Most teachers and administrators aren’t saying, ‘It may be useful to do this particular project at home,’” he writes. “Rather, the point of departure seems to be, ‘We’ve decided ahead of time that children will have to do something every night (or several times a week). ... This commitment to the idea of homework in the abstract is accepted by the overwhelming majority of schools — public and private, elementary and secondary.”

Brant had to confront this when she cut homework at Gaithersburg Elementary.

“A lot of my parents have this idea that homework is part of life. This is what I had to do when I was young,” she says, and so, too, will our kids. “So I had to shift their thinking.” She did this slowly, first by asking her teachers last year to really think about what they were sending home. And this year, in addition to forming a parent advisory group around the issue, she also holds events to answer questions.

Still, not everyone is convinced that homework as a given is a bad thing. “Any pursuit of excellence, be it in sports, the arts, or academics, requires hard work. That our culture finds it okay for kids to spend hours a day in a sport but not equal time on academics is part of the problem,” wrote one pro-homework parent on the blog for the documentary *Race to Nowhere*, which looks at the stress American students are under. “Homework has always been an issue for parents and children. It is now and it was 20 years ago. I think when people decide to have children that it is their responsibility to educate them,” wrote another.

And part of educating them, some believe, is helping them develop skills they will eventually need in adulthood. “Homework can help students develop study skills that will be of value even after they leave school,” reads a publication on the U.S. Department of Education website called *Homework Tips for Parents*. “It can teach them that learning takes place anywhere, not just in the classroom. ... It can foster positive character traits such as independence and responsibility. Homework can teach children how to manage time.”

Annie Brown, Ed.M.’01, feels this is particularly critical at less affluent schools like the ones she has worked at in Boston, Cambridge, Mass., and Los Angeles as a literacy coach.

“It feels important that my students do homework because they will ultimately be competing for college placement and jobs with students who have done homework and have developed a work ethic,” she says. “Also it will get them ready for independently taking responsibility for their learning, which will need to happen for them to go to college.”

The problem with this thinking, writes Vatterott, is that homework becomes a way to practice being a worker.

“Which begs the question,” she writes. “Is our job as educators to produce learners or workers?”

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*Slate* magazine editor Emily Bazelon, in a piece about homework, says this makes no sense for younger kids.

“Why should we think that practicing homework in first grade will make you better at doing it in middle school?” she writes. “Doesn’t the opposite seem equally plausible: that it’s counterproductive to ask children to sit down and work at night before they’re developmentally ready because you’ll just make them tired and cross?”

Kohn writes in the *American School Board Journal* that this “premature exposure” to practices like homework (and sit-and-listen lessons and tests) “are clearly a bad match for younger children and of questionable value at any age.” He calls it BGUTI: Better Get Used to It. “The logic here is that we have to prepare you for the bad things that are going to be done to you later ... by doing them to you now.”

According to a recent University of Michigan study, daily homework for six- to eight-year-olds increased on average from about 8 minutes in 1981 to 22 minutes in 2003. A review of research by Duke University Professor Harris Cooper found that for elementary school students, “the average correlation between time spent on homework and achievement ... hovered around zero.”

So should homework be eliminated? Of course not, say many Ed School graduates who are teaching. Not only would students not have time for essays and long projects, but also teachers would not be able to get all students to grade level or to cover critical material, says Brett Pangburn, Ed.M.’06, a sixth-grade English teacher at Excel Academy Charter School in Boston. Still, he says, homework has to be relevant.

“Kids need to practice the skills being taught in class, especially where, like the kids I teach at Excel, they are behind and need to catch up,” he says. “Our results at Excel have demonstrated that kids can catch up and view themselves as in control of their academic futures, but this requires hard work, and homework is a part of it.”

Ed School Professor [Howard Gardner](#) basically agrees.

“America and Americans lurch between too little homework in many of our schools to an excess of homework in our most competitive environments — Li'l Abner vs. Tiger Mother,” he says. “Neither approach makes sense. Homework should build on what happens in class, consolidating skills and helping students to answer new questions.”

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So how can schools come to a happy medium, a way that allows teachers to cover everything they need while not overwhelming students? Conklin says she often gives online math assignments that act as labs and students have two or three days to complete them, including some in-class time. Students at Pangburn's school have a 50-minute silent period during regular school hours where homework can be started, and where teachers pull individual or small groups of students aside for tutoring, often on that night's homework. Afterschool homework clubs can help.

Some schools and districts have adapted time limits rather than nix homework completely, with the 10-minute per grade rule being the standard — 10 minutes a night for first-graders, 30 minutes for third-graders, and so on. (This remedy, however, is often met with mixed results since not all students work at the same pace.) Other schools offer an extended day that allows teachers to cover more material in school, in turn requiring fewer take-home assignments. And for others, like Stephanie Brant's elementary school in Maryland, more reading with a few targeted project assignments has been the answer.

"The routine of reading is so much more important than the routine of homework," she says. "Let's have kids reflect. You can still have the routine and you can still have your workspace, but now it's for reading. I often say to parents, if we can put a man on the moon, we can put a man or woman on Mars and that person is now a second-grader. We don't know what skills that person will need. At the end of the day, we have to feel confident that we're giving them something they can use on Mars."

*Alfie Kohn, Stephanie Brant, Annie Brown, Brett Pangburn, Cathy Vatterott, homework, Howard Gardner, Leslie Butchko, Liz Goodenough, principals, Stephanie Conklin, students and alumni, teachers, Timothy Jarman*

## **Dates to Remember**

- 2/6 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Information Night-Math, Family Life IB Exhibition; All Purpose Room, 7:00 p.m.
- 2/7 PTA Meeting-Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) in a Nutshell with Staff Development Teacher Mrs. Dian Rubiera, All Purpose Room, 7:00 p.m.
- 2/8 Richard Montgomery HS Cluster Chorus Concert; Richard Montgomery HS, 7:30 p.m.
- 2/9 County Council Public Hearing; Richard Montgomery Cluster PTA Representative Testifies, 100 Maryland Avenue, 7:00 p.m.
- 2/9 Julius West MS Parent Information Night for Parents of Current 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Students; Julius West MS, 7:30 p.m.
- 2/15 Hoover MS Parent Information Night for Parents of Current 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Chinese Immersion Programs Students; Hoover MS at Tilden MS, 7:00 p.m.
- 2/16 Hearing & Vision Screening for Kindergarten & 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students and Students New to MCPS; Health Suite, 9:30 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
- 2/17 Hearing & Vision Screening for Kindergarten & 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students; Health Suite, 9:30 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.