

ROCKBRIDGE REPORTER

A Newsletter for Rockbridge Academy

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HOMework—A PRIMER by Michael McKenna

Ancient mariners who sailed through the Strait of Messina between the Island of Sicily and the boot of Italy were always cautious of coming too close to either landform. Scylla and Charybdis were Greek mythological sea monsters believed to dwell on opposite sides of the narrow strait. Scylla was a horrible creature with twelve feet and six long necks, each bearing a head with three rows of teeth. Across the strait dwelt Charybdis, the whirlpool, sucking in and belching forth the waters of the sea three times daily, engulfing anything that came near. In later years, when people found themselves to be in a “no win” situation, it was said that they were “between Scylla and Charybdis.”

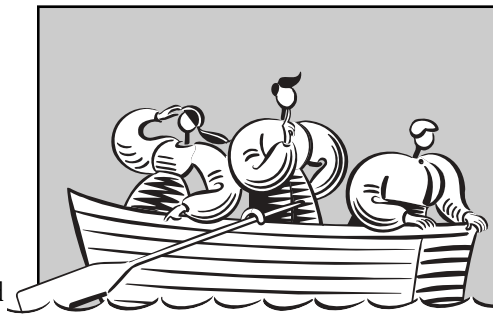
Sometimes it seems that the attempt to find the right path through the issue of homework is like trying to steer the narrow course between Scylla and Charybdis.

First, a bit of background. I have always found that, in any given classroom, during the course of the same academic year, three truths remain self-evident and immutable:

1) Some in the class will comment that homework is virtually non-existent. The children rarely bring any schoolwork home. The parents might occasionally wonder what their tuition dollars are purchasing, because they rarely see their children doing schoolwork outside of school. Good grades just seem to happen with a modicum of effort.

Schoolwork is something done in school, rarely invading the confines of the home.

2) Then there is the *homework-is-killing-us* camp. Parents in this group will



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declaim that their children do nothing but homework from the time they come home until the time they go to bed, maybe with a brief respite for a quick dinner and a shower. Homework consumes their lives. All they do is live for homework. Homework is increasing, while family is decreasing.

3) Finally, there are those for whom homework is a reasonable amount of work done outside of school. Homework is an expected part of life and is easily

manageable with a bit of extra time after school. However, the children still have time to be children, and family life is left reasonably intact.

Like any bell curve, the extremes (numbers one and two above) contain the fewest number of samples, while the bulge in the middle (number three) contains the largest sample.

Now, as was pointed out above, these three conditions exist concurrently, that is, in the same classrooms, during the same academic year, under the same teacher. This is an important point to take note of for obvious reasons: If Mr. Smith, the fourth grade teacher, were notorious for giving large quantities of homework, then you would expect his students to labor under that burden while other classes did not. Or, if schools separated students into “Honor Roll” and “Other” classes, you might expect the gifted ones to get their work done in school while the rest had to labor long into the night. At Rockbridge, neither is the case.

Now in seeking to address each of these three categories, it seems that groups one and three need little attention, while group number two requires the lion’s share of the remaining space.

As far as group one goes, those for whom homework is rarely an occurrence, I would encourage you in this: There’s nothing wrong with being successful, even if success comes relatively easily. However, in this headmaster’s experience, most of you can rest assured

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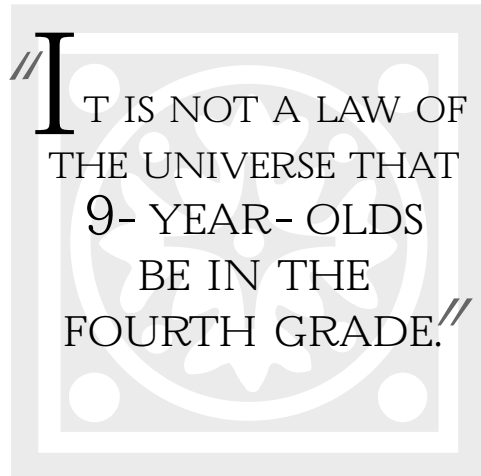
that the day is coming when your child will find that things do not continue to come so easily. (It is the rare student indeed for whom learning just happens like water off a duck's back.) He will eventually have to work, and work hard. You can set the stage now by preparing him for this eventuality, and challenging him with outside reading, study, etc. If the day of hard work never comes, skipping a grade may be in order for this child. Ultimately, children need to be placed where they will be successful, and if it's to the child's detriment to be kept in place, placing him where he can experience a bit of a challenge might be the best thing.

As for group three, those for whom homework is as it should be, you need little encouragement, except to know that the other two extremes are there, and, depending on your child's work habits and scholastic development, he could find himself one day in either of the other two camps.

Now for group two. There are several reasons why this state of affairs might exist:

1) The school or teacher is assigning too much homework. Let's face it, this is probably the easiest and most likely explanation. Frequently, in schools that like to consider themselves "rigorous" or going above and beyond the norm in modern education, sometimes they err on the side of going too far and requiring more work than the children can reasonably accomplish. This is why communication between the parent, teacher, and administration is a must. If the school is not aware of the toll its work is taking on the families, then the situation will not likely improve. If parents apprise one another of the burdensome workload, but fail to let the school know, it's unlikely that the load will get lighter either. (Parents giving themselves a "reality check" by asking other parents in the class how the workload is going is not what's in mind

here.) Rockbridge Academy has found itself on this side of the equation on occasion and goes to great lengths to encourage parent-teacher communication to fix the problem. The administration also monitors the classroom work closely to keep an eye on this kind of thing. Still, it happens



that children are occasionally overburdened by their schoolwork. When it does, come and talk to us. We want to help.

2) The child is not working up to his potential, is disorganized, or a combination of the two. This is also a common explanation of the too-much-homework dilemma. If your children are anything like mine, it's not uncommon to hear "I forgot...", "I can't find...", "I had it a minute ago...", and so forth. When this occurs, we have to be patient and forbearing, teaching them how to make better use of their time, how to be better organized, how to take responsibility for their own shortcomings. (That's fodder for another article!) Last year Rockbridge Academy offered a Saturday Study Skills Seminar which addressed many of these areas. In the future, this class will be mandatory for all rising seventh graders, and will be opened to sixth graders and students in grades 8+ who desire a bit of a refresher.

3) Students push themselves to maintain all A's. Many times over the years parents have come to me to tell

me how their children are working themselves to the bone, have no time to be a child, work from the time they get home until they go to bed, and so on. When I examine the report cards, I sometimes find that the student has perfect grades, straight A's and A+'s. The explanation typically is along the lines of, "She's always been a straight A student; She can't bare the idea of getting a B!" When an immovable object (a child determined to get straight A's) comes up against an irresistible force (being overburdened by schoolwork), well...like the old song says, something's gotta give. It might sound dismissive or trite to say it, but, in such a situation, the student should work less hard and be happy with the occasional B or C.

4) Occasionally, especially in the lower elementary grades, the student may need to be retained. Like the student in example #3 above, this student also works all the time, yet the grades are not as satisfactory. No matter how hard the student works, success eludes him. As was stated earlier, students need to be placed where they can be successful. If that means advancing them a grade, so be it. If it means retention, we should be just as willing to accept that remedy. After all, it is not a law of the universe that 9-year-olds be in the fourth grade. Our children are individuals. If a 9-year-old happens to function best at the third grade level, then we should be willing to recognize that, and place him where he can be successful and function without undue burden.

5) Sometimes, when it comes right down to it, we have to recognize the fact that some of us have to work harder than others. God has wired each of us differently. What comes easily to me may not come easily to you, and vice versa. For some of us, schoolwork is a joy and comes with relative ease. For others, acquisition of knowledge comes only with great effort and labor. We must help our children to recognize who God

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has created them to be, and to be content with His plan for them.

Sometimes, students may struggle with homework for a combination of these reasons, or even some that are not listed here. Whatever the case, parents should know this: It is not the intention of Rockbridge Academy to burden families and children with undue amounts of homework. If you find that your child labors under a great deal of homework, talk to his teacher, talk to our director of instruction, talk to the headmaster, and let's work together to find a solution that benefits all involved. □

Summer Latin Camp

Rockbridge Academy will be offering a summer Latin Camp, August 4-8, 2003. The class will be a crash course through Wheelock's Latin and is especially aimed at those entering students who have not had a Latin background and those students currently in grades 6 through 8 who are struggling. However, students in need of a refresher, parents who want to know what they're children are up to, homeschool parents, and others are welcome to sign up. Details are available in the school office.

Fine Arts Night

Rockbridge Academy's annual event will be held at Annapolis Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 710 Ridgely Avenue, Annapolis 2140. The evening will begin at 7:00 p.m. in the sanctuary with a delightful program directed by our music teacher, Mrs. Janet Horst. Following will be an art exhibit consisting of many masterpieces created by Rockbridge Academy students and displayed by our art teacher, Mrs. Heidi Stevens. Please join us for this special evening.

Grandparents' Day

This past April 17th, Rockbridge Academy celebrated its annual Grandparents' Day. As always, this was a wonderful opportunity for the students of Rockbridge Academy to demonstrate for their grandparents and grandfriends what they are learning and achieving at Rockbridge. The morning's activities began with coffee, juice, and muffins of various sorts at 9:30. At 10:00 our headmaster, Mr. McKenna, encouraged the grandparents with some comments drawn from Isaiah 58:12. After that the students moved effortlessly through their paces, wowing the grandfolks with all that they've learned. At the end of the student portion of the program, Mrs. Horst led the concert choir through a performance of two pieces, *Ain'a That Good News*, and *God Be In My Head*. To conclude the event, our grand-visitors were feted with awards for various impressive feats such as: The grandparents married the longest (57 years!), the grandparent who served the longest in the military (Navy, 37 years!), and more! At the conclusion of the day's festivities, one grandparent approached Mr. McKenna and said, "This was wonderful! It was so much more than a 'Grandparents' Day.' This was a celebration of life!" To Life! L'chai-im!

Heard Around the Halls

A notable Kindergarten quote from a recent Q&A time at a fire station field trip:


Q: "What are some things that you shouldn't play with for safety reasons?"

A: "Bombs."



GAVIN BLAIR SEMI-FINALIST FOR NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP

Each year, over 50,000 high school juniors take the PSAT test in October in order to qualify for the National Merit Scholarship Program. Of those 50,000 student hopefuls, 16,000 are chosen as semi-finalists. This September, the semi-finalists will be narrowed down to a field of 8,000 finalists. Rockbridge Academy junior, Gavin Blair, was chosen as one of the semi-finalists. Congratulations, Gavin!



GRAMMAR SPELLING BEE WINNERS

Rockbridge Academy Grammar students competed in our annual Spelling Bee competition on Friday, April 4th. A hint of nervousness was sensed (mostly from the parents in the audience) as our youngsters stepped up to the microphone. All of the competitors did an excellent job! Congratulations to our first place winners: 1st Grade: Faith Ruppert, 2nd Grade: Rachel Wallen, 3rd Grade: Christian Furniss, 4th Grade: Meredith Caton, 5th Grade: Beau Bustanoby, and 6th Grade: Noelle Meiser.