

Too Few Schoolwork Assignments Offer Students Choice, Relevance, Study Finds

By Sasha Jones on [November 19, 2018 4:12 PM](#)



By Guest Blogger Sasha Jones

Students rarely receive relevant assignments that allow room for student choice, potentially jeopardizing their engagement, according to a [new report](#).

The report, published by The Education Trust, a nonprofit advocacy group, analyzed over 6,800 middle school assignments in English/language arts, science, and social studies to find that only 10 percent offered students choice in content, process, or product. Three percent of math assignments gave students similar choices.

For their analysis, the authors defined choice in content as when educators provide a broader topic and allow students to narrow their focus of study to a specific subtopic. Choice in process was defined as allowing students to design their plan of action when it comes to tackling a project; this may include giving students the choice to work alone or in a group. Lastly, choice in product allows students to determine through what means they will present what they have learned.

The reviewers judged the relevancy of the assignments based on whether the content is useful and of interest to students, and if it is presented by someone they know and trust. Twelve

percent of English/language arts, science, and social studies assignments and 2 percent of math assignments were determined to be relevant for students, according to the report.

"When everything in the classroom is told to [students], and they have no voice ... that's demotivating because all they are doing is producing the wishes of someone else," said Tanji Reed Marshall, a co-author of the report and a senior practice associate for P-12 literacy at the Education Trust.

The report encourages teachers to shape the content of their classes to themes across cultures and generations, using real-world materials and events, and connections with students' values, interests, and goals.

For example, the report calls for teachers to discuss universal themes and long-standing dualities, such as power and justice, to ask questions like "What makes a government fair?" Doing so calls for students to engage in critical thinking on topics where there is no right or wrong answer.

Still, the report states that making assignments relevant is not enough. Teachers should be cautious about gimmicky teaching methods with unproven results and thoughtful about the assignment's content.

This follows [research](#) that found that students are too often given classwork below grade-level. Low-income and students of color are also given lower-level assignments and experience weaker teaching more regularly, with some students never receiving an on-grade-level assignment. The Education Trust study did not look at disparities in the relevancy and choice options of the assignments it reviewed.

"Students can do no better than the assignments that they are given," Marshall said.

Marshall hopes that this report helps teachers and school leaders re-envision the way classwork is assigned with equity in mind.