

# 'There's only so far I can take them': Why teachers give up on struggling students who don't do their homework

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Whenever "Gina," a fifth grader at a suburban public school on the East Coast, did her math homework, she never had to worry about whether

she could get help from her mom.

"I help her a lot with homework," Gina's mother, a married, mid-level manager for a health care company, explained to us during an interview for a study we did about [how teachers view students who complete their homework](#) versus those who do not.

"I try to maybe re-explain things, like, things she might not understand," Gina's mom continued. "Like, if she's struggling, I try to teach her a different way. I understand that Gina is a very visual child but also needs to hear things, too. I know that when I'm reading it, and I'm writing it, and I'm saying it to her, she comprehends it better."

One of us is a [sociologist](#) who looks at how [schools favor middle-class families](#). The other is a [math education professor](#) who examines [how math teachers perceive their students](#) based on their work.

We were curious about how [teachers](#) reward students who complete their homework and penalize and criticize those who don't—and whether there was any link between those things and [family income](#).

By analyzing student report cards and interviewing teachers, students and parents, we found that teachers gave good grades for homework effort and other rewards to students from middle-class families like Gina, who happen to have college-educated parents who take an active role in helping their children complete their homework.

But when it comes to students such as "Jesse," who attends the same [school](#) as Gina and is the child of a poor, [single mother](#) of two, we found that teachers had a more bleak outlook.

The names "Jesse" and "Gina" are pseudonyms to protect the children's identities. Jesse can't count on his mom to help with his homework

because she struggled in school herself.

"I had many difficulties in school," Jesse's mom told us for the same study. "I had behavior issues, attention-deficit. And so after seventh grade, they sent me to an alternative high school, which I thought was the worst thing in the world. We literally did, like, first and second grade work. So my education was horrible."

Jesse's mother admitted she still can't figure out division to this day.

"[My son will] ask me a question, and I'll go look at it and it's like algebra, in fifth grade. And I'm like: 'What's this?'" Jesse's mom said. "So it's really hard. Sometimes you just feel stupid. Because he's in fifth grade. And I'm like, I should be able to help my son with his homework in fifth grade."

Unlike Gina's parents, who are married and own their own home in a middle-class neighborhood, Jesse's mom isn't married and rents a place in a mobile home community. She had Jesse when she was a teenager and was raising Jesse and his brother mostly on her own, though with some help from her parents. Her son is eligible for free lunch.

## **An issue of equity**

As a matter of fairness, we think teachers should take these kinds of economic and social disparities into account in how they teach and grade students. But what we found in the schools we observed is that they usually don't, and instead they seemed to accept inequality as destiny. Consider, for instance, what a fourth grade teacher—one of 22 teachers we interviewed and observed during the study—told us about students and homework.

"I feel like there's a pocket here—a lower income pocket," one teacher

said. "And that trickles down to less support at home, homework not being done, stuff not being returned and signed. It should be almost 50-50 between home and school. If they don't have the support at home, there's only so far I can take them. If they're not going to go home and do their homework, there's just not much I can do."

While educators recognize the different levels of resources that students have at home, they continue to assign homework that is too difficult for students to complete independently, and reward students who complete the homework anyway.

Consider, for example, how one [seventh grade](#) teacher described his approach to homework: "I post the answers to the homework for every course online. The kids do the homework, and they're supposed to check it and figure out if they need extra help. The kids who do that, there is an amazing correlation between that and positive grades. The kids who don't do that are bombing.

"I need to drill that to parents that they need to check homework with their student, get it checked to see if it's right or wrong and then ask me questions. I don't want to use class time to go over homework."

The problem is that the benefits of homework are not uniformly distributed. Rather, research shows that students from high-income families make bigger achievement gains through homework than students from low-income families.

This relationship has been found in both [U.S.](#) and [Dutch schools](#), and it suggests that homework may contribute to disparities in students' performance in school.

## **Tougher struggles**

On top of uneven academic benefits, research also reveals that making sense of the math homework assigned in U.S schools is often more difficult for parents who have [limited educational attainment](#), parents who [feel anxious over mathematical content](#). It is also difficult for parents who [learned math using different approaches than those currently taught in the U.S.](#)

Meanwhile, students from more-privileged families are disproportionately more likely to have a [parent](#) or a [tutor](#) available after school to help with homework, as well as parents who [encourage them to seek help from their teachers if they have questions](#). And they are also more likely to have parents who [feel entitled to intervene at school](#) on their behalf.

## **False ideas about merit**

In the schools we observed, teachers interpreted homework inequalities through what social scientists call [the myth of meritocracy](#). The myth suggests that all students in the U.S. have the same opportunities to succeed in school and that any differences in [students'](#) outcomes are the result of different levels of effort. Teachers in our study said things that are in line with this belief.

For instance, one third grade teacher told us: "We're dealing with some really struggling kids. There are parents that I've never even met. They don't come to conferences. There's been no communication whatsoever. ... I'll write notes home or emails; they never respond. There are kids who never do their [homework](#), and clearly the parents are OK with that.

"When you don't have that support from home, what can you do? They can't study by themselves. So if they don't have [parents](#) that are going to help them out with that, then that's tough on them, and it shows."

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