

THE HOMEWORK CLUB

One School's
Effort
to Provide an
Equitable
Educational
Opportunity

by

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INTRODUCTION

“Education is the great equalizer. But is it really?”

Those words expressed by Schimmer¹ during a workshop given to Principals and Vice-Principals of school district 93 struck a chord.

As the authors chose education for their careers, they were convinced (naively) that the education system was providing equal opportunities. Unfortunately, the reality is far more complex. The more we acquire experience and maturity, the more we understand how complex it is to attain the goal of equity.

Nevertheless, we look for “place[s] to begin”² and, for us, this meant an offer of after-school homework support specifically to students with a lower socio-economic status who were also identified as struggling academically. This initiative allows us to provide two of the strategies mentioned by Growe and Montgomery³: individualized support and extended learning time.

OUR INITIATIVE

We decided to offer a homework club to students every day from 3:00pm to 4:00pm. In order to ‘qualify’ for this extra support, two conditions need to be met by the student:

- difficulty in either literacy or numeracy, as identified by the classroom teacher;
- belonging to a lower socio-economic category.

1 Schimmer, T. (2021). Posts by tomschimmer. Retrieved January 28, 2024, from <https://allthingsassessment.info/author/tom-schimmer/>

2 Gorski, P. C. (2018). Reaching and teaching students in poverty - strategies for erasing the opportunity gap. Teachers College Press. (p. 172)

3 Growe, R., & Montgomery, P. S. (2003). Educational equity in america: Is education the great equalizer? The Professional Educator, XXV(2), 23–29. Retrieved January 28, 2024, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ842412.pdf> (p. 27)

Once a week, the school-based team meets and reviews potential ‘candidates’ identified by a classroom teacher. After a conversation with the parents, the teacher in charge of the homework club consults with the school-based team, taking into account both the needs of the students and the existing distribution of support to determine which day or days the student will participate in the club.

During the homework club session – after a light snack provided by the school – a teacher in charge and one or two Education Assistants (EAs) provide individual or small group support to the children. The teacher also liaises with the classroom teachers using a tracking sheet to ensure that the efforts and strategies are aligned with the classroom objectives.

At the end of the sessions, a few students get picked up by their parents while others take a school bus home.

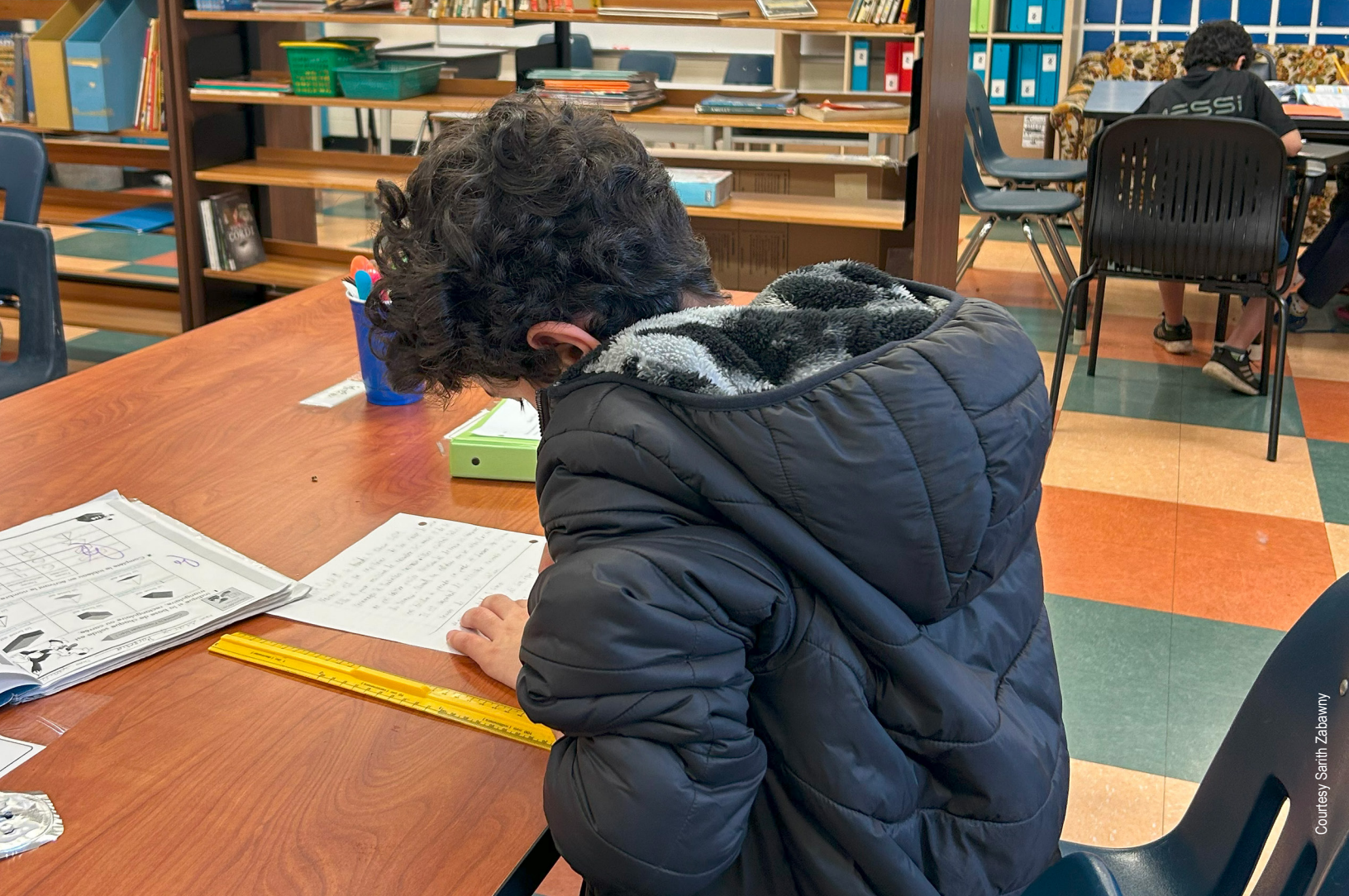
HOW IT BEGAN

In past years, homework support was provided through the school district’s CommunityLINK program. There were several limitations to the program: the funding provided only two evenings each week of homework support, and only a small subset of the vulnerable student population could actually participate.

THE BUS CONUNDRUM

As a public school operating in the French language within an English majority population, our school covers a wide geographical area and our students rely on school bus transportation. Our school district provides bus transportation for students, but only immediately after instruction is finished.

The journey home following homework club was an issue. Since most of the parents of the targeted student population are not able to pick



up their children at 4:00pm, we faced a paradox: only parents of the non-targeted population had the ability to pick up their children – it seemed that we were actually contributing to the inequity! We had identified one structural weakness of the system that was contributing to the inequity: only the students who were coming from a higher socio-economic status could participate meaningfully in a homework club scenario. To address this situation, we decided to organize transportation at the school level.

FINANCING THE SOLUTION

Following the advice of Gorski⁴, who recommends to “partner with local organisations to offer wraparound services”, we submitted a funding

request to the Vancouver Sun Children’s Fund’s Adopt-a-School initiative, asking for help to fund the bus transportation following our homework club sessions. We are very grateful to this organization for the funding for bus transportation: this really was the missing piece that we could not resolve on our own.

Since the two days of funding provided by the CommunityLINK program was insufficient, we adapted both the school supervision schedule and the EA timetable to enable every full-time EA at the school to provide one hour of homework support each week. This change was accomplished at no additional cost to the district, and is in line with the principle to build “a school organisation at the service of learning”.⁵

4 Gorski, P. C. (2018). Reaching and teaching students in poverty - strategies for erasing the opportunity gap. Teachers College Press. (p. 172)

5 Archambault, J., Garon, R., & Harnois, L. (2011). Diriger une école en milieu défavorisé : Des caractéristiques des écoles performantes, provenant de la documentation scientifique. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.cssdm.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Profil-Direction-Diriger-ecole-milieu-defavorise-Characteristiques.pdf> (p. 2)

Since our school has two sites – one small (30 students at Henderson Annex), and one larger (300 students at the Anne-Hébert site) – the CommunityLINK funding covered the two days of homework club at the small site, while the rearrangement of the EA timetable provided homework club support every day of the week at the larger site.

FEEDBACK ON THE EXPERIENCE

After one trimester with this initiative, the feedback has been very positive! Here are a few of reflections:

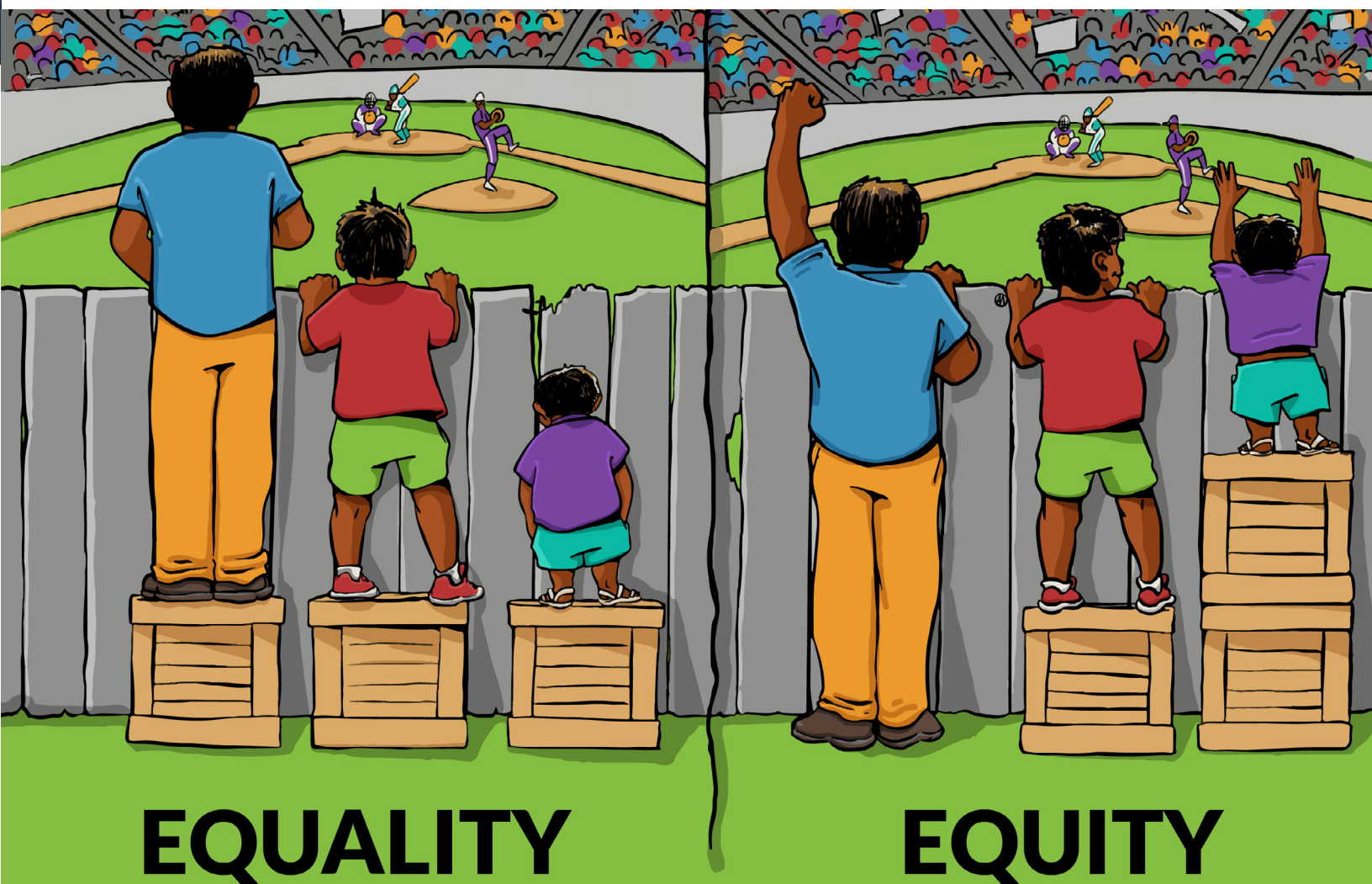
EAs like it The homework club is a special time, with a smaller group and a different setting than with the full class and classroom teacher. EAs can build a special relationship with students who need their help, both academically and socially.

A shared feeling of working towards equity Our school district has made extensive use of the image 'Equality versus Equity', and with this initiative, the whole teams feels that we are working together towards a more equitable education with a "shared project centered on learning".⁶

Not a leveling down We had heard the opinion that giving homework was not advised because it benefits only children from higher socio-economic category. Yet homework has been proven useful⁷ and, notably, a specific type of homework is helpful to consolidate key

6 Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur. (2019). Référentiel pour guider l'intervention en milieu défavorisé - une école pour la réussite de tous. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/education/jeunes/Referentiel-milieu-defavorise.pdf (p. 42)

7 Lathan, J. (2017, December 21). Is homework necessary? education inequity and its impact on students [University of san diego online degrees]. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://onlinedegrees.sandiego.edu/education-inequity-and-homework/>



learnings and build good work habits⁸. Not providing homework could appear to be a step towards 'equity', but may not be advantageous to those who could most benefit from having homework. We are happy with our initiative, as it does not level down expectations or learning and keeps expectations high. The importance of maintaining high expectations for students in poverty settings was highlighted by Archambault et al.⁹

Importance of snack time Starting the sessions with a light snack resulted in two benefits. It creates an occasion to practice informally the French language. This is very important for us as we are looking for ways to make French not only the instruction language but also a language of everyday life. It also builds a special relationship between the adults and the students, relationships that have been very beneficial in supporting the student both during the homework club and in the regular school time.

An important question One welcome surprise when we returned in January was that students asked when the homework club would start again. They were eager to do homework!

They don't want to stop studying One very satisfying experience has been that some children who never before did homework are now so caught up in the flow of studying that they don't want to stop when it is time to go home!

Classroom teachers notice the progress Finally, and maybe the most important indicator, classroom teachers have noticed the progress made.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing this article in February 2024, we are only halfway through the year but our experience has been very positive.

Several dynamics came into play, and made this whole initiative possible: the flexibility of the EAs with their timetables, our school district's support through allowing extra teacher time dedicated to support the homework club, and the Adopt-a-School agency that funded the bus trips home. It really takes a village to raise a child, and to work towards equity in education!

8 Gauthier, C., Bissonnette, S., & Richard, M. (2013). Enseignement explicite et réussite des élèves. Éditions du renouveau pédagogique. Retrieved January 29, 2024, from <https://www.erpi.com/fr/enseignement-explicite-gestion-appr-9782761355063.html> (p. 216–219)

9 Archambault, J., Garon, R., & Harnois, L. (2011). Diriger une école en milieu défavorisé : Des caractéristiques des écoles performantes, provenant de la documentation scientifique. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.cssdm.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Profil-Direction-Diriger-ecole-milieu-defavorise-Caracteristiques.pdf> (p. 1)



Courtesy Sarah Zabawny

Does Your School or District have a homework initiative? Tell us more!

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