

Tips to Regain Balance for Students, Schools and Families

HOMEWORK: YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

(Excerpts from a follow-up handout from *Race to Nowhere*)

“People [ask], ‘Doesn't doing more homework mean getting better scores?’ The answer quite simply is no.”

Professor Gerald LeTendre at Pennsylvania State University
and co-author of *National Differences, Global Similarities:
World Culture and the Future of Schooling*

More homework does not equal increased learning

- A 2006 synthesis of research on the effects of homework found no correlation between amount of time spent on homework and achievement for elementary school students, and only a moderate correlation in middle school. In middle school, this moderate correlation was shown to decrease once the homework time exceeded one hour. Even in high school, too much homework was found to be counterproductive.²
- A cross-cultural analysis of education practices found that American middle school students do more homework than their peers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The study found that more homework does not correlate with higher test scores.³ For example, middle school students who scored highest in math tests tended to come from countries where teachers assign relatively little homework — including Denmark, the Czech Republic and Japan. The lowest-scoring students came from countries where teachers assign large amounts of homework, such as Iran, Thailand and Greece.⁴

Quality versus quantity

Some educators suggest that students should be assigned ten minutes per grade level per school night (Monday through Thursday only) up to a maximum of two hours per night in high school. Others have rejected this guideline because it has not been shown to improve measures of higher thinking skills.

Negative effects of too much homework

- **Boredom:** Any activity can remain rewarding only for a limited time. It follows that if students are required to spend too much time on academic material, they eventually will become bored with it.
- **Loss of Downtime:** Homework limits the time students can spend on leisure-time and community activities that can impart important lessons, both academic and non-academic.
- **Homework Done by Parents:** Parental involvement, however well meant, often becomes parental interference. Parents can confuse children if the teaching methods they employ differ from those of teachers.
- **Cheating:** Homework can lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating, either through copying of assignments or receiving assistance with homework that involves more than tutoring.
- **Exacerbation of Social Inequalities.** Students from lower-socioeconomic homes are likely to have more difficulty completing homework than their more well-to-do peers. Poorer students are also more apt to work after school or may not have a quiet place to do assignments.⁵
- **Other consequences of excessive homework include:**
 - **Sleep deprivation.** Excessive homework forces students to choose between completing assignments and sleep. 80% of teens don't get the recommended 9.25 hours of sleep each night. 70% of kids ages 5-12 don't get the recommended 10-11 hours of sleep.⁶
 - **Stress.** 9-13 year olds said they were more stressed by academics than any other stressor—even bullying or family problems.⁷
 - **Sedentary Lifestyle.** When children spend 2-5 hours per night completing homework assignments, they have little time left for physical activities. This can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.

If homework isn't helpful, what is?

- **Family meals.** According to a study conducted by Columbia University, when compared to teens who have five to seven family dinners per week, those who have fewer than three meals per week are one and a half times more likely to report getting mostly C's or lower grades in school.⁸
- **Reading.** Several studies suggest reading for pleasure is a better predictor of test scores than quantity of homework yet a 2006 Scholastic/Yankelovich study found that reading for pleasure declines sharply after age eight. The number one reason: too much homework.⁹
- **Schools can eliminate or reduce homework.** [Several] schools have eliminated homework or limited homework to after-school reading: **Refer to our website for more schools that have addressed issues of homework.*

ACTION STEPS FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS AND STUDENTS

Create a committee of parents, educators, administrators and students to review and modify your school or district's homework practices and policies. Ask the committee to review relevant research and consider the following steps:

- Limit homework to two hours per night in high school and one hour per night in middle school.
- Assign no homework in elementary school.
- End homework assignments on weekends, vacations and over the summer.
- Build in study hall periods for students to work on academic assignments.
- Survey parents, educators, administrators and students for their perspectives on the impact and efficacy of homework.
- Stop grading the homework.
- Assign homework that cannot be cheated on (creatively designed work that is specific to individual needs).
- Eliminate punitive consequences for uncompleted homework across grade levels.
- Assign homework that doesn't require parental or adult help.
- Allow families to opt out of homework.
- Have occasional community nights during the week where no homework is assigned.
- Assign specific weeknights for specific subjects.
- Have a designated person in the school who monitors whether homework policies are being followed.
- Make homework the exception rather than the rule. Consider longer term projects that allow for choice, develop a student's interests, are relevant to a student's life and lead to a longer lasting sense of understanding.
- Allow students to self-assign homework. When they are excited by what they are learning, they will be self-motivated to learn more outside of the classroom.
- Before leaving a screening, agree to create a committee of parents, teachers, administrators and students to form a homework task force.

For more ideas and resources

- <http://www.stophomework.com>
Stop Homework is the blog of Sara Bennett, co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*.
- <http://eastbayhomework.blogspot.com/>
East Bay Homework is a blog started by Kerry Dickinson, a parent who sees homework as a good launching point for thoughtful discussions about issues like: parenting, ADHD, standardized testing, teacher training, preserving childhood, curriculum, colleges and student stress.
- <http://www.alfiekohn.org>
AlfieKohn.org is the website for Alfie Kohn who writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. His latest book is *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (2006).