

How Much Homework Is Too Much?

By Marian Wilde, GreatSchools Staff

Many students and their parents are frazzled by the amount of homework being piled on in the schools. Yet researchers say that American students have just the right amount of homework.



"Kids today are overwhelmed!" a parent recently wrote in an e-mail to GreatSchools.net "My first-grade son was required to research a significant person from history and write a paper of at least two pages about the person, with a bibliography. How can he be expected to do that by himself? He just started to learn to read and write a couple of months ago. Schools are pushing too hard and expecting too much from kids."

Diane Garfield, a fifth-grade teacher in San Francisco, concurs. "I believe that we're stressing children out," she says.

But hold on, it's not just the kids who are stressed out. "Teachers nowadays assign these almost college-level projects with requirements that make my mouth fall open with disbelief," says another frustrated parent. "It's not just the kids who suffer!"

"How many people take home an average of two hours or more of work that must be completed for the next day?" asks Tonya Noonan Herring, a New Mexico mother of three, an attorney and a former high school English teacher. "Most of us, even attorneys, do not do this. Bottom line: Students have too much homework and most of it is not productive or necessary."

Homework studies

How do educational researchers weigh in on the issue? According to Brian Gill, a senior social scientist at the Rand Corporation, there is no evidence that kids are doing more homework than they did before.

"If you look at high school kids in the late '90s, they're not doing substantially more homework than kids did in the '80s, '70s, '60s or the '40s," he says. "In fact, the trends through most of this time period are pretty flat. And most high school students in this country don't do a lot of homework. The median appears to be about four hours a week."

Education researchers like Gill base their conclusions, in part, on data gathered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests.

"It doesn't suggest that most kids are doing a tremendous amount," says Gill. "That's not to say there aren't any kids with too much homework. There surely are some. There's enormous variation across communities. But it's not a crisis in that it's a very small proportion of kids who are spending an enormous amount of time on homework."

Etta Kralovec, author of "The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning," disagrees, saying NAEP data is not a reliable source of information. "Students take the NAEP test and one of the questions they have to fill out is, 'How much homework did you do last night' Anybody who knows schools knows that teachers by and large do not give homework the

night before a national assessment. It just doesn't happen. Teachers are very clear with kids that they need to get a good night's sleep and they need to eat well to prepare for a test.

"So asking a kid how much homework they did the night before a national test and claiming that that data tells us anything about the general run-of-the-mill experience of kids and homework over the school year is, I think, really dishonest."

Further muddying the waters is an AP/AOL poll that suggests that most Americans feel that their children are getting the right amount of homework. It found that 57 percent of parents felt that their child was assigned about the right amount of homework, 23 percent thought there was too little and 19 percent thought there was too much.

One indisputable fact

One homework fact that educators do agree upon is that the young child today is doing more homework than ever before.

"Parents are correct in saying that they didn't get homework in the early grades and that their kids do," says Harris Cooper, professor of psychology and director of the education program at Duke University.

Gill quantifies the change this way: "There has been some increase in homework for the kids in kindergarten, first grade and second grade. But it's been an increase from zero to 20 minutes a day. So that is something that's fairly new in the last quarter century."

The history of homework

In his research, Gill found that homework has always been controversial. "Around the turn of the 20th century, the Ladies' Home Journal carried on a crusade against homework. They thought that kids were better off spending their time outside playing and looking at clouds. The most spectacular success this movement had was in the state of California, where in 1901 the legislature passed a law abolishing homework in grades K-8. That lasted about 15 years and then was quietly repealed. Then there was a lot of activism against homework again in the 1930s."

The proponents of homework have remained consistent in their reasons for why homework is a beneficial practice, says Gill. "One, it extends the work in the classroom with additional time on task. Second, it develops habits of independent study. Third, it's a form of communication between the school and the parents. It gives parents an idea of what their kids are doing in school."

The anti-homework crowd has also been consistent in its reasons for wanting to abolish or reduce homework.

"The first one is children's health," says Gill. "A hundred years ago, you had medical doctors testifying that heavy loads of books were causing children's spines to be bent."

The more things change, the more they stay the same, it seems. There were also concerns about excessive amounts of stress.

"Although they didn't use the term 'stress,'" says Gill. "They worried about 'nervous breakdowns.'"

"In the 1930s, there were lots of graduate students in education schools around the country who were doing experiments that claimed to show that homework had no academic value — that kids who got homework didn't learn any more than kids who didn't," Gill continues. Also, a lot of the opposition to homework, in the first half of the 20th century, was motivated by a notion that it was a leftover from a 19th-century model of schooling, which was based on recitation, memorization and drill. Progressive educators were trying to replace that with something more creative, something more interesting to kids."

The more-is-better movement

Garfield, the San Francisco fifth-grade teacher, says that when she started teaching 30 years ago, she didn't

give any homework. "Then parents started asking for it," she says. "I got, 'In junior high and high school there's so much homework, they need to get prepared.' So I bought that one. I said, 'OK, they need to be prepared.' But they don't need two hours."

Cooper sees the trend toward more homework as symptomatic of high-achieving parents who want the best for their children. "Part of it, I think, is pressure from the parents with regard to their desire to have their kids be competitive for the best universities in the country. The communities in which homework is being piled on are generally affluent communities."

Homework guidelines

What's a parent to do, you ask? Fortunately, there are some sanity-saving homework guidelines.

Cooper points to "The 10-Minute Rule" formulated by the National PTA and the National Education Association, which suggests that kids should be doing about 10 minutes of homework per night per grade level. In other words, 10 minutes for first-graders, 20 for second-graders and so on.

The optimal amount

Cooper has found that the correlation between homework and achievement is generally supportive of these guidelines. "We found that for kids in elementary school there was hardly any relationship between how much homework young children did and how well they were doing in school, but in middle school the relationship is positive and increases until the kids were doing between an hour to two hours a night, which is right where the 10-minute rule says it's going to be optimal.

"After that it didn't go up anymore. Kids that reported doing more than two hours of homework a night in middle school weren't doing any better in school than kids who were doing between an hour to two hours."

Garfield has a very clear homework policy that she distributes to her parents at the beginning of each school year. "I give one subject a night. It's what we were studying in class or preparation for the next day. It should be done within half an hour at most. I believe that children have many outside activities now and they also need to live fully as children. To have them work for six hours a day at school and then go home and work for hours at night does not seem right. It doesn't allow them to have a childhood."

International comparisons

How do American kids fare when compared to students in other countries? Professors Gerald LeTendre and David Baker of Pennsylvania State University conclude in their 2005 book, "National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling," that American middle-schoolers do more homework than their peers in Japan, Korea or Taiwan, but less than their peers in Singapore and Hong Kong.

One of the surprising findings of their research was that more homework does not correlate with higher test scores. LeTendre notes: "That really flummoxes people because they say, 'Doesn't doing more homework mean getting better scores?' The answer quite simply is no."

Homework is a complicated thing

To be effective, homework must be used in a certain way, he says. "Let me give you an example. Most homework in the fourth grade in the U.S. is worksheets. Fill them out, turn them in, maybe the teacher will check them, maybe not. That is a very ineffective use of homework. An effective use of homework would be the teacher sitting down and thinking 'Elizabeth has trouble with number placement, so I'm going to give her seven problems on number placement.' Then the next day the teacher sits down with Elizabeth and she says, 'Was this hard for you? Where did you have difficulty?' Then she gives Elizabeth either more or less material. As you can imagine, that kind of homework rarely happens."

Shotgun homework

"What typically happens is people give what we call 'shotgun homework': blanket drills, questions and problems from the book. On a national level that's associated with less well-functioning school systems," he says. "In a sense, you could sort of think of it as a sign of weaker teachers or less well-prepared teachers."

Over time, we see that in elementary and middle schools more and more homework is being given, and that countries around the world are doing this in an attempt to increase their test scores, and that is basically a failing strategy."

Additional resources

Books

"The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning" by Etta Kralovec and John Buell, Beacon Press, 2001.

"The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents" by Harris M. Cooper, Corwin Press, 2001.

"Seven Steps to Homework Success: A Family Guide to Solving Common Homework Problems" by Sydney Zentall and Sam Goldstein, Specialty Press, 1998.