



End Homework Now

Educators should stop squeezing time out of family life for the questionable benefits of homework.

Etta Kralovec and John Buell

Parents say that teachers require it. Teachers say that parents demand more of it. Politicians call for grading parents on their ability to help with it. Citizens run for school board seats on no-homework platforms.

The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association set guidelines. Some dismiss the current anti-homework outcry as just the latest swing of the opinion pendulum. School boards and politicians dictate homework policies for political rather than pedagogical reasons. Teachers say that they are increasingly uncomfortable about handing over to parents the learning for which teachers are accountable. Welcome to the homework wars.

When the school board in Piscataway, New Jersey, voted earlier this fall to limit homework in the elementary grades to half an hour each night and high school homework to two hours a night, the *New York Times* ran a front-page article on the school (Zernike, 2000) and national television networks followed suit. Homework is controversial, not only because of legitimate questions about its efficacy. Concern about homework is also part of a growing apprehension in the United States about the time pressures that both adults and children now face. Unstructured family time is shrinking in the face of longer workweeks and more hours of homework than ever before (Hofferth & Sandberg, in press).

In the early 1990s, we discovered the impact of homework on students' lives when we helped conduct a study of alternative schools for Maine's Department of Education, aiming to find out why these schools had been so successful in helping former high school dropouts graduate from high school (Antonucci & Mooser, 1993). We spoke with parents, school personnel, and school board members and conducted in-depth interviews with more than 45 at-risk students enrolled in these schools, asking them to identify when they had known they were going to drop out of school. Students told us about chaotic family lives, cramped living quarters, and parents who worked at night. They also kept mentioning their inability to complete homework as a factor in the decision to leave school.

Surprised that homework contributed so dramatically to students' dropping out of school, we analyzed research reports and talked with hundreds of teachers, parents, high school dropouts, and high school students. Instead of focusing narrowly on homework's impact on academic achievement or its presumed role in developing self-discipline and good work habits, we examined homework in the context of the lives of students, families, and communities. From this perspective, we found that homework often disrupts family life, interferes with what parents want to teach their children, and punishes students in poverty for being poor. Perhaps more significantly for educators are the serious limitations of homework's pedagogical prowess



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(Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

In the past 20 years, family life in the United States has undergone dramatic demographic and economic changes. More mothers work, more single parents run households, and more parents work longer—all contributing to a decrease in unstructured family time (Hofferth & Sandberg, in press). White middle-class parents in the past decade have increased their time at work by nearly six full-time weeks a year. African American middle-income families log an average of 4,278 hours per year, almost 500 hours per year more than white families (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001).

Homework squeezes family life. All parents have educational agendas for their children. They want to pass on their cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and important life skills. They want to teach their children how to be good citizens and how to share in the responsibilities of running a home. More homework makes parents put their own agendas on hold even as they often struggle to help their children cope with homework assignments. Additionally, families need time to constitute themselves as families. According to a 1998 survey by Public Agenda, nearly 50 percent of parents reported having a serious argument with their children over homework, and 34 percent reported homework as a source of stress and struggle. Parents often have conflicting feelings about homework, viewing it as a way for their children to succeed but also as imposing serious limits on family time.

Homework reinforces the social inequities inherent in the unequal distribution of educational resources in the United States. Some students go home to well-educated parents and have easy access to computers with vast databases. Other students have family responsibilities, parents who work at night, and no educational resources in their homes. A principal once told us that he had solved the homework problem for students in poverty simply by not assigning them homework. This curious solution raises troubling questions: Either homework is of no educational value—in which case why is anyone doing it—or we are committing the worst form of educational discrimination by differentiating academic programs on the basis of economic class.

The poor person's version of the emblematic soccer mom is the burger mom—the mother who works nights in a fast food restaurant while her children sit in a booth waiting for her to help them with homework. Close to 20 percent of children in the United States live in poverty, and homework further exacerbates their academic problems. Well-meaning parents cannot overcome their lack of resources, including the time needed to make sure that their children complete school assignments.

Homework: The Black Hole

The call for greater accountability in education, with its increased focus on test scores and outcomes, puts homework on the line. When we leave a sizable portion of learning to parents, how can we hold schools and teachers responsible for meeting higher standards? To teach to standards means to teach in a more tightly controlled system, leaving no room for an unknown variable—the black hole of homework—in the education process. Moreover, how can teachers know the level of their students' learning if they don't know how students are getting their assignments done at home?

Cognitive scientists have contributed to a revolution in learning theory, building on the foundation laid by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Educators accept that students have unique cognitive structures that determine their abilities to solve problems at different points in their development. We know that we must scaffold new learning onto existing mental frameworks to build new knowledge. Understanding students' mistakes is a crucial part of the teaching process. When work goes home, teachers have little understanding of the mistakes that

students have made on the material and little control over who does the work. Teachers wonder, Did the students do their own work? Did they exchange answers with friends over the phone or before school? Did they send homework by e-mail to their grandparents, who did the work and returned it early the next morning? Did they download the paper they are handing in? Homework is a black hole in the learning process, leaving teachers unaware of each student's true educational level or progress and unable to scaffold new knowledge for the students.

Homework Myths

Three homework myths have persisted during the past century, making us unwilling to ask for solid evidence on the benefits of homework and acquiescent in accepting claims about its efficacy.

Myth: Homework increases academic achievement. Even supporters of homework acknowledge the problems of research on homework. Homework supporter Harris Cooper acknowledges that "the conclusions of past reviewers of homework research show extraordinary variability. . . . the reviews often directly contradict one another" (1989, p. 28). Most researchers now concede that homework does not improve academic achievement for elementary students (Cooper, 1994). Recently, homework advocates have shifted their focus from homework's questionable impact on student achievement to homework's alleged importance in developing traits like self-discipline and time management. According to these views, developing homework habits early means that a student will be more disciplined about completing homework in high school and beyond.

According to Piaget, however, asking children to perform tasks before they are developmentally ready proves counterproductive to development. We need to ask ourselves whether homework falls into this category. Lacking solid evidence, homework supporters ask us to take on faith the notion that homework can instill desirable character traits.

Myth: If our students don't do lots of homework, their test scores will never be competitive internationally. Comparisons of student test scores often pit U.S. students against students from other countries. Ironically, the 1995 Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) found that 8th graders in Japan and Germany are assigned less homework but still outperform U.S. students on tests (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Japanese schools spend a greater portion of their budgets on professional development and organize their school days so that teachers can work collaboratively. Teachers in Japan are at school eight to nine hours a day, but they teach only four hours a day. In addition, the Japanese school calendar has longer school days, longer school years, longer lunches, and longer recess periods. The Japanese classroom is a sacred space that does not allow interruptions. We can learn many lessons from the Japanese system (Rohlen & LeTendre, 1995).

Myth: Those who call homework into question want to dilute the curriculum and kowtow to the inherent laziness of students. By calling homework into question, we are not questioning the work of homework, but rather the value of students completing that work at home. Students need to complete long-term, independent projects as part of a rigorous academic program. They need to learn many skills through drill and practice. They need time to make new learning their own. Professional educators need to design rigorous academic work, scaffold new knowledge, and coach new study habits. The place for such work is in the school.

Focus on Genuine Reforms

Educators are under the gun as never before to improve student achievement. With national attention now focused on school reform, education leaders have a valuable opening for

educating the public about how to improve schools in the United States. Rather than defending the practice of homework, educators should direct national discussion to more important issues.

- After close to 20 years of school reform measures, we now have some proven practices for increasing academic success. A recent RAND study of academic achievement compared 1993–1996 state test results and found that the states with higher test results shared three important characteristics: smaller class size, more pre-K education, and more resources for teachers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). A call for more school funding should be the mantra of our profession.
- The rush to fund and build after-school programs is now a major policy initiative with the potential to solve some of the homework problems we face (Miller, 2000). Education leaders should seek to ensure that after-school learning programs are academically rigorous and work closely with the community organizations that provide after-school services.
- Research on learning suggests the importance of physical movement in the learning process (Jensen, 2000). Beyond the back problems associated with heavy backpacks, students who sit all day in a classroom and then for hours to complete homework at night face a potential health threat. Turning up the pressure to achieve, instituting high-stakes testing programs, cutting physical activities, and piling on the homework are recipes for disaster. Educators should help parents and politicians understand how an overemphasis on testing will result in one-dimensional learning.

Piling on homework and arguing for its value are cheaper and less politically risky strategies, but educators need to inform the public about the real levers of school improvement. Do we have the courage to call for adequate school funding? Are we willing to declare an eight-hour workday for both students and teachers? Are we willing to commit ourselves to the professional development that teachers need to teach effectively in their classrooms? Are we willing to staff our after-school programs with professionals who can support student learning? Educators need to consider these questions before answering calls about homework from parents and the local news media.

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