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information on  
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# Homework

## *What are the issues?*

Homework has been the topic of spirited debate for more than 100 years. During this time, public attitude has shifted dramatically— from positive to negative and back again. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, homework was considered a key schooling strategy, an important means of disciplining the child's mind through memorization. That changed in the 1940's as the emphasis in education shifted from learning through memorization and drill to developing student problem-solving ability and initiative. But by the late 1950's, after the launch of Sputnik, homework, again, grew in popularity. Worried that education in the United States lacked rigor, the public felt homework might speed up knowledge acquisition. Homework continued in favor until the mid-1960's, when the pendulum swung the other way. Homework came to be seen as putting needless pressure on students and a possible cause of rising mental health problems. That way of thinking came to an abrupt end with the 1983 wake-up call sounded by *A Nation at Risk*. Homework was back in style, and it has been on education's front burner ever since.

Today, homework is a pervasive teaching strategy accounting for 20 percent of the total time American students spend on academic tasks. Studies indicate, moreover, that the amount of homework assigned is increasing, with the biggest jump

occurring for children six to eight years of age. Between 1981 and 1997, for example, the amount of homework given to these children nearly tripled from 44 minutes to more than two hours a week. Nationally, the average amount of homework time ranges from two hours and fifteen minutes a week at the elementary level, to between six and seven hours a week at the high school level.

For all its prominence, however, homework is one of the least studied topics in education. What's more, surprisingly little attention is paid to the topic in teacher education programs. For many teachers, homework is a major source of anxiety. And for many students and parents it is a major source of struggle.

This issue of the *Balanced View* examines what we know about homework. Our summary focuses on five questions:

- Is homework effective?
- What kind works best?
- At what age is it a useful tool?
- How much is appropriate?
- What role should parents play?

We begin by examining the views of advocates on both sides of the issue. And we conclude with a series of recommendations for administrators, teachers, and parents.

## What do people say about homework?

Homework has both its champions and its critics. Advocates of homework say that it can

- ① improve students' chances for academic success by increasing the amount of time they are engaged in learning.
- ② improve students' study skills and attitudes toward school.
- ③ promote student independence and personal responsibility.
- ④ increase parent appreciation of and involvement in schooling.
- ⑤ facilitate more rapid movement through the curriculum by enabling teachers to introduce new material more quickly.

Supporters also say that homework is one of the main ways parents gain insight about what's going on in school and the progress of their children.

Opponents, on the other hand, claim that homework can

- ① limit the amount of time students spend in valuable extracurricular activities or with their families.
- ② lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating and copying.
- ③ overwhelm students and result in negative attitudes

towards school, including dropping out.

- ④ promote parental interference in learning.

Opponents further argue that homework can exacerbate existing social inequities. Poorer students are likely to have more difficulty completing homework than their well-to-do-peers because they lack the needed time, resources, space, and study aids. Outside jobs and family demands also hamper

**The relationship between homework and academic performance is influenced heavily by grade level. The effects at the elementary level are trivial. For high school students, however, homework can make a significant impact on achievement.**

homework completion for these students. So, while homework may be beneficial for better students from better homes, it can create a frustrating situation, detrimental to learning, for the disadvantaged.

## What does research say?

Since the 1950's, fewer than 150 research studies on homework have been published. Despite this meager amount for a subject as contentious as homework, some general conclusions can be drawn. Those summed up below are based on several meta-analyses, including an exhaustive study by Harris Cooper, by far, the most prolific researcher of homework and its effects.

### Is homework effective?

Research suggests that homework can have a positive effect on student achievement, but the degree

of effectiveness is strongly influenced by grade level. At the elementary level, homework produces small, almost trivial improvements in grades or standardized test scores. At the high school level, however, the effects are large: on standardized tests or grades, the average high school student regularly assigned homework can be expected to outperform 69 percent of students not given homework. Junior high school students regularly assigned

homework can be expected to outperform 60 percent of their no-homework classmates.

Studies have also examined the outcomes of homework in relation to other instructional techniques such as ability grouping, individualized instruction, cooperative learning, direct instruction, higher-level cognitive questioning, and use of regular and positive feedback. Here, too, a grade level effect has been found. At the elementary level, homework has a comparatively small effect on achievement relative to other teaching methods. But at the high school level, homework's effect is large vis `a vis the other methods. Considering that homework is a low-cost treatment, researchers say that it can yield considerable benefits at the secondary level.

## What kind of homework works best?

Whether homework is effective or not depends on the nature of the assignment and classroom follow-up. There is considerable evidence that homework results in better achievement if assignments encourage more than a simple repetition of class work.

Homework that involves practice and review of lessons previously taught as well as simple introductions to material of upcoming lessons, is especially beneficial. Assignments that require students to integrate skills or apply concepts to other areas of the curriculum are also desirable. Finally, homework works best if the material is stimulating, but not too complex, if the lessons are in keeping with students' abilities and home realities, and if it is assigned with a clear goal in mind—not just as busywork.

**Homework that is reviewed and commented upon is three times more effective at improving students' achievement.**

Another key to making homework effective is for teachers to give students feedback on their efforts. Homework that is reviewed, commented upon, and discussed in class, is three times more effective at improving students' academic achievement. Such follow-up shows that the teacher takes homework seriously and that it serves a purpose. Some investigators suggest that home-

work should not be graded, that it should not be viewed as an opportunity to test. Others, however, see grading as important and recommend that teachers allow students to correct their own work as part of the learning process.

## At what age is homework useful?

Some say that homework should be abandoned at the elementary level because it produces no immediate effects. But the weight of the research suggests that homework for young children can have a long-term developmental effect: it can help develop good study habits, promote positive attitudes toward school, and communicate to students that learning takes place outside as well as inside school. Because young children have limited attention spans and limited ability to tune out distractions, their homework should be brief and non-demanding. Moreover, it should not be expected to impressively improve test scores. The academic function of homework should emerge in junior high school.

## How much homework is appropriate?

Experts recommend that the amount of homework should depend on students' developmental levels and the quality of support at home. They suggest about 10 minutes of homework a night beginning in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade with an additional 10 minutes each year—i.e., the *10-minute rule*. In a guide for parents, the National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association (2000) state that for children in

grades K-2, homework is most effective if it does not exceed 10-20 minutes each day. Older children in grades 3-6 can handle 30-60 minutes a day. Cooper suggests the following homework guidelines:

- Grades 1-3 – one to three assignments per week taking 15 minutes or less
- Grades 4-6 – two to four 15-45 minute assignments a week
- Grades 7-9 – three to five 45-75 minute assignments a week
- Grades 10-12 – four to five 75-120 minute assignments a week

**Overall, the quantity of homework is far more important at the high school level.**

And the National Association of Secondary School Principals recommends 20-30 minutes of homework per academic subject per night for college-bound students.

Overall, quantity is far more important at the high school level. For example, the edge that homework gives junior high school students disappears when students do more than one hour of homework a night. At the high school level, however, achievement continues to improve with more and more homework, although common sense would dictate a point of diminishing returns.

## What role should parents play?

Studies suggest that school efforts to improve parents'

understanding of homework and teach them appropriate ways of becoming involved in the homework process—i.e., helping their children without actually doing the work for them—are likely to pay off. Parents’ (proper) involvement in the homework process can have a direct, positive effect on children’s attitudes towards homework and, at the upper grades, on their classroom achievement. Leading educators suggest four ways for parents to help a child with homework:

- ① Establish a study area, away from household distractions, with good light and space for studying. Make sure that all supplies and materials needed to do the assignment are available.
- ② Check over the work, offer help when needed. Know what the teacher expects and monitor more closely if the child has problems completing the assignment.
- ③ Provide guidance and encouragement. Help the child find the answer rather than supplying the answer. Teach ways for the child to divide a large assignment into manageable parts.
- ④ Discuss homework difficulties with the teacher. Work together with the teacher to resolve problems.

Researchers also caution against over involvement unless a child is experiencing academic difficulties. Then, parental homework help is a good way of extending the school day. And some researchers note that it is important for schools/teachers to be sensitive to children’s home situations. Some children return home to parents who work the night shift or are too stressed from their daily duties to help with homework. Placing an emphasis on parent involvement for these children may have negative consequences.

## *Recommendations*

For homework to be most effective, researchers recommend that districts establish a homework policy. Cooper suggests coordinated homework policies at all levels of the school system— district, school, and classroom. District policies, says Cooper, should offer

- a clear and broad rationale for assigning homework, and
- general guidelines for how much should be assigned at each grade level.

School policies should

- provide more specific time requirements for homework,
- describe the role of teachers and principals, and
- contain guidelines for how assignments can be coordinated and consistent among different teachers.

Finally, classroom policies should describe

- how the length and frequency of assignments will be determined,

- how students’ special needs and family circumstances will be handled,
- the type of skills to be taught via homework,
- the expected role of students, and
- the expected role of parents.

Cooper further recommends that homework should never be used as punishment, nor should students be excused from homework for a job well done in class. Both actions imply that “homework is no fun” -a mixed message that can backfire on both students and teachers.

In summary, homework can be an effective instructional strategy, but its value lies in students experiencing success. Flexible homework policies that allow schools and teachers to take into the account the unique circumstances of their students, are key to making homework meaningful and beneficial for all.

*Helping Your Child with Homework*

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Homework/index.html>

*Helping Your Students with Homework: A Guide for Teachers*

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/HelpingStudents/>

*Homework—Policies, Practices, and Guides for Helping Parents and Teachers to Help Students*

<http://ericae.net/faqs/homework.htm>

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments on this topic. The primary references used are available upon request.