

## **The Destructive ‘Too Much Homework’ Myth**

By Jessica Lahey

From *The New York Times*

[http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/the-destructive-too-much-homework-myth/?\\_r=0](http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/the-destructive-too-much-homework-myth/?_r=0)

Across the country, voices are raised in protest over the skyrocketing homework load inflicted on American students. Parents challenge teachers to re-evaluate homework policies. Anti-homework nonprofits circulate no-homework pledges. Writers and filmmakers make careers out of their anti-homework stance. The current generation of schoolchildren, they say, is enslaved by four to five hours of homework a night, toiling into the wee hours of the morning with no time for family or friends, driven to drugs, cheating and mental illness.

This would be a sad state of affairs indeed – if only it were true.

I teach middle school Latin and English, and, as I have stated here on Motherlode, I hate homework. If American students really were laboring under this sort of untenable workload, I would be leading the charge for the emancipation of our children. But when I set out to adjust the amount of homework I assigned in my own classes earlier this year, I started looking at those national averages — and I found that most American kids aren’t overburdened with homework at all.

According to the Brown Center Report on American Education, American students have one of the lightest homework loads in the world, typically less than one hour per day. Fully half of U.S. students are assigned no homework at all, even in middle and high school. Who is doing more homework, according to “The Michigan Study,” research often cited as proof of the aforementioned “skyrocketing?” Twenty years ago, the first and second graders averaged about 8 minutes a day on homework. Now they average about 17 minutes a day.

Even the vocal parents protesting excessive homework loads are the exception rather than the norm. The Brown Center report reveals that most parents – 64 percent to be exact – feel that their children’s homework load is “just about right,” and among the parents who were unsatisfied with their children’s homework load, 5 out of 7 wanted more homework for their children, not less.

When I asked teachers in both public and private schools to explain the divide between the well-publicized homework horror stories and the reality as depicted in the research, their answers pointed in the obvious direction: demographics. Anecdotally, they saw wealthier students enrolled in college preparatory schools doing more homework than students in low-income public schools, and recent research on the experience of those lower-income youth bears them out. “Students overall did not have much assigned homework, and reported little or no consequences if they did not complete their assigned tasks.”

The supposed homework burden? It's upper middle class parent myopia, a problem whose limits they're too close to see. Robert Pondiscio, former fifth-grade teacher at P.S. 277 in the South Bronx, agreed, via e-mail:

The battle over homework is one of those things that differentiates education among the privileged and everyone else. At the low end you have abysmal standards of academic proficiency that create the illusion of achievement where little exists. At the high end, you have earnest parents who worry about uptown problems like over scheduling kids and the hothouse environment of elite schools. They fret about the pressures their kids face while continuing to worship at the altar of getting them into just the right college. Meanwhile inner city teachers work night and day to try to get kids to the point where they can compete for any kind of college opportunity whatsoever.

I am not in favor of an increase in homework load, thank you very much. But when we manage to have a national conversation about education, homework is a red herring. Some otherwise privileged children may have too much, but the real issue lies in places where there is too little. When we do talk about homework, we shouldn't forget that.

*Jessica Lahey is an educator, writer and speaker. She writes about parenting and education for The New York Times, The Atlantic and Vermont Public Radio. Her book, "The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed," will be published by HarperCollins in 2015.*