

Homework Hurts High-Achieving Students, Study Says

By Valerie Strauss

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This won't come as any surprise to many teenagers but here goes: A new study finds that a heavy homework load negatively impacts the lives of high school students in upper middle-class communities, resulting in excess stress, physical problems and little or no time for leisure.

What's too much homework? According to the study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Education*, 4,317 students in 10 high-performing California high schools — six private and four public — had an average of 3.1 hours of homework a night. (I know high school kids who do close to twice that amount.)

Homework is one of those perennial topics about which there are many “expert” opinions on its benefits and drawbacks but no conclusive body of research proving either side. What research there is casts big doubt on the notion that a lot of homework is a good thing — and indicates that any homework other than reading in elementary school has benefit. Harris Cooper, a well-known homework researcher, who is a professor of education and psychology at Duke University, says that no more than two hours of homework a night should be assigned to students in high school. Author Alfie Kohn argues that there is no research to show that homework in elementary and middle school has any benefit and that the correlation between homework and academic achievement in high school is at best weak. So this is the context in which this latest study was conducted.

The researchers set out to look at the relationship between homework load and student well-being in the upper middle class advantaged communities (where median household income is more than \$90,000, and 93 percent of students go to college) because it is there that homework is largely accepted as having value. The study notes that there are limitations to the sample of students used in the study — with all of them attending privileged, high-performing schools — but they said they felt it was worthwhile to investigate the stresses of homework on this population of students.

The co-authors of the study are Mollie Galloway of Lewis and Clark College, an assistant professor who is the director of research and assessment for the graduate school of education; Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Education; and Jerusha Conner, an assistant professor of education at Villanova University. Their report says:

“Our findings on the effects of homework challenge the traditional assumption that homework is “inherently good” (Gill & Schlossman, 2001, p. 27), and instead suggest that researchers, practitioners, students, and parents unpack why the default practice of assigning heavy homework loads exists, in the face of evidence of its negative effects.”

To conduct the study they used data from surveys as well as the answers to open-ended questions to explore student well-being, attitudes about homework and engagement in school. The mean age of the participants was 15.7 years, with ninth graders representing the largest sample, 28.1 percent. Tenth graders were 22.8 percent; eleventh graders, 23.6 percent; and seniors 19.4 percent; while 6.2 percent did not report their grade level. About 85 percent self-reported their ethnicity: 48 percent were European American; 38 percent Asian or Asian American; 4 percent Hispanic; 2 percent African American, and 0.5 percent Native American. Ten and a half percent of students checked multiple categories or “other,” and 4 percent did not mark anything in this category.

Also, no relationship was found between the time spent on homework and how much the student enjoyed it. The research quoted students as saying they often do homework they see as “pointless” or “mindless” in order to keep their grades up.

Their study found that most students said their homework is only “somewhat useful” in helping them learn the material and prepare for tests. But it leads to a host of problems, the study says:

Stress

- Less than 1 percent said homework was not a stressor, and 56 percent indicated homework is a primary cause of stress.
- Forty three percent listed tests as a primary stressor.
- About 33 percent listed grades and/or getting good grades as a primary stressor.
- More than 15 percent reported parental expectations and the college application process as stresses.

Health Issues Consequences

Many students wrote that homework causes them to sleep less than they should and leads to “headaches, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, weight loss and stomach problems” as well as a lack of balance in their lives.

Most experienced distress and/or lacked time to engage in important life tasks outside of school. The majority (72%) reported being often or always stressed over schoolwork ...and many reported that they experienced physical symptoms due to stress (82% reported experiencing at least one physical symptom in the past month, with 44% of the sample experiencing three or more symptoms). Overall, students reported getting less sleep than the National Sleep Foundation’s (2000) recommended 8.5 to 9.25 hours per night for healthy adolescent development. On average, students in our sample reported 6.80 hours of sleep on school nights ... and 68% stated that schoolwork often or always kept them from getting enough sleep each night. Many (63%) reported that the amount of work they received often or

always made it challenging to spend time with family and friends, and a similar percent (61%) indicated that they had been forced to drop an activity they enjoyed because of their school workload.

Engagement

- There was no relationship between “homework hours and students’ enjoyment of schoolwork, and open-ended responses revealed students will often do work they see as ‘pointless,’ ‘useless’ and ‘mindless’ because their grades will be affected if they do not.”
- Students who spent more hours on homework tended to be more behaviorally engaged in school, but were simultaneously more stressed about their school work and tended to report more physical symptoms due to stress, fewer hours of sleep on school nights, less ability to get enough sleep, and less ability to make time for friends and family.

Students recognized that spending so much time on homework meant that they were not meeting their developmental needs or cultivating other critical life skills. One questioned, “Most people have no social life because of all the homework they do; how is that helping them in the real world?”

Another explained, “I’m struggling between trying to maintain [my grades, but] more to maintain my identity, soul, and sanity! Teachers don’t seem to teach students that there’s more to life than...hours of homework a night.”

The inability to balance or juggle the overload of homework, along with the number of other out-of-school activities or interests was the single most-often provided response by students when describing homework as a stressor (30% mentioned this lack of balance due to homework).

One student described her homework load as “plenty manageable... If I never try to do anything else!”