

Homework Overload Gets an 'F' from Experts

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It seems the smoke has barely cleared from those Fourth of July celebrations, but in many parts of the U.S., parents are trying to light fires under their kids in an effort to get them studying for the new school year.

Unfortunately, new research shows the amount of time kids clock in out of school may not pay off.

Kids who do more homework actually perform worse on standardized tests, according to research by Sydney University educational psychologist Richard Walker, author of the forthcoming book, *Reforming Homework: Practices, Learning and Policies*.

Homework only boosts student scores in the final three years of high school, says Walker, and only these older high school students should be doing a couple of hours of homework a night. Younger students only benefit from small assignments, if they're getting help at home.

But that's not the end of the homework hurdles.

High-achieving students who are swamped with homework can suffer from poor mental and physical health, says Stanford University professor Denise Pope. In fact, findings consistently show that homework has very limited value in the elementary grades.

In response to this new research, many educators are acknowledging homework's flaws (much to the delight of students, no doubt). Homework now only accounts for ten percent of a student's grade in the Los Angeles Unified School District. And other school districts state they expect high schoolers to spend only about thirty minutes of homework for each class. Some schools are assigning even less.

Tera Maxwell's three children—ages three, five, and eight—don't have any homework at the Montessori International Children's House in Annapolis, Maryland.

"When you make homework mandatory, it becomes a chore, rather than a joyful activity," she says.

Other organizations—such as the National PTA—go with a policy supported by Duke University social psychologist Harris Cooper, who advises giving students about ten minutes of homework each night, per grade level starting in first grade. According to Cooper's recommendation, a fifth grader would have about 50 minutes of homework per night.

While Cooper, author of *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*, has found homework at every grade level does improve test scores, too much can be detrimental.

How much is too much? At the middle school level, students max out after 90 minutes, according to Cooper. High school students show diminishing returns somewhere between 90 minutes and two and a

half hours. In elementary school, small take-home assignments may help form study habits.

Unfortunately, what may seem an ant-sized assignment to a biology teacher may come across as a whale of a project to a student in the class.

Research shows the majority of teachers underestimate the amount of homework they give by 50 percent, says Ann Dolin, author of *Homework Made Simple: Tips, Tools, and Solutions for Stress-Free Homework*. "That's a huge discrepancy," she says.

Another problem for the homework fatigued? The home itself. When kids are working in the classroom, they are usually quiet and focused, says Dolin. But at home, they are distracted by TV, siblings, and other family responsibilities.

"Teachers base their homework load on what they see their students accomplishing in class," she says. "But often, this is far different than what goes on at home."

According to a survey by the U.S. Dept of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the majority of ninth graders spend less than three hours on homework or studying during a typical school day. But there's a huge variation in the amount of homework students are doing, say experts.

"We have a whole lot of students who don't do nearly enough homework at the high school level, and we see a decent number of students who probably do too much homework at the other extreme," says Jim Hull, a senior research analyst at the Center for Public Education.

At the Bay School in San Francisco, teachers not only limit the load they assign, they also carefully choose the types of assignments.

"That's how you produce someone who is an expert," says the school's Academic Dean Andy Shaw, who says he tries help parents understand that more is not always better. "The idea that you might send your kid to school that gives less homework is a scary one. In our society, the amount of homework has become a proxy for rigor."

He also points out that his students have more time to step away from their coursework to focus on other activities and become more well-rounded people.

"Time spent with family, constructing engineering projects, volunteering, or being involved in musical theater can end up changing a student's life just as much as what goes in classroom," he says.

Dawniel Patterson Winningham, mother of a 16-year-old son who plays football and two 14-year-old twin daughters who play basketball, says her teens are busy enough with their after school activities.

"I have seen them stay up as late as midnight trying to juggle both extracurriculars and homework," says the Houston, Texas, mom.

Shaw says the importance of a teen's sleep is one of the reasons behind the low-homework policy at his school. "We can't mandate a bedtime, but we've reduced the amount of homework so the students can get more sleep," he says. "That's good for them physiologically and intellectually—they perform better when they get more sleep."