

What's the Right Amount of Homework?

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William Kirk, a senior at Highland High School, spends nearly an hour each night doing homework on average. That's too much, he said.

"I think it just has to be done to get a grade in class," Kirk said. "It doesn't teach me anything."

Chris Gilmer and Jaime Perea, also seniors there, find homework essential. They take college prep and Advanced Placement classes, so usually have several hours of homework each night.

"It's not a problem with me," Gilmer said. "It's preparing me for college and for the long run."

"People complain about homework," Perea said. "Most of those people are just lazy."

How much homework is too much? And are there policies that address how much time should be devoted to homework? We sampled homework policies in several local school districts and schools to see how much they recommend.

POLICIES AS GUIDELINES

Earlier this month, the Davis Joint Unified School District in northern California decided to ask parents if they think teachers overload their kids with homework. The district plans to use the survey results to reshape homework policies, which currently allow its teachers to assign ten minutes of homework each day beginning in kindergarten, and increase it by ten minutes for each grade level, capping at three hours for high schoolers. Those guidelines are not too far off from what districts here ask.

Among districts with elementary and middle schools, the recommended homework dose in kindergarten ranges from 15 minutes to 20 minutes per day for four days. Kindergarten policies ask parents to also put in work by reading to their children.

As a student graduates to higher grades, that time goes up to roughly 30 minutes in third grade, 45 minutes in grade six, and about an hour in junior high.

The Kern High School District recommends one hour for each class per week, while college preparatory students should expect two hours. Some districts, like Fruitvale and Rosedale Union school districts, leave it up to school sites to police homework. Others use a general board policy, which isn't strictly policed. The policies, school officials say, are instead used as a guide.

"Ours are just guidelines for teachers to follow," said Bakersfield City School District spokesman Steve Gabbitas. "It's up to the principal to see how it's being implemented."

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Homework should be relevant and purposeful, said Denise Pope, a senior lecturer in Stanford University's School of Education and director of Challenge Success, a project with schools to counter the causes of adolescent academic stress.

The most valuable homework is that which is perceived by students to be meaningful, while simply providing "busy work" does nothing, she said. A research paper she co-authored, "Hazardous Homework?" analyzes the effects of homework on students. Among the findings:

"Any student who is doing more than 3 1/2 hours of homework a night is actually at risk for higher stress levels and poor mental and physical health," Pope said.

In elementary schools, "homework is overrated and over-assigned," she said. In general, more homework is being assigned today than years before.

Pope's study attributes studies from Harris Cooper, whose research has had an impact on policies and practices nationwide.

FAMILY AFFAIR

All homework policies in districts address some form of parent participation, whether it's reading to kindergartners or having parents act as a resource.

Throughout the years, Pope said, there's been a change in mindset at schools, where the thought is that more assigned homework results in students getting up to state standards.

"What we see is that parents expect more homework, and districts expect it," Pope said.

For Lisa Anderson, helping Audrey, her third-grade Gifted and Talented Education student at Downtown Elementary, can be daunting, she said. They've had nights where they spent nearly three hours on work, she said.

"It's overwhelming," Anderson said.

Leslie Painter finds homework sometimes cuts into family time. She helps her eighth-grader, Tristan, with algebra.

"Sometimes homework is too much," said Painter, whose son also goes to Downtown. "But I know there are standards to keep up with."

Jillian and Ronny Acosta spend about 15 minutes a day reading to Donnie, their second-grader at Thorner Elementary School. Then there's a weekly packet of math and spelling problems Donnie has to complete.

"It's been a while since I've been in the second grade, but I don't remember having as much work as they get today," Jillian Acosta said.

However, little Donnie doesn't seem to mind.

"It's good," he said. "It helps me learn."