

## **A Teacher's Defense of Homework**

By Andrea Townsend

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I am a parent, and I struggle daily with making sure my daughter does her homework. I can certainly identify with the anxiety Karl Taro Greenfeld describes in his essay “My Daughter’s Homework Is Killing Me.” Here, however, I’d like to speak as a teacher rather than a parent. I’d like to explain why, in my professional opinion, American kids need homework.

I teach biology at the Charles School, a five-year early-college high school in Columbus, Ohio. I believe that my job is to prepare my students for college. In order to do that, I teach a wide variety of topics including cells, genetics, evolution, and ecology, using the National Science Standards. I teach each topic in depth so that the students understand and appreciate the information. I teach them about the scientific method, lab procedures, and scientific writing, all skills they will need in college. It’s a lot to fit into one short year, and my class requires a lot of effort from my students.

I require my students to read one chapter out of their textbook each week, and to complete a short take-home quiz on the material. It helps to supplement the notes I give in class, so that I can spend more class time on labs and other hands-on activities. I learned in college that hands-on work is the best way for students to learn, and that’s certainly true. However, it’s definitely not the most efficient way. So, if I’m going to offer interactive activities in class, I need students to put in some time and effort studying outside of class as well.

Other than the reading, most of the homework students bring home from my class is left over from the day’s activity. I often give time at the end of class so that students can begin on work when I’m there to help them. Our dean calls it “buying in”: Students are much more likely to finish an assignment at home if I can convince them to start it in class. Unfortunately, many kids choose to socialize when I give them time to work on their own. The students always say, “I’ll just do this for homework” and neglect to get much, if any, of the assignment done in class. Then, they come home with a pile of homework, which many parents assume the teachers assigned at the end of class.

A few times a year, I require students to write a scientific paper. We spend a significant amount of time on these assignments at school, but effort outside of class is required as well. And I think that’s great. Schoolwork prepares students for work-related tasks, financial planning, and any project that ends with the feeling of a job well done. Long-term planning, projects, and deadlines are a key part of adulthood.

Nevertheless, some parents think their kids are getting too much work. One argument, which Greenfeld uses, is to compare American students with those in other countries. In his article, Greenfeld cites the fact that students in many overseas countries are scoring higher than American children, while

being assigned less homework. He uses Japan as an example. In 2011, Japan was ranked fourth in science scores in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. But according to a study cited in Greenfeld's article, Japanese students are actually assigned less homework by their teachers. Why, then, do they achieve more? The answer comes when you look at the differences in our cultures and our views on education. Japanese teachers may not be assigning much homework, but it turns out that Japanese kids are doing plenty of homework anyway.

I spoke with Chris Spackman, who is the English as a Second Language coordinator at my school. Chris taught for 13 years in Japan, and served on the Board of Education in the city of Kanazawa. I asked him why Japanese kids are scoring so high on achievement tests despite having relatively little homework. "Because Japanese kids go to *juku*," he answered. He went on to explain that *juku* is a common after-school program that prepares Japanese kids for achievement testing.

In Japan, senior high school is not required or guaranteed. Instead, students compete for spots at prestigious high schools by scoring high on achievement tests. "Some schools are for art, or college prep," says Chris. "You have to study hard in junior high to get into the high school that you want." In high school, Japanese kids continue to go to *juku* so that they can get into the college they want as well. So, Japanese kids do academic work outside of school, just not necessarily work assigned by their classroom teacher.

There is room for compromise on the homework debate. In their book *Reforming Homework*, Richard Walker and Mike Horsley state that while homework isn't very beneficial for younger kids, it's still beneficial for older students. I agree. I've learned, while preparing my students to start college early, that study skills become much more important than they were in primary school. It's also important for teachers to assign work that's high in quality, instead of quantity. The vast majority of teachers I know are careful to only assign work that's important for student success. Remember, teachers have to grade all of these assignments – we wouldn't want to spend extra time grading papers that have no value.