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THE CASE FOR MEANINGFUL HOMEWORK

By Michael Zwaagstra and Rodney A. Clifton
Executive Summary

- There is great debate over whether or not homework is conducive to student learning. Homework opponents, such as popular education author Alfie Kohn, argue that homework usually amounts to pointless busywork that provides virtually no appreciable benefit to students.

- Some jurisdictions are moving toward eliminating homework. In April 2008, the Toronto Public School Board announced a new policy designed to severely reduce the amount of homework assigned to students.

- Homework opponents say research does not back the claim that homework improves student achievement on standardized tests and that valuable time is being taken away from other activities.

- The arguments made by homework opponents have significant flaws:
  - In reality, the most recent numbers indicate that the average time spent on daily homework by six- to eight-year-old students is 22 minutes and that high school students spent an average of 50 minutes per weekday on homework.¹
  - Considering that school days are generally 5.5 hours or fewer, it hardly seems unreasonable to add an extra 22 or 50 minutes during the week for completing homework assignments.
  - The research data show a correlation between homework and academic achievement for middle years and high school students.

- The average six- to eight-year-old child watches an average of one hour and 51 minutes per day of television, and high school students watch an average of two hours and eight minutes daily. If anything is taking away from physical exercise and productive family time, it is television, not homework.

- Homework is an important part of the schooling process, and it would be better to reform and improve its use than to abolish it entirely.
Introduction

Is homework beneficial to learning? This question has provoked a great deal of debate in educational circles. Some educators defend the practice of assigning homework and assert that it helps develop important skills, fosters responsibility and prepares students for the reality of post-secondary education. Others argue that homework usually amounts to pointless busywork that provides virtually no appreciable benefit to students.

One of the fiercest critics of homework is popular education author Alfie Kohn. Kohn’s many articles and a recent book argue that schools should eliminate homework.² A number of jurisdictions have taken these arguments seriously, including Toronto. In April 2008, the Toronto Public School Board announced a new policy that would severely limit the amount of homework assigned to students. Among other actions, the policy bans homework over holiday periods and prevents teachers from deducting marks for overdue assignments.³

The challenge to homework is a serious one and needs to be addressed. If it really is true that homework is meaningless busywork, then it makes little sense for teachers to continue assigning it. However, it is also important to assess whether critics of homework are missing any important factors. Does the fact that some work assigned by teachers as homework is pointless necessarily mean that students should never complete work outside of regular class time? This important question needs to be answered.
The case against homework

Homework opponents marshal a number of arguments to make their case that homework is worthless. They note that the amount of homework assigned to elementary and high school students has more than doubled over the last few decades and that homework levels continue to skyrocket.\(^4\)

One key claim Kohn makes is that, despite these skyrocketing homework rates, research does not back the claim that homework improves student achievement on standardized tests. The opponents claim that at the elementary levels there is no evidence of any correlation between time spent on homework and student performance. They grant that there is a modest correlation at the junior high and high school levels but say that it is relatively weak. They also say other factors could easily account for this correlation.\(^5\)

Along with this assertion, Kohn argues that studies fail to show that homework yields non-academic benefits such as self-discipline, better time-management skills, perseverance or independence. As a result, Kohn and other homework opponents such as Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish argue “homework builds character” in students is simply a myth and has no supporting evidence.

In addition, Kohn claims that to require students to complete large amounts of homework in elementary school takes away valuable time from other activities. For example, children need time to engage in constructive play, to exercise and to be with their family. Thus, to force them to complete hours of ostensibly mindless activities does a great disservice to children. According to this view, homework is worse than useless and it is harmful, as it keeps children away from the activities and socialization that they need to develop healthy lifestyles.

Opponents also note that students who struggle in school are likely to have difficulty completing their homework. If they are unable to complete the work in school, additional work at home is going to be of little benefit to them. As a result, students are at risk of being turned off school and are more likely to drop out.

Finally, homework opponents point to the growing number of parents who are expressing frustration with the current system. Many parents argue that homework intrudes on their family time and makes it difficult for them to build relationships with their children. They also object to the amount of time that is required to help their children with assignments that have not been clearly explained at school. This growing cadre of parents opposed to homework is leading a number of school boards across North America to severely reduce the amount of homework assigned to students.
Evaluating the case against homework

The arguments against homework are multiple and need to be taken seriously. If homework is pointless and does not benefit students, there is little reason to continue to assign it. Schools need to ensure that their practices promote a quality education and that homework is assigned only if it contributes a measurable benefit to student learning.

However, the arguments against homework are not nearly as strong as they appear. First, the amount of time spent on homework is not generally as extensive as homework opponents imply. Recent research from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research indicates that the average time spent on homework for six- to eight-year-old students is 22 minutes per weekday. High school students spent an average of 50 minutes per weekday. While these times do reflect a large percentage increase from 1981 levels, it is clear that the actual time allocation for homework is still quite modest. Considering that school days are generally 5.5 hours or fewer, it is not unreasonable to add an extra 22 or 50 minutes to that during the week for completing homework assignments.

It is also interesting to note that while homework opponents acknowledge that the data show a correlation between homework and academic achievement for middle years and high school students, they say it is weak. Since this correlation exists, it needs to be explained in order for the anti-homework thesis to hold. However, one has to wonder at the way homework opponents enthusiastically embrace the data that show no correlation between homework levels and academic achievement with elementary students. It is inconsistent to use one set of data in one way but then to interpret away a second set when the facts do not match the desired conclusion.

A better approach is to take the data at face value. Older students receive greater benefit from homework than younger students do. This is because they are more capable of independent work and are better at reading and writing and can complete their work without parental assistance. Students who are just beginning to read will receive substantially fewer benefits from completing an independent assignment when compared to grade 12 students who, for example, write up chemistry lab reports. This is precisely why teachers assign more homework to older students than they do to younger ones: The practice fits the research.

“Older students receive greater benefit from homework than younger students do.”
A commonsensical understanding of homework

It is television that takes away from physical exercise and productive family time, not homework. It is difficult to understand exactly how studies would be able to determine if homework yields non-academic benefits such as perseverance, time management and independence. However, the fact remains that spending focused time practicing a skill is likely to improve one’s ability. This is why piano students practice scales, athletes spend hours in repetitive practice sessions and student drivers spend hours in driver training prior to taking a driving test. Most skills worth having require some level of repetitive practice; academic skills are no different.

Finally, the argument that valuable time is being taken away from other constructive activities borders on the absurd. The average six- to eight-year-old child watches an average of one hour and 51 minutes per day of television, and high school students watch an average of two hours and eight minutes daily. It is television that takes away from physical exercise and productive family time, not homework. Surely, to divert some television time to a productive homework assignment is a much better use of time than is watching hours of television.

In short, the arguments against homework fail to stand up to scrutiny. Homework opponents have greatly exaggerated its alleged deleterious effects.
Conclusion

It would be a mistake for school boards to wholeheartedly implement the recommendations made by homework opponents such as Kohn. While they might be correct to point out that some homework assignments are poorly designed, it makes little sense to eliminate homework entirely. It does make sense for students to practice skills and complete work outside of the scheduled school day.

As the research indicates, older students benefit more from homework assignments than younger students do.10 Schools should continue the practice of assigning more work to students in upper grades than to those in lower grades. Because younger students have shorter attention spans, it makes sense that excessive amounts of homework can be counterproductive to their academic development.

Homework is an important part of the schooling process, and it would be better to reform and improve its use than to abolish it. School boards should resist the pressure from some groups to ban it as a learning method. Such a move would be an unfortunate step backwards and a disservice to students.

"It does make sense for students to practice skills and complete work outside of the scheduled school day."
SOURCES


5. Alfie Kohn, op. cit.


9. F. Thomas Juster, Hiromo Ono and Frank P. Stafford, op. cit.


FURTHER READING

Frontier Backgrounder

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