

# Does Homework Work?

## Reconsidering the Need for Homework

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Few subjects in education are as contentious as homework. Almost all teachers assign at least some homework and most see it as necessary and essential for student learning. But is it? Current research suggests that in some cases, no, it is not. This is hard to accept; especially for those of us who have been told our entire careers that assigning homework leads to deeper learning and higher test scores. But some of the most **current research** (see **below**) available throws a heavy shadow of doubt on these beliefs, even at the secondary level. In addition, if we look beyond the tenuous connection between homework and academic success, there are many **other compelling reasons** (see **below**) to consider rethinking or significantly reducing homework, ranging from its potential detrimental effects on mental health to its inadvertent fostering of inequity.

If you are curious about the research that suggests reduced homework leads to both increased equity and a healthier school-life balance for students, without any negative impact on academic outcomes, then let us propose to you **An Experiment**:



In the next quarter or marking period, experiment with one of these **revised homework policies** (see **below**). At the end of the quarter, judge for yourself whether or not your students are less prepared than previous year's students. Compare their classroom quiz/test scores for that quarter or marking period with the scores from your students the year before, during the same time period. Is there any noticeable academic difference? Anecdotally, what do you notice about both yours and your students' stress levels, attitudes towards school, and classroom rapport as a result of this new policy?

Still reluctant? Need to see it in order to believe it? We understand. Check out these **anecdotal case studies** (see **below**) from some folks who took the leap and gave it a try. See what they have to say and what came of it.

While there may not be one perfect answer to the homework issue that will work for everyone, we owe it to our students and ourselves to look at the research and consider alternatives to the traditional assigning of homework.

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### On the following pages you will find:

- Revised homework policies teachers can experiment with at multiple grade levels
  - Anecdotal evidence supporting the benefits of reducing, altering, and/or eliminating homework
  - Research that exposes homework's lack of effectiveness, and links to additional studies
  - Discussion of several other compelling reasons to reduce, alter, or eliminate homework
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# Homework: Reduced Policies

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If you are curious about research that suggests reduced homework leads to increased equity and helps students create a healthier school-life balance, you might want to experiment with one of the suggested homework policies below.

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## **Elementary: Optional Homework**

Make homework optional. If kids do it, great. Maybe even offer extra credit or some other incentive for doing it. If they don't do it, fine. It wasn't required, so non-homework doers aren't penalized.

## **Secondary: No Daily Homework**

With the exception of essays and multi-day projects, which are intended to be worked on at home over a period of days or weeks, only assign homework if what you planned for the period doesn't get finished. Plan to give some independent work time in class for students to work individually on what was taught, so that you can be there to support those that need it and monitor those that don't. Students that don't finish everything in class simply finish up at home for homework. Those that did finish in class have no homework. This policy has the added benefit of encouraging greater classroom engagement; because the more focused students are, the more likely they are not to have homework.

## **Secondary: Leveled Homework**

Label each homework assignment with a level from 1-3. Be explicit with students about which level has been given for each night's homework. A level 1 indicates an assignment to spend 10 minutes on. Level 2 is 20 minutes. Level 3 is 30 minutes. For example, you might say to a class, "Tonight's homework is a level 2 assignment. Do your best for 20 minutes. After that, even if you are not done, stop. I only want you to spend a maximum of 20 minutes on this." This policy makes homework both more equitable and more reasonable. Slower learners are not punished for being slower. Faster learners know how much effort to put in. All students are more willing to try, because they know the time and effort they have to put in is finite. And teachers are more certain they aren't overburdening their students, who may have been assigned homework in 4 or more other classes. Further, it can serve as an assessment tool for the teacher, seeing how much work individual students do in a given amount of time.

## **Any Grade Level: Reduced Homework**

Don't assign homework on weekends and over holidays, and limit school night homework. Limitations to school-night homework at the elementary level might look like a weekly reading log for K – 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and that's all. For grades 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> it might be a weekly 3-page homework packet that includes no more than 1 page of math, 1 page of literacy, and a 1-page reading log. Limitations to school-night homework at the secondary level might look like requiring no more than 10 minutes of homework per school-night per subject.

# Homework: Compelling Reasons to Reduce

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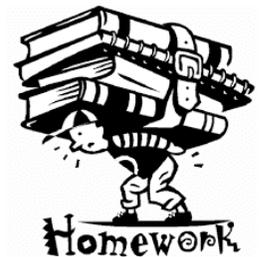
Separate from the research focusing on links, or the lack thereof, between academic achievement and homework, there are other reasons to consider reducing or even eliminating it. While some kinds of homework may have positive academic effects at the secondary level, they also can have detrimental effects.

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## Homework & Suffering

Many suggest that students who struggle in school also suffer when it comes to homework assignments, as homework consistently takes them longer than their non-struggling peers. In addition, one could argue that having students complete homework rarely tells us anything we didn't already know.

For high-performing kids, who already understand what was taught in class, homework is busy work. For low-performing kids, who couldn't grasp what was being taught even with a trained professional educator in the room with them, homework just reinforces that they don't get it. For teachers, monitoring and punishing students for not doing their homework creates extra work and stress, and degrades their relationships with their most vulnerable students. For parents, monitoring and arguing with their children about getting homework done can create negative family dynamics and reduces the opportunity for both family time and/or down time.



## Homework & Efficacy

Homework can lack significant value as an assessment of learning because it takes place essentially in a vacuum. Teachers have no accurate way to monitor homework completion, including who actually completed the homework, how long it took, or whether any expected parameters (ex: collaboration or independent work) were met.

## Homework & Inequity

Homework can inadvertently perpetuate socio-economic inequality. Some students go home to educated parents and easy access to technology, while others have familial responsibilities, and parents who work at night. For students in poverty, lack of resources at home can mean a very different homework experience. In a 2015 study published in the *American Journal of Family Therapy* researchers found that in families where parents had limited education, family fights about homework were 200% more likely than in families where parents held college degrees. In addition, students living in poverty or experiencing trauma or toxic stress in their home environments were statistically less likely to complete homework, which they are then penalized for at school.

# Homework: Anecdotal Evidence

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The idea of eliminating or reducing homework can feel like a radical one. Often, teachers assign homework because they feel like they're supposed to or because they were assigned homework and it's what they're comfortable with. Others worry that parents will complain if students do not have homework. However, administrators and teachers who have tried it report student and parental support and enthusiasm for eliminated or reduced homework.

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- ▶ Mark Trifilio, an elementary school **principal in Vermont**, and his staff agreed to eliminate homework and asked students to read, play, and spend time with their families instead. The results were impressive to both teachers and parents, who noted that not only was there no evidence of academic backsliding, but that students were happier and more able to explore their interests and hobbies.
- ▶ Phil Lyons, a high school **AP history teacher in California**, cut out homework completely, instead choosing to spend the first 10 minutes of class reading and discussing an article relating to the topic the class was covering. The result? Not only were students scoring better on their AP exams, but Lyons noted that his students also began seeking out more information on topics that interested them, often bringing new articles to class of their own volition.
- ▶ Jeanne Boiarsky, an **elementary school teacher in Arizona**, was frustrated with students who routinely did not do or turn in homework. She had tried everything from incentives to consequences, but just ended up exasperated, with the same handful of students chronically being penalized for not completing their homework. She experimented with a “no-homework” year. She said: “It was recommended to me and, really, what did I have to lose? I talked to my grade level team and 2 out of the 3 decided to try it as well. This was the best decision I ever made. The kids were - of course - thrilled. But so were the parents! I expected some push-back and complaints. I did not have any. Some parents even thanked me. Grades did not fall, which was also a concern for me. The students did great. I wish I had tried this years ago!”
- ▶ Christina Delantoni, a **high school teacher in California**, started by cutting all homework on weekends. Students and parents had such a strong positive reaction to the policy that she then started reducing weeknight homework as well. After two years of continual reductions in homework, there appeared to be no negative academic affect for her students so she went all the way and tried a “no homework” policy for an entire year. Initial resistance from the administration was overcome with a promise to return to homework if her student's test scores were not as high, on average, as in previous years. The gamble paid off. Average student test scores for the year showed no difference than in previous years. “Assigning little to no homework was easier on me, on my students, and on the parents. So if performance didn't suffer, why assign it? That's not to say that my students never had any homework. They had term papers and projects, which of course they sometimes had to work on over the weekend or after school on school nights. And if they didn't use their time wisely in class to get the assigned classwork done, they had to finish it at home. But generally my goal was to assign none. And in the end we were all happier for it.”

# Homework: Some Research

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While it is possible to find conflicting studies about the need for homework at the high school level, there are few if any studies that support the need for homework at the elementary level. And even at the high school level, the studies that support the benefits of homework can only show a weak correlation between homework and achievement. No existing study can show causation. This means that although high school students who complete their homework usually perform better than those that do not, the homework itself cannot be determined to be the reason for the greater achievement. It is just as likely to be a result of other factors, including parental level of education, parental involvement, number of hours of sleep per night, level of self-motivation, and/or study habits.

Below you will find summaries of 5 studies, and links to numerous other studies, that support reducing or eliminating homework at all grade levels.

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## **Study #1:**

Alfie Kohn states in his review of over a decade of homework research that “...no research has ever found a benefit to assigning homework (of any kind or in any amount) in elementary school. Even at the high school level, the... correlation between homework and standardized test scores isn’t strong, meaning that homework doesn’t explain much of the variance in scores...” (Kohn, 2013).

## **Study #2:**

Researcher Timothy Keith, who initially found a solid correlation between high school homework and test scores, revisited this topic ten years later with improved multi-variable equations and found that while there was a “very modest” correlation between amount of time spent doing homework and performance, correlation did not imply causation. He ultimately concluded that there was no proof that homework was the cause of the increased test scores (Cool & Keith, 1991).

## **Study #3:**

Research done by Nancy Kalish found that over-assignment of homework often leads to negative attitudes toward school and learning, particularly when assignments take more than 20 minutes to complete or are “busy work” that make learning a chore. This negative attitude can squash a student’s innate curiosity, perpetuate a negative response to school, and negatively impact future learning (Kalish, 2006).

# Homework: Some Research

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## Study #4:

A 2013 study at Stanford University found that students who spent more than 2 hours a night on homework experienced increases in stress, physical health problems, a lack of balance in life, and even alienation from society. High school students specifically noted feeling that the amount of time they spent on homework prevented them from cultivating other skills and talents, causing them to forego time with friends, family, and hobbies. (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013)

## Study #5:

John Hattie's research exposed over 250 factors that influence student academic success. For each factor he found a magnitude of impact, from highly influential to highly detrimental. For example, "mobility" (changing schools or districts during the school year) has a highly detrimental impact on student academic success, with a negative effect size of (-.34). Alternately, "reciprocal teaching" has a highly positive impact, with an effect size of .74. And he found a hinge point of .40. The hinge point was the level at which the factor's influence could be said to be successful in bringing about positive academic outcomes. Over 100 factors scored at or above the hinge point. Homework, with an effect size of .29, was not one of them. (Hattie, 2011)

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## More Homework Research & Articles

- ▶ **Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs.** By Cathy Vatterott
- ▶ **Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning.** By John Hattie
- ▶ **The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning.** By Etta Kralovec and John Buell
- ▶ **The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About.** By Nancy Kalish and Sarah Bennett
- ▶ **"Is Too Much Homework Bad For Kids' Health?"** by Sandra Levy [www.tinyurl.com/HWandHealth](http://www.tinyurl.com/HWandHealth)
- ▶ **"What Happened When One School Banned Homework – and Asked Kids to Read and Play Instead"** by Valerie Strauss (Washington Post) [www.tinyurl.com/ESstudy](http://www.tinyurl.com/ESstudy)
- ▶ **"The Homework Debate: The Case Against Homework"** by Monica Fugeli (Concordia University – Portland) <https://tinyurl.com/againstHW>
- ▶ **"Teachers Who Have Stopped Assigning Homework"** by Alfie Kohn <https://tinyurl.com/TeachersStop>
- ▶ **"Nonacademic Effects of Homework in Privileged, High-Performing High Schools"** by Mollie Galloway, Jerusha Conner & Denise Pope. <https://news.stanford.edu/2014/03/10/too-much-homework-031014/>