



INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

Vol 1301
July 2013

Christie Blazer, Supervisor

THE HOMEWORK DEBATE CONTINUES

At a Glance

Educators disagree about the value of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. Yet teachers have followed a trend of assigning increased amounts of homework, hoping to prepare students to compete in a global society. Across all grade levels, parents report that their children spend an average of 5.4 hours per week on homework, with over 40% of parents reporting that their children do homework five or more days per week. One issue experts do agree on is that the quality of homework assigned is more important than the quantity. Homework assignments have been found to be of greater value when they are connected to students' classroom learning and are at the appropriate difficulty level.

Homework has been a topic of debate in education for over a century. Today, U.S. educators still disagree about the value of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. While there are strong arguments against homework, some recent studies have provided evidence that, at least at the secondary school level, homework can have a positive impact on student achievement (Hu, 2011; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Chaika, 2006; Strauss, 2000).

Studies that have attempted to measure homework's impact on student achievement have been unable to determine conclusively how much homework students should be assigned. DeNisco (2013) noted, "If you're looking to bolster your particular position with research results, you're in luck, because there are studies that back the more-is-better approach and others that support the less-is-better tack." Experts do agree, however, that some homework should be assigned to students at all grade levels. Marzano and Pickering (2007) stated, "If a district or school discards homework altogether . . . it will be throwing away a powerful instructional tool."

The advent of "flipped" classrooms is causing educators to completely rethink the concept of homework. The flipped classroom is a model of blended learning in which students learn independently outside of the classroom and teachers use in-class time for active learning experiences. Instead of spending their out-of-school time completing traditional homework assignments, students watch lectures and presentations via online videos and podcasts. Class time is spent engaging in active problem-solving and one-to-one or small group tutoring with the teacher (DeNisco, 2013).

How Much Time Do Students Spend on Homework?

Researchers have found that the amount of homework assigned has increased over the years for children of all ages (Chaika, 2006; Strauss, 2000). According to a national survey of 2,900 randomly selected U.S. children conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000), the average amount of time spent on homework increased by 20% from 1981 to 1997, from 1 hour and 53 minutes per week to 2 hours and 16 minutes per week. Much of the overall increase was due to a large increase in the amount of time 6-8 year olds spent on homework. This age group more than doubled their homework load, from 52 minutes per week in 1981 to 128 minutes per week in 1997. In addition, the number of 6-8 year olds completing any homework at all increased markedly, from only 34% in 1981 to 55% in 1997.

According to results of the National Center for Education Statistics' (2011) 2007 *Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program* (PFI-NHES), parents reported that their children spent an average of 5.4 hours per week on homework. At the elementary level (kindergarten through grade 8), parents reported that their children spent an average of 4.7 hours per week on homework. At the secondary level (grades 9-12), parents reported that their children spent an average of 6.8 hours per week on homework. Across all grade levels, 42% of parents reported that their children did homework five or more days per week. At the elementary level, 39% of parents reported that their children did homework five or more days per week, and at the secondary level, 42% reported that their children did homework five or more days per week.

Analysis of PFI-NHES survey results by ethnicity revealed that at the elementary level, parents of Asian and Black students reported that their children spent more hours per week on homework (5.7 hours and 5.6 hours, respectively) than parents of Hispanic or White children (4.7 hours and 4.4 hours, respectively). At the high school level, parents of Asian students reported that their children spent more hours per week on homework (10.3 hours on average) than did students of any other ethnicity (who spent an average of 6.3 to 6.8 hours per week on homework). Additionally, 55% of Asian parents reported that their elementary school children did homework five or more days per week, compared to 47% of Black parents, 44% of Hispanic parents, and 35% of White parents. At the high school level, 68% of Asian parents reported that their children did homework five or more days per week, compared with 44% of White parents, 40% of Hispanic parents, and 30% of Black parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Quality of Homework is More Important Than Quantity

Experts agree that homework must be assigned in a way that maximizes the potential for student success. For many students, homework is seen as “busy work” that has little if any connection to what they are learning in the classroom. Legitimate purposes for homework include introducing new content, practicing a skill or process that students

can do independently but not fluently, elaborating on information that has been addressed in class to deepen students' knowledge, and providing opportunities for students to explore topics of interest (DeNisco, 2013; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Chaika, 2006).

Homework assignments' level of difficulty should be matched to students' academic performance levels. Students should be able to complete homework assignments independently with relatively high success rates, but they should still find the assignments challenging (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). Chaika (2006) cited a study in which teachers were asked to evaluate the quality of 1,400 writing and mathematics homework assignments from 12 schools. The teachers found that less than 30% of the assignments evaluated were even "minimally challenging."

Lack of Homework Standards

Strauss (2000) noted that the conflict over what, or how much, homework to assign is partly the result of educators' lack of agreement on the purpose of homework. For example, some educators believe homework should reinforce what is learned in school, others believe it should be used to cover material they did not have time to cover in the classroom, and still others believe homework should be assigned to encourage student creativity and exploration. Finally, some teachers assign homework simply to develop students' work habits or to help keep parents informed about what their children are learning in school. The author concluded, "The lack of homework standards is striking in an era when school systems are designing rigid guidelines for curriculum content and the performance of teachers and principals."

Summary

U.S. educators disagree about the value of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. However, the following general conclusions can be drawn:

- The amount of homework teachers assign has increased at all grade levels since the 1980s.
- Across all grade levels, parents report that their children spend an average of 5.4 hours per week on homework. Forty-two percent of parents report that their children do homework five or more days per week.
- Parents of Asian children report that their children spend more hours per week on homework than parents of White, Hispanic, or Black children.
- Experts agree that the *quality* of homework assigned is more important than the *quantity*. Homework assignments must be connected to what students are learning in class and the level of homework's difficulty should be matched to students' performance levels.
- There is no standardized policy in the U.S. dictating what type or how much homework students should be assigned.

References

- Chaika, G. (2006). Help! My Homework is Wrecking My Home Life! *Education World*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationworld.com/admin/admin/admin182.shtml>.
- DeNisco, A. (2013). Homework or Not? That is the Research Question. *District Administration*, March 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.districtadministration.com/article/homework-or-not-research-question>.
- Hofferth, S.J., & Sandberg, J.F. (2000). *How American Children Spend Their Time*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Retrieved from <http://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/pdf/rr00-458.pdf>.
- Hu, W. (2011). New Recruit in Homework Revolt: The Principal. *The New York Times*, June 15, 2011.
- Marzano, R.J., & Pickering, D.J. (2007). The Case For and Against Homework. *Educational Leadership*, 64(4), 74-79.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *Digest of Education Statistics: 2011*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/>.
- Strauss, V. (2000). Who Needs Homework? *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2000.