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Homework

At a Glance

Although homework is assigned for a variety of academic and non-academic purposes, there is disagreement within the educational community about the value of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. This Information Capsule summarizes the benefits and drawbacks of homework and examines how much time students should and actually do spend on homework. The establishment of formal homework policies and the issue of parent involvement are discussed and recommendations for teachers assigning homework are provided. Finally, research on homework's impact on student achievement is summarized. A more detailed Literature Review on homework is available at Research Services' web site (<http://drs.dadeschools.net>).

For over 100 years, U.S. educators have debated the importance of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. In the early 1900s, many school districts banned homework, especially at the elementary level, in an effort to discourage rote learning. In the 1950s, the cold war and Russia's launch of the Sputnik satellite led to increased homework loads. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, homework assignments again declined, but fears about the country's economic competitiveness created pressure on educators to assign more homework. During the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of the public supported homework. Today, however, there is increasing disagreement about the value of homework and how much homework to assign (Center for Public Education, 2007a; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Ratnesar, 1999).

Homework has been defined simply as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours" (Cooper, 1989). But definitions of homework become more complicated when variations in the types of assignments are considered: difficulty level; skill or subject area; completion deadline (short- or long-term); degree of individualization; social context (completed independently or with other students); mandatory or voluntary; and if it will be submitted for grading (Cooper, 2007; Coutts, 2004). Furthermore, teachers assign homework for many different reasons, although researchers have noted that most assignments usually serve multiple purposes.

Metlife's (2007) *Survey of the American Teacher* focused on issues related to homework. The survey of 1,000 U.S. K-12 public school teachers found that teachers reported frequently assigning homework for the following reasons:

- to help students practice skills or prepare for tests (86%).
- to help students develop good working habits (80%).
- to develop students' critical thinking skills (67%).
- to motivate students to learn (65%).
- to assess students' skills and knowledge (63%).

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Benefits of Homework

Proponents of homework believe it can benefit students when used appropriately. The most obvious benefit is that it will improve students' understanding of the material covered (Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005; Brewster & Fager, 2000). Advocates of homework claim it also:

- Serves as a diagnostic tool that allows teachers to regularly monitor their students' progress (West Allegheny School District, n.d.)
- Provides educators with a cost effective way to extend the school day by several hours (Bluestein, 2006; Horowitz, 2005; Cooper, 1994).
- Fosters student initiative and independence (Horowitz, 2005; Plato, 2000; Cooper, 1994).
- Promotes greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling (Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005; Cooper, 1994).

Drawbacks of Homework

Critics say it is questionable whether homework, done at the end of a long day when motivation and concentration are low, has any benefits at all (Leone, 2005; James, 2000). Arguments against homework include:

- Homework provides few, if any, academic benefits to students who don't possess the skills needed to complete the assignment. Conversely, students who have already mastered the skills derive little or no benefit from completing the assignment (Kohn, 2006a; Moorman & Haller, 2006a).
- Homework overload can cause students to lose interest in the academic material and become physically and emotionally fatigued (Skaggs, 2007; Cooper et al., 2006; Moorman & Haller, 2006a; McPherson, 2005; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Cooper, 1994).
- Excessive homework often creates tension between parents and their children because it takes away from family time (Clemmitt, 2007; Moorman & Haller, 2006a; Checkley, 2003; McEntire, 2001).

- Homework can widen social inequalities. Compared to their higher income peers, students from lower income homes are more likely to work after school and less likely to have an environment conducive to studying (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005; Cooper, 1994; Thomas, 1992).

How Much Time Do Students Actually Spend on Homework?

Researchers have concluded that, despite media reports of students overburdened with homework, the average American student across all grade levels completes less than one hour of homework per night, an amount that has not changed substantially in at least 20 years. While some students, such as those enrolled in advanced programs, have significantly larger homework loads, reports of a widespread homework problem appear to be greatly overstated (Center for Public Education, 2006b; Linver et al., 2005; Shellard & Turner, 2004; Brown Center on Education Policy, 2003; Gill & Schlossman, 2003). Skinner (2004) noted that "while some parents and families may have serious homework problems, these appear to be private problems, hardly in need of national or even local solutions."

Most U.S. students do not appear to be doing significantly greater amounts of homework than their international peers. Clemmitt (2007) noted that it is difficult to make international homework comparisons because cultures have different ideas about what they consider homework. For example, children in China may come home without homework assignments but spend all evening studying. In addition, different countries have different views about the purpose of homework. While homework is seen as one element of course grades in the majority of U.S. classrooms, other countries use homework predominantly for practice and preparation purposes. Eighty-two percent of U.S. teachers reported grading homework, compared to 14 percent of teachers in Japan and 6 percent of teachers in Germany (Moorman & Haller, 2006b).

How Much Time Should Students Spend on Homework?

One of the more contentious issues in the homework debate is the amount of time students

should spend on homework. Available research indicates that the optimum amount of time is between 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours per night for high school students and about one hour per night for middle school students (Center for Public Education, 2007c). There is less research on the optimum amount of time elementary students should devote to homework, but available studies suggest that smaller amounts of homework (no more than 20 minutes per night) may help to develop study skills and work habits, but do not directly affect achievement (Cooper, 2008; National Education Association, 2008; Center for Public Education, 2007b).

Research conducted on the amount of homework most beneficial to students has led many researchers, the National Education Association, and the Parent Teacher Association to recommend the “10 minute rule” for determining how much homework to assign. The “10 minute rule” is a general guideline that suggests 10 minutes of homework per grade level per night (for example, 30 minutes per day for third graders and 120 minutes per day for twelfth graders) (McPherson, 2005; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005; Shellard & Turner, 2004; Cooper, 2001; Cooper et al., 1998).

There is evidence that the relationship between time spent on homework and academic achievement may be curvilinear. This finding suggests that homework may have a greater impact on student achievement when teachers assign moderate amounts of homework, rather than very little or a great deal of homework (Center for Public Education, 2007c; McPherson, 2005; The State of Queensland, 2004; Sharp, 2001; Keys et al., 1997).

Should School Districts Establish Formal Homework Policies?

Homework policies define a standard set of expectations for homework. Many researchers agree that districts should have a formal policy on homework that is developed with input from teachers, administrators, students, and parents. They argue that teachers need a policy to guide them with assignments; students need to know the types and quantity of homework that will be assigned; and parents have the right to know why each assignment is given (Skaggs, 2007; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005; Brewster

& Fager, 2000; O’Rourke-Ferrara, 1998; Thomas, 1992; Davis et al., n.d.).

Those in favor of formal districtwide homework policies recommend that they clearly specify what kind of homework is most effective; how much homework is appropriate at each grade level; who will be responsible for deciding how much homework to assign; how the scheduling of homework will be coordinated among different teachers; and parents’ responsibilities regarding homework (Skaggs, 2007; Cooper, 2001; Eddy, 1984).

The Center for Public Education (2007b), however, has recommended that districts refrain from establishing formal homework policies and instead develop guidelines at the individual school level. The Center does not advocate the creation of formal districtwide homework policies because research findings on the impact of homework on students’ academic achievement have been inconclusive and the optimum amount of time students should spend on homework has not yet been clearly established.

Some educators have cautioned that when districts set up homework policies in advance, they are admitting homework is not dictated by the lesson or by students’ needs, but by a predetermined schedule (Moorman & Haller, 2006c; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005; Thomas, 1992). Moorman and Haller (2006c) stated that policies governing the amount of homework to be assigned insure that homework will be given whether or not it’s appropriate. They suggested that a commitment to daily homework increases the odds that it will be meaningless and repetitive.

Parent Involvement in Homework

Most parents help their children with their assigned homework. *MetLife’s Survey of the American Teacher* (2007) found that 73 percent of the 501 parents surveyed had reviewed, proofed, or checked homework during the past school year (84 percent of elementary parents and 61 percent of secondary parents).

Researchers agree that parents should be somewhat, but not overly, involved in their children’s homework. For example, parents should monitor homework; offer guidance, not answers, when asked for help; provide a quiet, well-lit place for

their children to study; ensure that the required materials (books, paper, and pencils) are available; and help with time and workload management (Bempechat, 2004; Cooper & Gersten, 2002; Cromwell, 1998).

Research has produced mixed findings on the impact of parents' homework involvement on student achievement. However, parent involvement in homework has consistently been shown to have a positive effect on students' homework completion rates and parents' attitudes toward their children's schools (Center for Public Education, 2007c; Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Pytel, 2007; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005; Sharp, 2001).

Recommendations for Teachers Assigning Homework

In order to increase both homework completion rates and the meaningfulness of assignments, researchers have recommended that teachers consider the following issues when assigning homework (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005; Shellard & Turner, 2004; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Dierson, 2000; Paulu, 1998; Cooper, 1994):

- Assign homework that has a clear purpose.
- Communicate expectations to both students and parents.
- Use homework to enrich the classroom curriculum.
- Match assignments to students' skill levels.
- Match assignments to students' learning styles.
- Assign a variety of homework.
- Keep drill work to a minimum.
- Prepare homework assignments carefully.
- Connect homework to real life events or activities in the home and community.
- Teach students the skills they need to complete assignments.
- Monitor the amount of homework assigned.
- Don't use homework as a punishment.
- Establish a flexible homework completion policy.
- Don't assign homework at the end of class.
- Decide whether to differentiate homework assignments.
- Provide feedback.
- Decide whether or not to grade homework assignments.
- Coordinate with other teachers.
- Involve parents.

Research: Homework and Student Achievement

Before considering studies on homework's effect on student achievement, the reader should be aware that homework has been a difficult variable to study directly, uncontaminated by other variables. Homework assignments are influenced by more factors than any other instructional strategy. Student ability, motivation, and grade level may all influence homework's effect. In addition, there is considerable variation in whether, when, and how students complete assignments, as well as the home conditions in which they work on their assignments (Cooper et al., 2006; McPherson, 2005). Trautwein, Lüdtke, and Pieper (2007) stated that "the recommendations that scientists and practitioners make about homework assignment and completion are often based on their own experience or on speculation rather than on sound scientific evidence."

In general, research on homework has produced inconsistent results. There is no conclusive evidence that homework increases academic achievement. Some studies have found homework has a positive impact under certain conditions and for certain students; some have found homework has no effect on academic achievement; and others have found homework has a negative effect on achievement (Center for Public Education 2007c; McPherson, 2005; Bempechat, 2004; McEntire, 2001). Homework has consistently been found to have a greater impact on the academic achievement of students at the higher grade levels. Some studies have also concluded that homework is related to higher class grades and scores on teacher-made tests, but not to performance on standardized achievement tests (Krashen, 2005; Cooper et al., 1998; Cooper, 1989).

Research: Non-Academic Benefits of Homework

Most researchers believe homework has non-academic benefits, especially for younger students. They claim that homework promotes improved attitudes toward school, demonstrates that learning can take place outside of the classroom, teaches students how to manage time, helps students develop good study habits, and encourages students' sense of personal responsibility and self-discipline (Center for Public Education, 2007c;

Cooper, 2007; Corno & Xu, 2004; The State of Queensland, 2004; Cooper, 1994).

Some researchers, however, contend there is no evidence to support the widely accepted assumption that homework yields non-academic benefits (Kohn, 2006b; Adoption Media, n.d). Kralovec and Buell (2000) stated “there has been no research done on whether homework teaches responsibility, self-discipline, or motivation. That’s just a value judgment.” Forster (2000) maintained that before homework is assigned for its non-academic benefits, more research needs to be conducted on these outcomes.

Research: Homework and Gender

The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida recognizes regular, purposeful homework as an essential component of the instructional process in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

School Board Rule requires that schools consider the following guidelines as daily averages:

Grade Level	Total Daily Average (All Subjects)
K-1	30 minutes
2-3	45 minutes
4-5	60 minutes
6-8	75 minutes
9-12	120 minutes

All students should spend an additional 30 minutes reading.

Teachers are responsible for:

- teaching independent study skills
- making specific assignments
- checking, reviewing, and evaluating students’ homework in accordance with a system that is clearly explained to the class
- giving feedback on homework assignments in a timely manner
- making instructions related to homework clear
- when necessary, providing a period of questioning or supervised study to insure that students understand the assignment

Teachers are directed to consider the following factors when assigning homework:

- grade level of student

- maturity level of student
- instructional needs of student
- level and degree of difficulty of the subject being studied
- purpose of the assignment and its relation to the objectives of the course under study
- length of the assignment and the amount of time required to complete it
- homework demands made in other subject areas

Each school is expected to advise parents in writing about the school’s homework policy at the beginning of the school year. This explanation should include the nature of homework assignments and suggestions as to how parents can cooperate in the completion of assignments.

Summary

Although homework is assigned for a variety of academic and non-academic purposes, there is disagreement within the educational community about the value of homework and the amount of homework students should be assigned. Researchers have concluded that, despite media reports of students overburdened with homework, the average American student across all grade levels does less than one hour of homework per night. In addition, most U.S. students do not appear to be doing significantly greater amounts of homework than their international peers.

Estimates on the optimum amount of time students should spend on homework vary, but research indicates that high school students should spend about 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours on homework per night and middle school students should spend about one hour per night. Smaller amounts of homework (no more than 20 minutes per night) help elementary students develop effective work habits and study skills, but do not appear to directly affect achievement. Many educators have adopted the “10 minute rule” (10 minutes of homework per grade level per night) as a general guideline for deciding how much homework to assign. Others have maintained that the quality of homework assigned is more important than the quantity completed.

Experts disagree on whether districts should establish formal homework policies. Some maintain parents and students have the right to know the types and quantity of homework teachers will

assign, while others contend formal policies lead to homework assignments that are determined by a pre-set schedule, instead of students' academic needs.

Most researchers agree that parents should be somewhat, but not overly, involved in their children's homework. Research has produced mixed findings on the impact of parents' homework involvement on students' achievement. However, parent involvement in homework has consistently been found to have a positive effect on students' homework completion rates and parents' attitudes toward their children's schools.

The recommendations that scientists and practitioners make about homework assignment and completion are often based on their own experience or on speculation

rather than on sound scientific evidence. Research conducted on homework's impact on student achievement has produced inconsistent findings. Some studies have found homework has a positive impact on achievement under certain conditions and for certain students; some have found homework has no effect on academic achievement; and others have found homework has a negative effect on achievement. Studies have consistently found, however, that homework has a greater impact on the academic achievement of students at the higher grade levels.

A Literature Review on homework is available at Research Services' Web site (<http://drs.dadeschools.net>). The Literature Review includes a more detailed discussion of the research conducted on the optimum amount of homework time; the effect of parent involvement on homework completion rates; homework's impact on student achievement; and the role of income level, ethnicity, and gender in homework completion rates and the resulting effects on achievement.

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