

Maggie Boggs and Sakshie Rao

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Dr. Gingrich

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How Much Homework Should Students Have?

Introduction

For some students these days, homework seems to weigh them down--literally. A middle school student comes home from school bearing a backpack heavier than himself. Tears augment in the glossy eyes of a second grader as the pressure to do well in school and complete all his homework overwhelms him. A teenage girl does not have enough time to enjoy her weekends like she should. Do any of these situations sound familiar? Whether you are a student, or a mom, dad, neighbor, friend, or relative to a student, you've heard the stories. Stories of college-level assignments, staying up past midnight to finish math homework, and excessive amounts of stress. Many American parents are concerned with the amount of homework students are continually lugging home these days, and feel that there is simply too much homework. But not everyone is in agreement on the matter.

Throughout history, homework has always been controversial. In the early 1900s, the Ladies' Home Journal protested against homework. They believed that free time that could be used to play outdoors or read was more beneficial to children. They actually were successful in convincing the state of California to pass a law abolishing homework in grades K-8. The law lasted around 15 years, but then it was quietly repealed.

Today, there is a wide range of thought on how much homework should be assigned. Some are as extreme as the Ladies' Home Journal, and support no homework at all, while others prefer limited amounts. However, others feel that homework has many benefits, and students are obtaining just the right amount of homework. Is what some students and parents are complaining about today truly an issue? Should homework levels decrease or diminish completely? Should homework levels stay the same? Just how beneficial *is* homework?

Con Side: Less or No Homework

Homework has many negative impacts on a student and his or her family. A study that calculated the amount of homework assigned between 1981 and 1997 found that homework has increased, especially for children aged 6 to 9. Within that range of students, the amount of homework has almost tripled.

These excessive rates of homework can be damaging to a child's health. Too much homework can force students to decide between sleeping and doing their assignments. 80% of teenagers and 70% of younger children don't get their recommended dosages of sleep. This blocks the brain from completing important tasks during nighttime. REM (rapid eye movement) sleep is the restorative stage of the sleep cycle in which dreams occur. If REM sleep is disrupted, the body continually needs more and more sleep time in order to catch up on this stage. Although the exact reason for the importance of sleep isn't clear, researchers theorize that the dreams that occur during REM sleep are ways that the brain processes emotions, memories, and information (Smith). Also, sleep loss in students leads to decreased concentration and inability to perform well the next day at school. Lots of homework also correlates with sedentary lifestyles, where students spend so much time on their academics that they have little or no time for physical

activities. According to the resource End the Race Companion Book, “this can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.” (Westheimer 4).

Some of the issues with sending children home with tons of work have been evident for a very long time. Doctors over 100 years ago knew that lots of heavy textbooks damages a child’s spine. And while they didn’t use the word stress, doctors worried about students having nervous breakdowns. Researchers found that 9-13-year-olds said they were more stressed by academics than anything else, even more than “bullying or family problems” (Westheimer 6). This is very unsettling. How can homework, which supposedly helps a child learn and prepare for their adult lives, be more stressful than the actual real-life problems children endure? This sort of stress, especially among teens, often leads to depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and even suicide.

If we have known these problems for so long, why has America not tried to decrease its homework load? Perhaps it is our drive to outdo other countries academically. Unfortunately, if that’s the case, America is already struggling to keep up. Our students do more homework than students from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and yet these other countries have performed significantly better on international math tests. The lowest-scoring students came from Iran, Thailand, and Greece, which are three countries where large quantities of homework are given. Clearly, too much homework does not seem to be working.

Current research backs up the academic ineffectiveness of too much homework. Within the article titled “The Value of Homework Needs Further Research,” author Alfie Kohn discusses whether or not homework has academic value. With elementary school students, data shows that there is practically no correlation between homework and achievement. Kohn also claims that while homework may appear to be a necessity, “there’s reason to doubt that requiring

children to do homework has any meaningful academic benefit” (Kohn). In regards to high school and middle school homework, the lengthier the study duration, the smaller the impact of the homework. An activity is helpful at first, but after a while amount of reward a student gains from doing an activity decreases sharply. Therefore, at a certain point, homework becomes useless and wasteful of a child’s time and energy. One 2006 research study called excessive homework “counterproductive” (Westheimer 3). This is mainly due to the boredom that ensues after a certain point. Many educators are also suggesting the 10 minute rule, where one multiplies a grade level number by ten to find the recommended length of homework, in minutes. If a student goes past this length, researchers recommend them stopping by the 2 hour mark.

One school in England has taken these ideas about the negative effects of homework to heart and has made an even more drastic move—by opening as a homework-free school. Nottingham East Academy opened in 2008. Instead of homework, students attended an extra lesson and after-school activities, which increased the length of the school day. Barry Day, the appointed principal of the school, believes that children from poorer or non-English speaking families have more trouble completing their homework. He claims that “homework causes an enormous amount of home conflict and parents and the community certainly won’t mind children coming home later” (Irvine). He believes that homework is often set only because there is an expectation that it should be set. The children of Nottingham East Academy will have reading requirements, but overall, the school’s outlook on homework is that it is counterproductive. After opening, the school has been quite successful. Over the summer, students were given a reading challenge, and apparently many of the students met the challenge’s goals with flying colors. So, Nottingham East Academy is one of many examples of the schools that have successfully integrated the use of less homework. Some American schools that have

either eliminated or limited homework include Bloomfield Middle School in Missouri and Grant Elementary School in Wyoming.

Excessive amounts of homework can even lead to parents helping students with their homework and even filling it out for them. This can confuse students if the parent is uneducated in the subject or has different teaching methods than the teacher. Also, students sometimes cheat on their homework by copying papers at the lunch table or frantically before the bell rings in the classroom to which the assignment is due. This is not teaching our students anything, except how to be deceptive and not do the work for themselves. Clearly stated, overdosages of homework can lead to bad standards of the students.

Clearly, Americans are obtaining too much homework. It has negative effects on students' health since it takes away the time to do physical activities, relax, and sleep. Also, research shows that after a certain point, homework *just doesn't help*. America should follow the lead of the most academically successful nations, which often assign very little homework. Homework can even create the need for a parent to help out, which is only leading the child into the realm of dishonesty, where cheating on homework seems acceptable. Homework levels must decrease, or diminish completely.

Pro Side: Same Amount or Even More Homework

Many people can agree that much homework is not beneficial to students health-wise and it will not help them prepare for life. However, there are also many who believe that homework is beneficial, and that the amount of homework teachers are giving students should remain the same or even increase. Homework can have a positive impact and help kids prepare for life after high school.

More homework can effectively provide students with a good work ethic that they can use for many years in the future. Keith O'Brien describes in his article, "College Students Study Less Than in the Past" how it is increasingly shown that when students arrive from high school into college, they study less than they did in high school. O'Brien states, "Once on campus, the students aren't studying". The why, however, is not very clear, but studying is a key part of being successful in college, and it is not happening. Possible reasons are: the fact that more interests compete for students' time in college, or there is less incentive for both the professor and the student to do any work, causing them to do the least amount of work possible. College students do not have the study habits they need to succeed, and high school does not do a good job of preparing students for college. Students do not have too much work and they do need to study more, but they do not have the time to do so because high school days take up most of the day while college is much different.

Educators do not do a good job in fully bringing out a student's academic potential for the excellence that they need for college admissions, and the little amount of homework given by the educators in question attests to that fact. James White contends that the low quality of today's public schools is a result of educators' low expectations in his article, "Low Expectations Hamper Public Education". Because teachers fail to set high standards and do not expect high quality student work, students do not achieve their academic excellence. Moreover, White explains, "Blaming parents or outside social factors for low student performance simply fosters laziness and mediocrity". He concludes that public schools must raise their educational standards if students are to excel. For that reason, students should be given more homework in order to be prepared and excel.

Maggie's Point of View

As a high school student myself, I have first-handedly experienced public high school and my personal nemesis- the homework that comes with it. I am in my junior year, and the homework piles up with great ease. On the typical night, my homework includes a science lab, a math worksheet, a history assignment, reading, working on a paper, and practicing violin. Often times I need to study for tests and quizzes the next day. Plus, I dance almost every night, unless I am forced to skip class due to homework. This happens almost once a week. I am currently taking two AP classes, along with mostly honors classes. This may sound like a challenging schedule, but many of my peers are taking up to five AP courses. Imagine what their homework loads look like! I think that while homework does have some importance, its levels should be drastically reduced.

Due to the time homework consumes, most of my school friends and I get less than seven to ten hours of sleep every night. The next day of school arrives briskly, full of assessments to complete, questions to answer, and ideas to ponder. Unfortunately, many of us feel tired and distracted, which causes performance level to decrease and learning to be inhibited. Many students, especially those in honors classes, feel stressed due to the amount of work they carry home. This state of stress is harmful to the body, and sometimes teens and even children become depressed, inflict harm on themselves, or obtain eating disorders as a result.

While homework does tend damage a student physically and emotionally, it has its values. It reinforces what students learned during class and allows students to practice skills. It also prepares students for college, where the workload will be heavy. Homework also forces students to master the skill of independent study, which will be vital in college. Therefore, I feel that since homework does help a student to an extent, homework should not be eradicated completely, but should be limited to lower levels than many students receive currently. That

way, students will receive the benefits of preparing for college and practicing the material, but homework won't take up too much time and worries.

Sakshie's Point of View

Parents who don't understand say, "Oh, I work, too. I work a nine-to-five business day every day. You have it easy."

I don't think we have it easy. I don't think that any high school student "has it easy". High school students in this age work harder than anybody else, in my opinion. Imagine the regular day of an average high school girl named Cara. Cara gets up at 6:30 every morning, and from the moment she wakes up, her mind is working. She is planning out her day, making lists of the quizzes and tests she has, and as she gets ready for school, she is mentally studying for those assessments, going over each term and event and theorem and equation and theme and everything. When she gets to school at about 7:45, she goes straight to the library to finish up any homework she was not able to do the night before. When school starts at 8:15, she works endlessly, going from class to class, switching her brain from one subject to another, taking tests, doing projects, learning at a speed that no one should, just to keep up with what the teacher is talking about. At the end of the school day, which is 3:30, Cara goes home, thanking her lucky stars that she did not have to stay after school for any of her extracurriculars. She arrives home at 4:00 on the slowest bus to ever be allowed to go on the road, and saying hello to her parents, she goes straight to her room and does her homework and studies for the next day, working until her bedtime at 10:30, assuming she doesn't have to stay up late studying.

Is that a life that any person should have? That is Cara's life, and that is the typical life of any high school student. If you calculate the time, Cara works for about fourteen hours every

day, which is much more than a “nine-to-five business day”. Approximately, that adds up to 70 hours a week, not counting the weekends.

Homework should not be a student’s life. In reality, homework does little to prepare a person for the future, because in the future that person needs to have social skills and the ability to handle what the real world is like after living the high school life described above. To live in the real world, one cannot venture into the world with nothing but a naive mind and an extreme work ethic. For a student to be as prepared as he/she should be, he/she should have only one to one and a half hours of homework from all his/her classes combined, not 2 hours of homework from every class. Homework should reinforce learning, and the way high school is, the teachers teach little in class and give mounds of homework so the students can learn everything they need to know at home by themselves, where they barely understand it and fail the assignment. That is normal today, and that needs to be rectified.

Negotiation

Though the con-homework side may disagree, students should not be given a choice to make homework optional. In the article, “Student Performance Suffers When Homework is Optional”, Susan Graham talks about a school district in Irving, Texas that stopped counting homework assignments as part of grades. Graham says that apparently, “after six weeks, over half of the high school students were failing a class—a much higher percentage than the previous year”. The students could not make precise judgments on how much homework they should complete to be fully prepared and to master the material. Parents and teachers were troubled that students appeared less prepared for tests because they weren't completing their work. They also were concerned that students who were poor test takers would fall behind. Graham’s arguments are that average teenagers cannot judge what work to do as to not fail, and no matter how good

one is at something, practice helps and that most could use some outside motivation to get that practice accomplished.

John Gatto represents a viewpoint that is quite the opposite. He describes in the article “Life Lessons Are More Important Than School Lessons” that if people truly want to learn, they must educate themselves and discover themselves in a way that formal schooling cannot teach. As the article states, “only you can educate you—and you can't do it by memorizing. You have to find out who you are by experience and by risk-taking, then pursue your own nature intensely. School routines are set up to discourage you from self-discovery. People who know who they are make trouble for schools”(Gatto). Gatto is claiming that school often acts as an obstacle to success since its routine schedule discourages self-discovery. Success does not depend on formal schooling, so students shouldn't have excessive amounts of worthless homework that keeps them from life.

The solution to these conflicting arguments is one that schools should embrace nationwide: schools need to have less homework, but the homework should have enough value to be assigned. The low amount of homework given should be used to reinforce what the students have already learned in the classroom. This homework should be mandatory so that students can gain the most practice out of it and can develop good work ethics which can be used in the future. Since there will be less homework assigned, students will have more free time, and the self-discovery through informal learning, the kind that Gatto discussed, will occur. Students will be in better health due to less stress over assignments, and they will be able to sleep more, therefore being more focused the following day. With this negotiation, students shall gain the benefits homework provides, and in addition more time to learn in more informal means and simply enjoy life.

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