

BREAK OUT OF THE RACE

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF COMMUNITY TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION AND OUR CULTURE

THE HEALTHY HOMEWORK TOOL KIT

Use the Healthy Homework Tool Kit to take action in your community today!

Inside, you'll find concrete action ideas, sample letters to superintendents, teachers, and principals, and additional resources to help you transform your school – today!

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LETTER FROM VICKI ABELES DIRECTOR, "RACE TO NOWHERE"

Dear Friends,

Having toured the country and spoken to thousands of teachers, parents, and students on the "front lines" of education for the last year, I've seen people expend tremendous energy on the Goldilocks question of homework (too much, too little, or just right?). I propose that the real question about homework is: To what end? And at what cost?

The research on homework is clear. Experts who have conducted such research or synthesized it, including Sara Bennett, Alfie Kohn, Dr. Etta Kralovec and Harris Cooper, concur with what Professor Gerald LeTendre at Pennsylvania State University so bluntly stated: "People [ask], 'Doesn't doing more homework mean getting better scores?' LeTendre recounted. "The answer quite simply is no."

Nor will it adequately prepare our kids for the future.

Here's what most of today's typical homework does: It encourages conformity. It diminishes a child's intrinsic motivation to learn. It invites cheating. It turns kids off to learning. It emphasizes getting through the material at the cost of sleep, friendship, family time, play, physical activity and health. It stresses that rote repetition is somehow superior to passion, curiosity, creativity and invention.

How is this possible? Most homework robs our children and our families of our most precious resource: time. Time to think, time to play, time to connect, time to be bored. Time to read, rest, discover, run, fall, fail and learn from it all. Time to fight with their friends and make up; time to fall in love; time to test their parents. Time to be human.

It's time to change! What happens when we reduce homework and implement practices aligned with education research and the developmental needs of children? We encourage engagement with learning. We prioritize physical and mental health. We discourage cheating. And we stop relying on parents to put in a second shift as "homework wardens."

Revolutionizing homework for the better is not an outlandish proposition. Across the country, tens of thousands of administrators, parents, students and PTA leaders have supported the Healthy Homework Guidelines: a set of simple, common-sense homework guidelines that encourage schools nationwide to reexamine and reimagine homework practices to better support student engagement, health and learning. This new framework for homework provides a model for every school to support the development of well-rounded children who are prepared for the 21st century; to promote greater social equity among children and families of varying economic and educational backgrounds; to enhance family engagement with schools and teachers; and to provide more time for quality in-class instruction and quality out-of-school activities like athletics, arts and community service.

Thank you for supporting Healthy Homework Guidelines in your homes, classrooms and schools. Together, we can make time for change.

Sincerely,

Vicki Abeles

HEALTHY HOMEWORK: A NEW VISION

SPARK CHANGE NATIONALLY AND IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

Join us in reexamining and reimagining homework practices to better support student engagement, health and learning. Use the guidelines and this Tool Kit to create change in your school community today.

Created by Vicki Abeles, Founder, *BreakOutoftheRace*; Dr. Etta Kralovec, Associate Professor, Teacher Education, University of Arizona and co-author, *The End of Homework*; Alfie Kohn, author, *Homework Myth*; and Sara Bennett, author, *The Case Against Homework*

BACKGROUND

There is a growing national discussion about homework among education stakeholders, which questions the ability of take-home schoolwork to measurably support, reinforce or augment classroom learning.

Many schools use the **10-minute rule** for homework, originally developed by Duke University's Dr. Harris Cooper.

As Dr. Cooper has openly stated, this **guideline is not grounded in research**, but rather in the **questionable (but often unquestioned) premise that homework must be assigned each day**, and therefore must be limited.

BENEFITS OF A NEW FRAMEWORK

- ▶ Improves health, learning, engagement and character
- ▶ Supports the development of well-rounded children prepared for the 21st century
- ▶ Promotes greater social equity
- ▶ Enhances family engagement with schools
- ▶ Provides more in-class time for instruction and engagement

RECOMMENDED HOMEWORK GUIDELINES

1. Homework should advance a spirit of learning
2. Homework should be student-directed
3. Homework should promote a balanced schedule

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOMEWORK

- Many students spend **2 to 5 hours per night** completing homework.
- Excessive homework causes **stress, sleep deprivation, academic disengagement and family conflict**.
- Homework **exacerbates social inequalities**.
- Homework **limits the amount of time** students can spend on extra-curricular and community activities that can impart important lessons as well.
- It also limits time for family, physical activity and reading for pleasure.
- Homework is **limited in its utility** as a tool for increasing a student's subject-matter retention or enhancing his or her test scores.
- Data indicates an **inverse relationship** between the time spent on homework and scores on a standardized test called the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

HEALTHY HOMEWORK GUIDELINES

1. HOMEWORK SHOULD ADVANCE A SPIRIT OF LEARNING

Educators at all grade levels should assign homework only when:

- ▶ Such assignments demonstrably advance a spirit of learning, curiosity and inquiry among students.
- ▶ Such assignments demonstrably provide a unique learning opportunity or experience that cannot be had within the confines of the school setting or school day.
- ▶ Such assignments are not intended to enhance rote skill rehearsal or mastery. Rehearsal and repetition assignments should be completed within the confines of the school day, if they are required at all.
- ▶ Such assignments are not intended as a disciplinary or punitive measure, nor as a means of fostering competition among or assessment of students.

2. HOMEWORK SHOULD BE STUDENT-DIRECTED

Educators at all grade levels, but particularly in elementary and middle grades, should limit take-home assignments to:

- ▶ At-home reading chosen by the student.
- ▶ Project-based work chosen by the student.
- ▶ Experiential learning that integrates the student's existing interests and family commitments.
- ▶ Work that can be completed without the assistance of a sibling, caregiver or parent.

3. HOMEWORK SHOULD PROMOTE A BALANCED SCHEDULE

Educators at all grade levels should avoid assigning or requiring homework:

- ▶ On non-school nights, including weekends, school holidays, or winter or summer breaks.
- ▶ On the nights of major or all-school events, concerts, or sports activities.
- ▶ When a child is sick or absent from school.
- ▶ When it conflicts with a child's parental, family, religious or community obligations.
- ▶ When a parent opts a child out of homework.

The above commitments will ask of school leaders that they provide teachers with professional development support and time to restructure their classroom practices to eliminate an over-reliance on homework. This will help us to ensure that homework can:

- Better support learning and engagement among students, regardless of family background, income level, or caregivers' educational status.
- Enhance family engagement with schools and students by providing parents and caregivers more opportunities to influence and collaborate on homework policy and practice.
- Narrow the achievement gap by ensuring that instruction, rehearsal, mastery and remediation happens primarily at school and in the classroom, rather than at home, where resources and instructional support are less equitably distributed.
- Provide time for students to develop a rich array of extra-curricular personal interests and to engage in meaningful family, religious, community, creative or athletic activities outside of school.

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ACTION IDEAS

Whether you're a student, teacher, administrator, or parent, you can take immediate action to revolutionize your school by supporting the Healthy Homework Guidelines.

If you're a student:

- Form a coalition of students in your school to work with school administrators and classroom teachers to urge a schoolwide adoption of the Healthy Homework Guidelines.
- Communicate with your teacher or principal about homework assignments: how long they take to complete, how much parental or adult help they require, how much they affect your interest in learning, and whether they conflict with other obligations. Make sure your teacher knows whether homework assignments are helping or hurting. Communicate with school counselors and your parents when there are concerns.
- Ask your teacher to design homework assignments with you – not for you. Contribute your ideas about deadlines, project parameters, and grading standards.
- Using the samples included here, write a letter to your school board, district superintendent or principal showcasing your support of a district-wide policy that supports the Healthy Homework Guidelines. Ask to be among a coalition of students who make a statement about supporting the Healthy Homework Guidelines at the next school board meeting.
- Circulate a petition for the adoption of Healthy Homework Guidelines among your fellow students, and aim to attract signatures from a minimum of 75% of your student body. When you've reached your goal, present your petition and list of signatures to your principal to illustrate broad support for the Healthy Homework Guidelines among students.

If you're a teacher:

- Don't assign homework on weekends, holiday breaks or nights of major all-school events.
- Schedule deadlines for papers, exams and large projects before holiday breaks for high school and middle school students.
- Solicit student opinion when assigning projects and setting deadlines.
- Don't assign homework in elementary school. Communicate with your colleagues about scheduling homework and exams in middle and high school.
- Stop grading homework, and eliminate punitive consequences for incomplete or late assignments.
- Work with students to craft homework assignments that don't require parental or adult help.
- Make weeknight homework the exception rather than the rule. Consider project-based learning that allows for choice, develops students' interests, and is relevant to students' daily lives.
- Arrange a meeting with your principal or write a letter to your school board or district superintendent showcasing your support of a district-wide policy that supports the Healthy Homework Guidelines.

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ACTION IDEAS, CONTINUED

If you're a principal:

- Adopt the Healthy Homework Guidelines and work with teachers and students in your school to implement the guidelines.
- Check in regularly with classroom teachers, both one-on-one and in small groups, to be sure that they have the support they need to shift the focus away from take-home assignments and toward in-class instruction. Consider devoting professional development days to discussing how the administration can support teachers who implement the Guidelines.
- Experiment with your school schedule to create in-school time for extra help and practice. For example, build in time for study halls, free block periods, and reading periods, in which students can work on assignments and get hands-on help from teachers.
- Survey parents, teachers and students for their perspectives on the impact and efficacy of homework and appoint a homework committee or task force to encourage ongoing collaboration and communication on schoolwide homework policies.
- Offer weekly community nights during which no homework is assigned.

If you're a parent:

- Form a coalition of parents in your school community that will work with school administrators and classroom teachers to urge the adoption of the Healthy Homework Guidelines.
- Using the samples included here, write a letter to your school board, district superintendent, or child's principal showcasing your support of a district-wide policy that supports the Healthy Homework Guidelines.
- Arrange a meeting with your child and his or her teachers to talk about the importance of balancing time spent on homework with free time, family time and time for physical and mental health.
- Encourage your child to reflect on his or her homework assignments and take-home projects and to share his or her experiences with the classroom teacher.
- Support your child in opting out of homework that interrupts his or her sleep, extracurricular interests, or family responsibilities, encourages the consumption of caffeine and other stimulants, or requires parental or adult involvement.

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SAMPLE LETTERS

Use the sample letters below to draft a letter supporting the adoption of the Healthy Homework Guidelines in your school community. If you can, include a personal example or two to lend context to your letter!

If your school has not yet hosted a community screening of “Race to Nowhere,” you may also wish to include your interest in hosting a screening as a way to spark discussion about homework policies.

FOR PARENTS: LETTER TO YOUR CHILD’S PRINCIPAL, SUPERINTENDENT, CLASSROOM TEACHER, or THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Dear _____,

As a parent of a student at [your school], I am in support of the Healthy Homework Guidelines. I hope you will support me and my fellow parents in working toward the adoption of Healthy Homework Guidelines at [your school].

The Healthy Homework Guidelines encourage schools and teachers to assign homework only when it:

- 1) demonstrably encourages true learning and engagement among students;
- 2) is centered around student interests and academic development; and
- 3) promotes a student’s balanced schedule, which must include time for sleep, family meals and valuable extracurricular pursuits like athletics, arts and community service.

Many schools have already adopted new homework policies in the wake of their screenings of the documentary film “Race to Nowhere,” which [your school] also hosted on [date of screening].

Adopting the Healthy Homework Guidelines as a policy at [your school] could be transformative for our students. It would encourage student engagement with learning. It would prioritize physical and mental health. It would discourage cheating. And it would allow us to stop relying on parents to put in a second shift as “homework wardens.”

Most of all, restructuring homework policies to better support student health, learning and engagement would send a powerful message to our children: that we value their health, interests and passions, and that we aren’t afraid to preserve time in their day for unstructured learning, sleep, play, family, friendships and creative pursuits in the hours outside the seven-hour school day.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the possibility of our school formally endorsing and implementing the Healthy Homework Guidelines, and I look forward to following up to arrange a time to meet with me and other concerned parents. In the meantime, please take a moment to peruse the Healthy Homework Guidelines in the attached flyer. Please don’t hesitate to be in touch at [(xxx) xxx-xxxx] or [xxx@xxx.com].

Sincerely,

[Name]

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SAMPLE LETTERS, CONTINUED

FOR STUDENTS: LETTER TO YOUR PRINCIPAL, SUPERINTENDENT, CLASSROOM TEACHER, or THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Dear _____,

I am a student at [your school] and I am in support of the Healthy Homework Guidelines.

I hope you will support me and my fellow students in working toward the adoption of Healthy Homework Guidelines at [your school].

The Healthy Homework Guidelines encourage schools and teachers to assign homework only when it:

- 1) demonstrably encourages true learning and engagement among students;
- 2) is centered around student interests and academic development; and
- 3) promotes a student's balanced schedule, which must include time for sleep, family meals and valuable extracurricular pursuits like athletics, arts and community service.

My fellow students and I believe that bringing such guidelines to bear on the homework policies at [your school] will encourage students to learn more effectively and with more enthusiasm for and engagement with our schoolwork. Such guidelines will also remind students and teachers alike to make time for a healthy balance among school, family, friends, creative and extracurricular pursuits and community involvement.

I believe that the benefits of adopting the Healthy Homework Guidelines at [your school] could be transformative for students. With balanced homework policies, we'd gain time to pursue passions and learning for its own sake. We'd gain time for physical and mental health, including adequate sleep. We'd gain time for family and friends. And we'd gain the kind of rest and downtime that encourages refreshed, engaged learning when we return to school. Engagement with learning would go up. Cheating would go down. And best of all, we'd all be more healthy, engaged and ready to learn!

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the possibility of a schoolwide policy supporting the Healthy Homework Guidelines at [school].

I hope you will consider meeting with me and a coalition of my fellow students to discuss this important issue. In the meantime, please take a moment to peruse the Healthy Homework Guidelines in the attached flyer. Please don't hesitate to be in touch at [(xxx) xxx-xxxx] or [xxx@xxx.com].

Sincerely,

[Name]

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SAMPLE LETTERS, CONTINUED

FOR TEACHERS: LETTER TO YOUR PRINCIPAL, SUPERINTENDENT, or THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Dear _____,

I am a teacher at your school and I am in support of the Healthy Homework Guidelines.

I hope you will support me and my fellow teachers in working toward the adoption of Healthy Homework Guidelines at [your school].

The Healthy Homework Guidelines encourage schools and teachers to assign homework only when it:

- 1) demonstrably encourages true learning and engagement among students;
- 2) is centered around student interests and academic development; and
- 3) promotes a student's balanced schedule, which must include time for sleep, family meals and valuable extracurricular pursuits like athletics, arts and community service.

My fellow educators and I believe that bringing such guidelines to bear on the homework policies at [your school] will encourage students to learn more effectively and to develop more enthusiasm for and engagement with their schoolwork. Moreover, adopting the Healthy Homework Guidelines at [your school] would be transformative for teachers.

With balanced homework policies, we'd gain time to encourage student passions and learning for its own sake. We'd gain more time for in-class instruction and student-directed projects, and eliminate the need to spend valuable instructional periods collecting, correcting and assigning homework that does not improve student engagement. We'd also gain an opportunity to teach students who would have the essential tools for learning: adequate rest and down-time, a balanced schedule, and a sense of ownership over assignments and projects.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the possibility of a schoolwide policy supporting the Healthy Homework Guidelines at [school].

I hope you will consider meeting with me and a coalition of my fellow teachers to discuss this important issue. In the meantime, please take a moment to peruse the Healthy Homework Guidelines in the attached flyer. Please don't hesitate to be in touch at [(xxx) xxx-xxxx] or [xxx@xxx.com].

Sincerely,

[Name]

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POSTCARD TEXT

If your school hosts a screening of “Race to Nowhere,” convene a post-film postcard-writing campaign to communicate your support of the Healthy Homework Guidelines to your administrators and/or district superintendent. Strength lies in numbers, so aim to write as many postcards – from as many stakeholders – as you can. Send them on the same day for maximum impact!

Dear Superintendent,

I recently attended a screening of the documentary film “Race to Nowhere” and am writing to encourage you to support positive change in our school community by supporting the Healthy Homework Guidelines and by adopting and implementing the guidelines for all students at [your school].

Since you are an education leader in our community, I hope you will join a growing chorus of stakeholders in our community who believe that homework should be assigned only when it:

- 1) demonstrably encourages true learning and engagement among students;
- 2) is centered around student interests and academic development; and
- 3) promotes a student’s balanced schedule, which must include time for sleep, family meals and valuable extracurricular pursuits like athletics, arts and community service.

I encourage you to involve teachers, parents and students in your decision-making process, and to see “Race to Nowhere” for further evidence of how shifting homework policies can enhance learning and prioritize health for our students.

Sincerely,

[Name]

“Race to Nowhere” is a documentary film that seeks to mobilize families, educators, and policy makers to challenge current assumptions on how to best prepare the youth of America to become healthy, bright, contributing and leading citizens. www.RaceToNowhere.com