

***BREAK OUT* OF THE RACE**

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF COMMUNITY TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION AND OUR CULTURE

HOMework: YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE*

* Excerpt from the *End the Race Companion Book*

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“People [ask], ‘Doesn’t doing more homework mean getting better scores?’ The answer quite simply is no.”

–Professor Gerald LeTendre at Pennsylvania State University and co-author of *National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling*

Increases in Amount of Homework

A study that looked at the amount of homework assigned between 1981 to 1997 found that:

- the amount of homework assigned to children aged 6 to 9 almost tripled during that time;
- assigned homework increased from about 44 minutes a week to more than 2 hours a week; and
- homework for kids ages 9 to 11 increased from about 2 hours and 50 minutes to more than 3 and a half hours per week.¹

More Homework Does Not Equal Increased Learning

A 2006 synthesis of research on the effects of homework found no correlation between amount of time spent on homework and academic achievement for elementary school students and only a moderate correlation in middle school. In middle school, this moderate correlation was shown to decrease once the homework time exceeded one hour. Even in high school, too much homework was found to be counterproductive.²

A cross-cultural analysis of education practices found that American middle-school students do more homework than their peers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The study found that more homework does not correlate with higher test scores.³ For example, middle school students who scored highest in math tests tended to come from countries where teachers assign relatively little homework – including Denmark, the Czech Republic and Japan. The lowest-scoring students came from countries where teachers assign large amounts of homework, such as Iran, Thailand and Greece.⁴

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Quality versus Quantity

Some educators suggest that students should be assigned ten minutes per grade level per school night (Monday through Thursday only) up to a maximum of two hours per night in high school. Others have rejected this guideline because it has not been shown to improve measures of higher thinking skills.

Negative Effects of Too Much Homework

- **Boredom.** Any activity can remain rewarding only for a limited time. It follows that if students are required to spend too much time on academic material, they eventually will become bored with it.
- **Loss of Downtime.** Homework limits the time students can spend on leisure-time and community activities that can impart important lessons, both academic and non-academic.
- **Homework Done by Parents.** Parental involvement, however well meant, often becomes parental interference. Parents can confuse children if the teaching methods they employ differ from those of teachers.
- **Cheating.** Homework can lead to undesirable behaviors such as cheating, either through copying of assignments or receiving assistance with homework that involves more than tutoring.
- **Exacerbation of Social Inequalities.** Students from lower-socioeconomic homes are likely to have more difficulty completing homework than their more affluent peers. Poorer students are also more apt to work after school or may not have a quiet place to do assignments.⁵

Other consequences of excessive homework include:

Sleep Deprivation. Excessive homework forces students to choose between completing assignments and sleep. 80% of teens don't get the recommended 9.25 hours of sleep each night. 70% of children ages 5-12 don't get the recommended 10-11 hours of sleep.⁶

Stress. 9-13-year-olds said they were more stressed by academics than any other stressor – even bullying or family problems.⁷

Sedentary Lifestyle. When children spend 2-5 hours per night completing homework assignments, they have little time left for physical activities. This can have a negative impact on physical and mental health.

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If Homework Isn't Helpful, What Is?

Family meals. According to a study conducted by Columbia University, when compared to teens who have five to seven family dinners per week, those who have fewer than three meals per week are one and a half times more likely to report getting mostly C's or lower grades in school.⁸

Reading. Several studies suggest reading for pleasure is a better predictor of test scores than quantity of homework, yet a 2006 Scholastic/Yankelovich study found that reading for pleasure declines sharply after age eight. The number one reason: too much homework.⁹

Schools can eliminate or reduce homework. The following schools are among those that have eliminated homework or limited homework to after-school reading:

- Bloomfield Middle School, Bloomfield, MO
- Grant Elementary School, Glenrock, WY
- Helendale Elementary and Middle Schools, Helendale, CA
- VanDamme Academy K-8, Aliso Viejo, CA
- Nottingham East Academy, Nottingham, UK
- Oak Knoll Elementary School, Menlo Park, CA
- Tiffin Boys' School in Kingston, London, UK
- Gaithersburg Elementary School, Gaithersburg, MD
- Cardiff Elementary School, Cardiff, CA

ACTION STEPS FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS AND STUDENTS

Create a committee of parents, educators, administrators and students to review and modify your school or district's homework practices and policies. Ask the committee to consider adopting the "Race to Nowhere" Healthy Homework Guidelines. See www.RacetoNowhere.com/take-action for more information.

The committee may also want to consider the following steps:

- Assign no homework in elementary school.
- Limit homework to two hours per night in high school and one hour per night in middle school.
- End homework assignments on weekends, vacations and over the summer. Schedule exams before holiday breaks.
- Build in study hall periods for students to work on academic assignments.

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- Survey parents, educators, administrators and students for their perspectives on the impact and efficacy of homework.
- Stop grading homework.
- Create homework assignments specific to individual needs.
- Eliminate punitive consequences for incomplete homework across grade levels.
- Assign homework that doesn't require parental or adult help.
- Allow families to opt out of homework.
- Have occasional community nights during the week where no homework is assigned.
- Assign specific weeknights for specific subjects.
- Have a designated person in the school who monitors whether homework policies are being followed.
- Make homework the exception rather than the rule. Consider longer term projects that allow for choice, develop a student's interests, are relevant to a student's life and lead to a longer lasting sense of understanding.
- Allow students to self-assign homework. When they are excited by what they are learning, they will be self-motivated to learn more outside of the classroom.
- Before leaving a screening, agree to create a committee of parents, teachers, administrators and students to form a homework task force.
- Consider how much class time is spent assigning and checking homework and whether that time might be more effectively used.

Other Action Items for Parents:

If you are unhappy with the quality and quantity of homework your child is being assigned, set up a meeting with your child's teacher or express your concerns in a letter to the teacher.

Don't let homework interfere with sleep, dinner, reading and physical activities.

Don't make grades, homework and test scores a singular focus in discussions about school with your children.

Form alliances with other parents who share your concerns and meet with teachers and administrators to collaborate.

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For more ideas and information:

<http://www.stophomework.com>

Stop Homework is a resource created by Sara Bennett, co-author of *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting our Children and What We Can Do About It*. Stop Homework provides homework news, opinion articles and guest editorials.

<http://eastbayhomework.blogspot.com/>

East Bay Homework is a blog started by Kerry Dickinson, a parent who sees homework as a good launching point for thoughtful discussions about issues like: parenting, ADHD, standardized testing, teacher training, preserving childhood, curriculum, colleges and student stress.

<http://www.alfiekohn.org>

AlfieKohn.org is the website for Alfie Kohn who writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education and parenting. His latest book is *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (2006).

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END NOTES

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- ⁶ National Sleep Foundation. (2006). 2006 Teens and sleep. *Sleep In America Poll*. Retrieved October 19, 2006, from <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/article/sleep-america-polls/2006-teens-and-sleep>
- ⁷ KidsHealth KidsPoll. (2005). *Kids and stress – how do they handle it?* National Association of Health Education Centers (NAHEC).
- ⁸ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2009, September). *The importance of family dinners*, V. Columbia University, NY.
- ⁹ Bennett, S., & Kalish, N. (2006). *The Case Against Homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.