

Why we're getting the homework question wrong

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

This was written by [Vicki Abeles](#), a mother, activist, and filmmaker. She directed the documentary "[Race to Nowhere](#)."

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Hayley Eaton was always an academic achiever. Like many American teens, college was uppermost in her mind, as well as that of her parents and guidance counselors. She signed up for all the available AP and honors courses at her high school and performed well. She didn't flinch when [homework](#) meant getting five or six hours of sleep a night before "waking up and repeating the cycle all over again." Haley used to joke, "I'll sleep when I'm dead." One afternoon while driving home from high school, Haley nodded asleep and crashed into a tree, totaling her car. She escaped with minor cuts and bruises but the experience caused her to rethink her concept of success. "I'm grateful," she says. In reprioritizing she found her life goal. Today she's pursuing a master's in education so she can help create school reform — away from "endless homework and inadequate [high stakes testing](#)" and toward "healthy priorities for young people's physical and mental health."

Are American students like Haley spending too much of their lives at their desks? And is putting in that grueling second shift of homework paying off in the long-term?

Two recent studies have fueled a growing debate over how much homework is too much, and whether it has any benefit at all. They reached different conclusions. One study, published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, presented [findings](#) that are consistent with about a century of scientific analysis on homework; that is, it concluded that homework offers no benefits for elementary and middle school children. In contrast, the second study found the opposite to be true. In that investigation, spending more than two hours a night doing homework led British students to achieve better results in English, math and science.

Faced with a decade's worth of contradicting academic studies — not to mention countless stories like Hayley's — what is a parent to conclude about the role of homework in her children's lives? This parent, for one, has concluded that "[the homework question](#)" itself is flawed.

Further, our preoccupation with it has led us to overlook a far more important inquiry. Forget homework's impact on our children's test scores, report cards, and international aptitude exams — good or bad. The salient question, instead, is this: *What does all this desk and test time mean for the quality of our kids' lives, now and for their future?*

Let's turn instead to the evidence that is mounting in our homes, our classrooms and our ball fields. At my kitchen table, putting in a second shift of homework after seven hours in school does not help my son become a more inquisitive, confident, life-long learner with an intrinsic sense of curiosity and joy in discovery. It does not allow my family to strike a graceful balance between school and home life. It does not leave time for those non-academic pursuits — lying on a blanket under the sky and puzzling out the constellations, peering under rocks, putting a nose in a book for long, lost hours — that can shape a child's personality, aspirations and dreams.

Of course, rigorous research backs up these observations, too. The [Lucille Packard Foundation](#) recently reported that homework is now the greatest contributor to stress among our high-schoolers. And a growing body of scientific data tells us that a brain under chronic stress is a brain that performs less well. We have only to look at the harried adult world to see that less is often more: recent studies show a strong correlation between adult workaholism and diminishing returns on workers' ideas and productivity.

Chronic school stress is also taking a profound physical toll on our kids. More children than ever before are reporting chronic health conditions, including headaches, back pain, abdominal pain, and general malaise.[i] Studies show that rates of depression among high schoolers in America have been increasing steadily for decades.[ii] And the more academically competitive the school, the greater the link to student depression.[iii]

Meanwhile, rates of happiness are declining among children between 6th and 12th grade. Researchers recently equipped more than 800 students from 33 different schools across the country with a special wrist watch, then prompted them at random moments to signal where they were, what they were doing, and how happy or unhappy they were at the time. Kids were least happy at school. Their happiness levels went up over weekends, then fell again just before the school week began again.[iv]

[Homework](#) may indeed have a role in shaping my children's academic and intellectual lives. But as a parent, I'd like to be sure that role is kept in balance. Why not ask our schools to assign homework only when assignments advance a spirit of learning, curiosity and inquiry, and offer a learning opportunity students can't have during the school day? Why not advocate for policies that make homework the exception — not the rule — in elementary and middle school, and that limit it to at-home reading or occasional project-based work, not busywork and drills? Why not give parents — who should have at least some control over the arc of their children's lives — the power to opt out of homework on behalf of their children, for any reason, without fear that doing so will result in negative consequences for the child? Why not simply eliminate all homework on non-school nights, including weekends, holidays and school breaks, so that these hours can be filled, instead, with the passions and pursuits of our children's and families' choosing?

Implementing policies like these may seem daunting. But a number of schools are already leading the way. Ridgewood High School in Ridgewood, New Jersey, banned homework during the winter and February breaks this year, and when area schools learned of the change they followed Ridgewood's lead. Walter Payton College Prep in Chicago has eliminated homework for all breaks and is experimenting with the "upside down" classroom. Grant Elementary in Wyoming has a no-homework policy for grades K-5. The Van Damme Academy in Mission Viejo, California is pursuing a little to no-homework policy all the way through grade eight.

We recently interviewed David Ackerman, a courageous principal at Oak Knoll Elementary in Menlo Park, California who established a homework policy that discourages assigning homework for homework's sake and maintains a focus on reading (preferably of the student's choice). Last October, he instituted a no-homework month to collect data on the impact of homework on family life and on students' attitudes towards learning. [Ackerman's philosophy on homework](#) was covered by local press several years ago, and district officials discouraged him from responding to inquiries from national press around his bold step. Inspired by these local changes, we launched a new petition on [Change.org](#), which asks the National PTA to stand behind a set of national homework recommendations that would encourage schools to assign homework only when it advances true learning, encourages a child's self-direction and curiosity, and promotes a healthy, balanced schedule.

The adoption of such recommendations by the National PTA — and their embrace by a broad coalition of schools and parents — would signal that we've finally begun to ask the right set of questions about homework. Do we want our children to grow up to be whole, thriving adults who have held onto their innate joy of learning and discovery? Or do we want to teach them it's only work we value—and not health, family, balance, creativity and fun? We don't need an academic study to reach the right conclusion on that.

Sources:

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