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Assigning Homework with One Voice: Why the National PTA Should Adopt National Homework Guidelines

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Homework -- how much, for whom, and to what end -- has long been a focus of discussion and concern among parents, teachers and PTA associations across the country. But particularly since the passage of No Child Left Behind and Obama's more recent Race to the Top incentive program, the homework debate has intensified. School administrators and classroom teachers are under increasing economic pressure to meet state standards and churn out high test scores in exchange for federal support. Inundating students with homework in this fraught and numbers-focused climate is seen by many as a logical response to anxieties about funding, international competitiveness and performance.

Unfortunately, unexamined homework practices are also taking a toll on our students, teachers and families. Far from enhancing student engagement, learning or development, homework is too often diminishing their academic performance and contributing to an epidemic of academic stress, burnout and unpreparedness in American schools.

It's time for the National PTA to adopt homework guidelines that state and local districts can embrace in an effort to curb the negative impact of unscientific and unhealthy homework policies and practices. With the support of the National PTA, we can embrace -- nationally, and with one voice -- a set of homework guidelines that re-prioritize student learning, health and engagement.

In order to shape such national guidelines, it's important we look at the scientific research on homework. This consistently reveals that the relationship between homework and school achievement is limited at best -- and inconclusive in many cases. In 2006, for example, education

researcher Harris Cooper at Duke University surveyed 15 years' worth of homework studies conducted across the country. He found no academic benefit of homework in elementary school. Moreover, he found [diminishing returns for middle and high school students](#) as the hours spent doing homework increased. More recently, a study released last fall by the *Economics of Education Review* found that homework in science, English and history was shown to have "[little to no impact](#)" on eighth graders' test scores in those subjects. And studies show that countries that outperform the United States on the international TIMSS exam, which assesses student performance in math and science, typically assign their students [far less homework](#) than we do here.

Beyond studies of academic performance, research also links homework to student stress and academic disengagement. According to a study in 2005 by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 70% of Bay Area parents reported that their 9- to 13-year-olds suffered "moderate to high levels of stress," and that schoolwork or homework was the [most significant contributor](#). And a growing body of scientific data tells us that a brain under chronic stress is a brain that performs less well. According to research published this year by the American Psychological Association, reducing academic pressure [increases cognitive ability](#) and academic success in students. Similarly, a 2006 Scholastic study of 500 children and their parents found that reading for pleasure decreased dramatically after age 8 (the age after which only 29% of students read every day). Parents identified [homework as the number one reason](#) their children didn't read more.

But scientific study and sociological surveys don't tell the whole story. A national set of homework guidelines should also take into account the holistic cultural, economic and societal impact of homework on the student, her family and her community. To this inquiry, I offer my own experiences as the director of the documentary film *Race to Nowhere*. The film identifies the epidemic of academic anxiety and emotional and scholastic burnout among American students. *Race to Nowhere* has been screened more than 5,000 times, reaching an audience of over one million people across the country. Often these screenings are community-wide events hosted by local PTAs where the film is followed by a community dialogue providing a forum for students, parents and teachers whose stories and experiences reinforce the scientific research about homework.

In stark contrast to the two-hours-per-night guideline recommended by the National Education Association and currently supported by the National PTA, for instance, many high school students report spending upwards of 4 or 5 hours studying each night, often long after their parents have gone to bed. 16-year-olds report they're afraid to lose their spot in class rankings, so they pull Red Bull-fueled all-nighters to make it through hours of assigned papers and studying. Teenage girls confess they're afraid to perform poorly on their third (or fourth, or fifth) go at the SAT, so they routinely skip dinner to "get more energy" for at-home test prep. They tell me cheating -- as the recent arrests in Long Island have made painfully clear -- is "normal." And they report that, far

from offering time for mastery and self-direction, the hours spent on homework don't generally inspire deep engagement with a problem or an idea. They don't inspire, period.

For younger students, homework often also reduces the child's opportunity to spend after-school hours pursuing crucial developmental tasks of non-academic life: sleep, friendship, family time, play, exercise and downtime. And it too often precludes the kind of social connection and community involvement that prepares students for a more balanced, fulfilling adult life -- activities like playing with siblings, contributing to family chores or volunteering in the neighborhood.

What's more, lower-income students or the children of single-parent or two-working-parent families report that homework practices don't often account for the diversity of students' economic circumstances, like the need for many students to hold an after-school and/or weekend job. For struggling students in need of remediation, teachers and parents alike indicate a need for schools to bring students up to speed during school hours, when extra help and tutoring can be offered by trained faculty, not after school, when academic support is less equitable and consistent. And while some parents and educators fear that decreased homework loads will only serve to boost the time that children spend in front of TV and computer screens, I also hear a chorus of parents and educators who say lighter homework loads would do the opposite: empowering students and parents alike to exercise more creativity and control over students' after-school activities.

In consideration of these realities -- reported not only in the scientific literature but also in school auditoria across the nation -- I believe it's crucial that the National PTA provide a policy framework on homework, for use and adoption at the state and district level. The homework guidelines, developed in collaboration with education and homework experts Alfie Kohn, Etta Kralovec and Sara Bennett, and forwarded by the Change.org petition, "[Urge the National PTA: Support Healthy Homework Guidelines](#)", now signed by nearly 14,000 educators, parents, students and policymakers across the country, are a first step in this effort.

In addition to recommending specific policies that schools can embrace in order to ensure that all homework advances a spirit of learning, is student directed and promotes a balanced schedule, these guidelines also support the belief that homework policies should:

- Be equitable by supporting learning and engagement among students regardless of family background, income level or caregivers' educational status.
- Narrow the achievement gap by ensuring that instruction, rehearsal, mastery and remediation happen primarily at school and in the classroom, rather than at home, where resources and instructional support are less equitably distributed.
- Enhance family engagement with schools and students by providing parents and caregivers more opportunities to influence and collaborate on homework policies and practices.

- 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.

As we witness an epidemic of student anxiety and disengagement across the country, we need a trusted, national policymaking body to take the burden of reimagining and re-prioritizing healthy and effective homework policies away from local schools, most of which have neither the resources nor the access needed to devise their own unified guidelines. With a national policy framework to look to, local districts nationwide can more consistently and effectively deliver America's students what they deserve: homework practices that keep student health, learning and engagement at the center of the conversation.