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By Glori Chaika



Help! Homework Is Wrecking My Home Life!

As many (all?) students will tell you, the amount of homework assigned has reached an all-time high. Never before have students had as much homework as they do now. Students have long railed against homework; are they right this time? Just how much homework is too much? Education World writer Glori Chaika interviews teachers and the top experts -- including Howard Gardner, Carol Huntsinger, and Harris Cooper -- to find out.

American teachers have followed a trend of increased homework, hoping to prepare students to compete in the global marketplace. For example, after the Soviets launched Sputnik, *A Nation At Risk* warned of our insidious educational mediocrity. And when Asia began its ascent to power in the global economy, the amount of homework assigned in American schools increased.

When researchers from the University of Michigan compared the amount of homework assigned in 1981 to the amount assigned in 1997, they were astonished. Although minimal changes occurred on the high school level, the amount of homework assigned to kids from ages 6 to 9 almost tripled during that time! Assigned homework increased from about 44 minutes a week to more than two hours a week. Homework for kids ages 9 to 11 increased from about two hours and 50 minutes to more than three-and-a-half hours per week. Many students complain that teachers give too much homework. They may have a point. Busy families with demanding schedules may find fitting lots of homework into an average day difficult. Could the stress of trying to keep up do some students and families more harm than good?

"Teachers should devote energy to creating homework that is stimulating and provocative rather than banal," Howard Gardner, the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor in Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the creator of the theory of multiple intelligences, told Education World. "And parents or mentors should go shoulder-to-shoulder with youngsters, helping to motivate them, thinking of ways in which to help them without giving the answer, and being aware of the child's special gifts and weaknesses."

It sounds great, "but you need parent input for kids to perform, and with the increase in single-parent families, there's no one at home to help," veteran fifth-grade teacher Loretta Highfield told Education World.

"It isn't that the kids don't want to do homework; the majority of my students don't have the skills to go home and do it independently," added Highfield, a teacher at Florida Avenue Elementary in Slidell, Louisiana. "Even young students are not getting the help at home that they used to."

The same seems to hold true for older children. "I have students who have been thrown out of the house or have a financial situation brought on by an ill parent," Northshore High School (Slidell, Louisiana) teacher Kathleen Modenbach told Education World. "There are others whose after-school jobs pay for car insurance and clothes or whose involvement in extra-curricular activities, private lessons, or sports leaves little time for homework."

"For some students, a lot of homework can seem irrelevant," Modenbach added. "High school students become expert at evaluating the validity of assignments and assigning priorities to them. Kids who wouldn't dream of cheating on a test or copying a research paper think nothing of copying homework. I find students will do homework when it must be done to pass the class. Anything else is a waste of time and feeds into the vicious circle of beating the homework system."

Therefore, as kids deal with assigned homework in their own ways -- or grow increasingly frazzled -- their too-busy parents are uncertain what to do. Some, wanting their children to be academically competitive, demand extra homework, while others wonder just how much is too much.

ASK THE EXPERTS FOR HOMEWORK GUIDELINES

"Check out the National PTA and the National Education Association guidelines," University of Missouri psychology professor Harris Cooper, author of a pioneer study on the effect of homework on student achievement, told Education World. "For children in grades K through 2, homework is most effective when it does not exceed ten to 20 minutes each day. Children in grades three through six can handle 30 to 60 minutes a

day. If educators and parents expect homework far out of line with these recommendations to result in big gains in test scores, they are likely to be disappointed."

After reviewing dozens of existing studies on homework and researching hundreds of students and parents, Cooper found that although doing homework may begin to pay off in secondary school, little correlation exists between homework and test scores in elementary school.

Carol Huntsinger's research, however, had different results. Huntsinger, an education professor at the College of Lake County, Chicago, also investigated the study habits of young children. She found that for her sample, work done at home *did* make a difference.

Huntsinger compared the homework habits of middle-class immigrant Chinese Americans with similar European Americans. The Chinese American first graders she studied spent more than 20 minutes per night on math homework -- some of which their parents assigned. European Americans averaged just five minutes. When tested, the Chinese American children performed at higher academic levels than did their European American counterparts. In a longitudinal companion study of European American and Chinese American children from grades 5 through 11, Huntsinger found that those disparities continued through high school.

"Parents' beliefs and practices are very important influences on their children's academic achievement," Huntsinger told Education World. "We got similar results for European American children in our study whose parents taught them in ways similar to those Chinese American parents used. ... I looked at time spent on parent-assigned homework, school-assigned homework, and the formality of parents' teaching methods. Most other studies have focused on time spent on school-assigned homework only."

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE QUALITY OF THE ASSIGNMENTS?

Cooper found the effect of school-assigned homework on standardized test scores for students in lower grades to be minimal or nonexistent; however, the homework completed by the students Huntsinger studied was not necessarily schoolwork but focused on themes the families felt were important. Just how big a difference is there between the quality of typical school-selected assignments and those parents tend to select?

To find out, researchers funded by the Consortium on Chicago School Research asked teachers to evaluate the quality of 1,400 math and writing assignments for third, sixth, and eighth graders from 12 different schools.

"According to criteria established by prior research, the teachers found fewer than 30 percent of the assignments evaluated even minimally challenging," University of Wisconsin professor Fred Newmann, one of the study's authors, told Education World. "It will take a significant commitment to staff development to help teachers ... change their teaching sufficiently to promote more authentic intellectual work."

QUALITY VS. QUANTITY

However, when it comes to older children and math, *quantity*, or the number of assignments, *is* what matters, according to associate professor of economics Julian Betts of the University of California, San Diego. Betts examined surveys on the homework habits of 6,000 junior and senior high students over a period of five years.

"It appears to be the overall extent of (math) homework assigned and not the amount that is graded that matters," Betts told Education World. For older children, *the quality of assignments had absolutely no influence on math achievement!*

Students who did an extra 30 minutes of nightly math homework beginning in grade 7 increased their achievement scores the equivalent of two grade levels by grade 11. Differences in achievement remained -- though at a slightly depreciated level -- even if students stopped doing the extra homework.

"Overall, the best advice for math teachers in middle and high school seems to be that homework can be very effective and helps the bottom kids just as much as it helps the top students in the class," Betts told Education World. "As long as homework levels are maintained at a reasonable level, and teachers in different subject areas carefully coordinate homework assignments to avoid overloading students, an hour of assigned homework appears to be about as effective as an hour spent in the classroom."

HOMEWORK CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A review of the research in the field, *Homework: What Does the Research Say?*, published by ERIC's National Parent Information Network, found that high school students who receive school-assigned homework perform 69 percent better on standardized tests and have higher grades than do students who don't. Junior high students who receive homework perform 35 percent better; and elementary students perform about the same.

That does not mean elementary students should have no homework, only that grades or results on standardized tests do not measure the benefits of homework.

Currently, the prevailing feeling is that students need homework to stay competitive in the global market -- that the extra work and responsibility give kids an edge. There is a

problem, though, if family time is minimized and children no longer have time to play or if students don't graduate because of failing homework grades. Experts suggest approximately ten minutes of homework a night, starting in first grade, with an additional ten minutes each year. They also stress, however, the importance of teachers' addressing the issue of assignment quality.

"Unless one is prepared to have lots of supervised work at school, there is no way that one can avoid homework for youngsters after they've reached the middle school years," Gardner told Education World. "But before assigning homework, one needs to have clear goals, share those goals with children and parents, and make sure that those goals are being achieved. Otherwise homework is an idle exercise."

So the experts agree: Homework *can* have a positive effect on achievement as children grow older. Despite the experts' stress on monitoring the quality and quantity of homework, many students are left trying to cope with a huge, often boring, homework load. They wonder -- is anyone out there listening?