

EDUCATION/ELEMENTARY

Is Homework Finished?

Seattle-area experts weigh in on the homework debate

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We try to keep it a secret from our kids, but we probably dread homework more than they do. There is so much to take care of in the evening, from dinner to bedtime to prepping for the next day. The last thing we need is an hour of cajoling tired, tearful children through math worksheets. But we grit our teeth and do it because it's important for their education. Or is it?

Several Seattle-area elementary schools made news in 2016 when they chose to eliminate homework. While many families sighed with relief, others worried that it was another sign of declining standards. The move was part of a national trend, the latest pendulum swing in a [controversy that has been raging](https://online.mc.edu/degrees/education/elementary/homework-) (<https://online.mc.edu/degrees/education/elementary/homework->

elementary-school-kids) for more than 100 years. Despite strong opinions on both sides, when it comes to the value of homework, few things are certain.

Homework problems

Those Seattle schools (<https://www.kuow.org/stories/no-more-homework-say-many-seattle-elementary-schools/>) were at the vanguard of a homework elimination trend in 2016. Since the pandemic, schools around the country, including several districts in major cities in California (<https://edsource.org/2021/why-some-california-school-districts-are-changing-how-students-earn-grades/664226>) (Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Diego (<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-08/as-ds-and-fs-soar-schools-ditch-inequitable-grade-systems>)) and Clark County, Nevada, have taken steps to limit or eliminate elementary school homework. They argue that homework exacerbates the achievement gap. A study conducted in the Netherlands surprisingly found that homework benefited students from higher-income backgrounds more than it benefited students from lower-income backgrounds. Higher-income families are more likely to have resources like a quiet space to study, books and internet access, as well as adults (full-time parents or even tutors) who have time to assist the child with confusing assignments. In the U.S., a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/10/01/what-we-know-about-online-learning-and-the-homework-gap-amid-the-pandemic/>) found that 25 percent of lower-income children (compared to only 2 percent of upper-income children) were sometimes unable to complete their schoolwork for lack of computer access at home.

Many parents and educators also point out that homework comes at a potentially high cost in terms of missed opportunities, even for well-resourced families. Children already have a deficit of physical activity after sitting still at a desk for hours every day. In light of the known serious health effects of a sedentary lifestyle, there is a strong argument to be made that children should be playing outside as much as possible after school. Homework cuts into family time, too, eliminating opportunities for family meals and activities such as playing board games, having conversations, doing household chores, reading for pleasure and even going to bed on time. All of these activities have proven beneficial to kids' mental and physical health, social skills development, executive function development and even academic achievement.

On the other side of the equation, many teachers and parents feel that restricting homework is a "lowest common denominator" approach. They argue that it sends a message that schools' expectations for student

learning are so low, they have given up on expecting kids to do any work. The concern is that even if eliminating homework minimizes the academic performance gap, it does so by universally lowering the bar.

There is also the argument that doing homework early in their education helps students establish good habits, such as organizing and planning ahead, as well as learning effective studying methods that will pay off when they get older.

The science of homework

Ideally, these theoretical arguments could be laid to rest by looking at the research. But the research is surprisingly ambiguous, in part because it is challenging to establish consistent definitions and reliable measurements. Should homework be measured by time spent or number of problems completed? How do you account for homework a child finishes by themselves compared to homework completed with adult assistance? And in all cases, how reliable is the data reported by busy parents? Add to that the fact that academic outcomes are nearly impossible to measure (see also: the standardized testing debate).

Both in research and at home, it's easy to confuse rigor with workload (<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23584497/remote-school-homework-elimination-movement>), but a time-consuming homework assignment may not teach a child very much at all – just think of all those school projects involving papier-mâché. For years, most of the research on homework (<https://challengesuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Challenge-Success-Homework-White-Paper-2020.pdf>) focused on figuring out how much time it should take. That old research confirmed that too much homework is a major source of stress at all grade levels. Among those who approve of elementary school homework, a widely accepted guideline is 10 minutes per grade level, so it would be 20 minutes for a second-grader and one hour for a sixth-grader. It's a rule of thumb designed to minimize frustration. In elementary school, there is no correlation between academic performance and the amount of time spent on homework.

According to the 2006 meta-analysis by researchers at Duke University (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00346543076001001>), different studies have found that homework can improve study habits, self-discipline and independent problem-solving, but it can also cause physical and emotional fatigue, fuel negative attitudes about learning and limit leisure time for children.

Newer research has begun to look at other aspects (<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23584497/remote-school-homework-elimination-movement>), of homework besides workload to determine what leads to such disparate outcomes. One study indicated that students who found their homework interesting and who believed it was the result of their teacher's careful consideration were not only more likely to complete a homework assignment, but also to learn from it. Other studies have shown that "extension"-type assignments, in which students extend concepts taught in class to real-world situations, correlated with higher grades than homework that simply prepared students for the next class. Both types of homework were more beneficial than the drill-and-practice type of assignment that has historically made up the bulk of homework.

Perhaps surprisingly, a more relaxed approach to homework is also associated with better outcomes. When teachers and adults promote autonomy and independence for students doing their homework, rather than having them focus on completion and correct answers, the students tend to benefit more. Based on all this newer research, homework may not get finished, but it may get better results.

What parents should do about homework

"Ultimately, I think the question shouldn't be whether or not homework is valuable generally, but to ask what specific purpose we are hoping it will serve. To build self-management and other soft skills? Preparation for middle school? To get kids off their devices? Parent involvement? Extra drilling or practice on content that they are being taught? To provide additional support for kids who need it? To give kids opportunities to pursue their own interests more deeply through reading and research? Depending on what you're hoping to achieve through homework, the homework itself should look different," says Caryn Park, a faculty member at Antioch University Seattle's School of Education.

For elementary students who still receive homework assignments, a survey of research on the effectiveness of homework has determined some guidelines for parents (<https://challengesuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Challenge-Success-Homework-White-Paper-2020.pdf>) to help make homework more valuable:

Treat homework like sports: Parents should cheer from the sideline, but resist stepping onto the field.

Engage in respectful dialogue with the school about your child's experiences with homework.

Work with your child to determine a healthy schedule that will enable them to complete homework while leaving adequate time for sleep, play, relaxation and family time.

If your child's elementary school has abandoned homework and your child is struggling with a subject in school, a conversation with the teacher might result in targeted homework assignments or other at-home learning opportunities. But the problem may also be addressed by changes in the classroom. If there is not a specific academic concern, parents should prioritize physical activity and creative play over academics during their child's free time.

Regardless of where you stand on the question of homework, experts are clear that children need to play outside, read for pleasure, engage in family life and get a good night's sleep. As long as these needs are met, homework probably doesn't make a lot of difference either way.

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