

THE BATTLE OVER HOMEWORK

By Michael Bradley

Ten-year-old Joe Taylor usually spends three hours a night on homework. “It’s an ongoing battle,” says his mother, Lisa. “He’s crying, I’m crying; it’s caused massive rifts between us.” One evening assignment was to locate 12 historic places in their hometown of Grapevine, TX –an activity that consumed three hours and forced the family to eat a fat-food dinner in the car.

“I saw several other moms driving around all night, so we set up a system to call each other on cell phones whenever we found a place,” Taylor says. “The assignment could have been a lot of fun if the kids had more time.” As it was, she says, the homework became more like “mom work.”

Nightmarish experiences like this are played out every evening in homes across the United States. Pushed to the breaking point, parents are beginning to speak out, expressing their concerns that schools are piling on too much homework. At a time when much effort is being devoted to improving the nation’s schools the value of homework as a worthwhile tool is being questioned.

Increasingly schools are beginning to respond. Last year, the Piscataway, NJ, school district made national headlines when it established strict homework guidelines, setting the time limit at 30 minutes a night for grades one through three. In Arlington, VA this fall, teachers were asked to give only assignments the students could complete independently, without a parent’s help. And teachers in East Porter County, IN, are barred from assigning take-home busywork;

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

instead, they're encouraged to have students finish their work during class. In fact, the county's homework policy explicitly states that "assignments which consistently require that most of each evening be devoted to homework are inappropriate."

For every parent who thinks there's too much homework, however, there is another who feels her child needs more. Pattie Waschek of Lakewood, OH, is one such parent: She says her son, Bobby, was seriously underprepared for middle school because he never had enough homework in grade school. "He could finish his fifth grade homework in five minutes, if he had any at all," she says. "Then in sixth grade, he was inundated with homework and big projects, and he's been floundering ever since."

Waschek, who also has a daughter and another son in Lakewood schools, has been lobbying the district to get its elementary and middle school teachers in sync about homework. Tapped to help develop Ohio's Continuous Improvement Plan—a mandate of the state's board of education—Waschek and her team submitted a plan for improving Horace Mann Middle School, which Bobby attends, in 1999.

Although the school's district has solved many problems—it was one of Ohio's most improved this year—"there's been no progress in the homework area," Waschek says, "The communication just doesn't seem to be there." She says she'll continue to fight for more consistent amounts of homework across the district.

Who's right? Who's wrong? Both sides make a compelling case, and parents and educators are working to make homework assignments reasonable, helpful, and more than just a tedious exercise that's bound to tradition.

How we got here

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

Homework's history in the United States isn't all that long. Take-home work wasn't widely assigned before 1900 and experienced its first backlash in the 1940's when the concept of building "life skills" won out over rigorous academic training. National sentiment toward homework changed again in 1957, when the Soviet Union launched its first Sputnik rocket. The international space race was on, and the U.S. needed as many sharp minds as possible to fight its way to the moon.

Now the pendulum is swinging back. The growth of two-income families and single-parent homes makes it harder for parents to find time to supervise their children's assignments. Packed extracurricular schedules also play a part: If Johnny has to get to piano lessons, soccer practice, and Cub Scout meetings, when will he have time for homework?

Some educators have even gone as far as to say that conventional homework isn't necessary at all. In their book, *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*, Etta Kralovec, Ph.D., and John Buell, Ph.D., call it "school reform on the cheap," charging that some schools assign a lot of homework to give parents the impression of academic rigor rather than taking the time to develop more substantive assignments.

The case for lightening the load

Many people in the academic community agree that homework has spiraled out of control. A 1997 University of Michigan study, for example, revealed that 6- to 8-year-olds were doing nearly three times as much homework—more than two hours a night for some—as their

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

1981 counterparts. Statistics like this led the National Parent-Teacher Association to advocate a nightly limit of 10 minutes of homework per grade.

“Parents who believe that piling tons of homework on young children will lead to noticeable gains in achievement will be disappointed,” says Harris Cooper, Ph.D., chair of the University of Missouri’s psychology department, who has studied homework for more than 10 years. His research shows that homework given to students in grades K-3 does nothing to improve their standardized test scores. What’s more even 20 minutes of work over the suggested nightly limit can have a negative effect on kids’ self-image and motivation level, Dr. Cooper says.

Dr. Kralovec agrees, emphasizing the importance of building balanced children through a variety of activities. She says that students who devote time to the arts, athletics, and character education will be better equipped for life than those who focus solely on the three R’s.

Schools take up the cause

More and more educators are beginning to cut back on homework, believing that too much can indeed be a bad thing. Dick Baroody is head of the Lower School at the Haverford School in suburban Philadelphia, where parents tend to expect big results. He tries to persuade them that the path to Harvard is not necessarily paved with two hours of homework in the second grade.

“We’re getting kids who are burned out much, much earlier,” Baroody says. I’m continually trying to convince anyone I speak with that we need to take away rather than pile on.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

And while we still have those parents who want us to teach differential equations to third-graders, most are pretty reasonable.

At the Mason-Rice School, Mr. Baroody would have been preaching to the choir. When Principal Springer came to the elementary school in 1995, parents routinely told him that teachers were assigning too much homework, which was interfering with play the family activities and unstructured time. Springer admits he was surprised. “I was expecting parents to be clamoring for more homework, thinking that more of it means a better school. I found that parents and teachers were more interested in homework quality.”

So he got busy. Together with the Mason-Rice teachers and parents, he developed a set of homework guidelines in which everyone has specific responsibilities: Teachers must give assignments covering only topics they have already introduced in the classroom, students are responsible for completing their tasks independently, and parents are charged with creating a comfortable environment for kids to do homework in and communication to teachers when assignments are too hard. The guidelines loosely follow the PTA’s 10-minutes-per-grade recommended for written work and, more importantly Springer says, contain expectation time spent reading or being read ten minutes a night for first-graders; 25 minutes for fifth-graders).

Since their debut four years ago homework guidelines have succeeded “Parents are happy, and having less homework hasn’t interfered with the children’s ability to do well with standardized tests,” Springer said “It has freed up time for them to spend with a book or play their brothers and sisters—and that’s a good thing.”

Bring it on

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

Not all school systems, however are jumping on the less-is-more bandwagon. Last summer, the head of the math department suburban Philadelphia's Newtown schools decided that not enough high school juniors and seniors were taking advanced placement math. He set out to double the number. The policy could be felt as far down as the primary grades.

Frank Long, a third grade teacher at the district's School, has increased the amount of math homework he assigned considerably, to almost twice as much—better, he thinks will install a foundation for future AP achievement. “The only way to double the number of AP students is to push the kids to higher levels,” Long says. “I’m more demanding of them, and so far, the kids are staying afloat. They’re ahead of last year.”

While not all examples are this extreme, most educators agree that a reasonable amount of homework helps children build discipline, responsibility, and the skills needed to complete tasks. “The value of homework at the elementary level is not academic; it’s motivational,” says Janine Bempechat an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of *Getting our Kids Back on Track: Education Children for the Future*. She says developmentally appropriate homework helps kids learn persistence and the ability to delay gratification and handle boredom.

Some research has found that extra work does pay off in the early school years. In the mid-190's Carol Huntsinger and education and psychology professor at the College of Lake County in Illinois, tracked two groups of students—one comprising the children of Chinese-America immigrants, the other second-and third-generation offspring of European-Americans parents. The reading and math skills of each population were measured three times, first at the pre-K level, then in the second and fourth grades. Huntsinger found that, thanks to extra

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

homework given by their parents during the school year and in the summer, the Chinese-Americans began with an edge in math skills and build their lead over the four years; by fourth grade, they also surpassed their European-American counterparts in the language skills.

“The Chinese-American parents set aside extra reading and drawing time,” Huntsinger says. “They would even make their children do reports on the books they read and write out definitions of vocabulary words.”

All children learn at different rates. It might take one child half an hour to complete an assignment that another can finish in 10 minutes. And all kids will have a meltdown every now and again. But if homework regularly begets tears, anger, and frustration, your child’s take-home assignments might be inappropriate. Ask yourself the following questions, compiled by the Washington, DC-based Center for Education Reform:

- Do homework assignments reinforce or expand on concepts taught in class?**
- Could the same lesson be learned with fewer problems or a shorter composition?**
- Does your child understand exactly what the teacher expects him to do?**
- Is the assigned work based on quality material? Is it presented logically, and does it teach useful lessons?**

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com