


Introduction to Do Students Have Too Much Homework?: At Issue

 *Do Students Have Too Much Homework?*, 2012

Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other interested parties all seem to have strong feelings on the subject of homework. Students complain they get too much work to complete outside of the hours they already attend classes. Parents worry their children may not get accepted into college without a rigorous amount of schoolwork. Teachers and administrators feel the pressure from all sides to make sure every child succeeds, and realize they too are being graded accordingly. Perhaps a more important issue is what society expects students will gain from homework and school in general, and not what the recommended workload is that will potentially guarantee achievement.

Within the past two decades, but especially since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, the academic achievement level of American students has been under increased scrutiny. The demand to demonstrate achievement through standardized testing has resulted in pressure on schools, teachers, and students to master more academic content in shorter time periods. Test results often are used as the sole means of judging success, and test performance is being used to allocate funds to schools, review individual teacher performance, and determine college acceptance.

Homework is viewed by many educators as an accepted method to increase student achievement. The "more is better" theory is unquestioned by a majority of school districts. But evidence does not support this philosophy as student test scores remain stagnant. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that in state after state test results have shown little change in the past decade. Moreover, an analysis conducted by David Conley for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2007 estimated that up to 40 percent of new college students need at least one remedial course upon entering college. Clearly increasing the amount of homework students are given is not having the desired effect.

A growing chorus of critics is questioning not only standard homework practice, but the real purpose of America's educational system as well. Education expert Tony Wagner offers his analysis of the situation in his book, *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—And What We Can Do About It*. Wagner contends that American schools are not teaching the types of skills students will need to succeed not only in college but also in life. An emphasis on memorizing facts and focusing on test preparation is doing students a great disservice, Wagner believes, essentially leaving them unprepared for life after school when critical-thinking and problem-solving skills will be in great demand among potential employers.

And it is not only in the workplace that students will suffer. Wagner asks, "What does it mean in today's world to be an active and informed citizen and how does a democratic society best educate its citizenship?" Students unprepared to analyze problems and reach thoughtful, educated conclusions are not equipped to participate in a democracy, thus weakening the foundation of American society.

It could be that the amount of homework students receive matters less than what may be missing from it—lessons that require students to develop research and analytical skills and the ability to effectively communicate their results. "The rigor that matters most for the twenty-first century is demonstrated mastery of the core competencies for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. Studying academic content is the means of developing

competencies, instead of being the goal, as it has been traditionally. In today's world, it's no longer how much you know that matters; it's what you can do with what you know," according to Wagner.

Wagner is not alone in his insight into what it will take for students to succeed in the future. Daniel H. Pink, the author of several bestselling books, including *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* and *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, provides a thought-provoking analysis of what type of learning will be essential to success. Pink believes that "knowledge" workers—computer programmers, engineers and accountants among others—that have dominated our recent history, will shrink in importance. Technology and overseas competition will lessen their value as the future will belong to a different kind of mind—a mind based more on creativity, inventiveness, and big-picture capabilities.

Pink believes that a large part of what humans can accomplish is based on motivation, and that motivation comes more from intrinsic satisfaction than external rewards. Schools that heavily rely on rote memorization and feedback based on test results may be de-motivating students and leading them to dislike school and the learning process. Pink writes in *Drive*, "In our offices and our classrooms we have way too much compliance and way too little engagement." He believes we need to help kids both at home and school "move toward autonomy, mastery and purpose."

Homework assignments, according to Pink, should engage students and offer them some control over how they will master a skill. He writes, "Does the homework bulging from kids' backpacks truly help them learn? Or does it simply steal their free time in the service of a false sense of rigor?" In a future where technological advances are eliminating many of the tasks that used to be done by people, it is imperative that students are taught a new set of skills based on flexibility and creativity, using curiosity and initiative to confront whatever they may encounter. As Pink suggests "With a little thought and effort, we can turn *homework* into *homelearning*." The viewpoints in *At Issue: Do Students Have Too Much Homework?* reflect this and other perspectives on this passionately debated topic.

Further Readings

Books

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