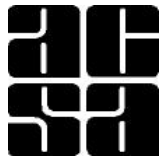


# Got Homework?



## An ACSA Policy Position Paper on Homework

The Association of California School Administrators

Developed by the Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability Council

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### Does this principal's story sound familiar?

*As I sat in my office after my last parent conference at the end of an unusually busy day, I couldn't help but shake my head in puzzlement as to how two teachers on my staff—two teachers at the same grade level—could have such differing views about homework. Earlier today, Madison's parents left my office in tears. Not normally the type to complain, they were at their wit's end. Their intelligent little girl, who once loved learning, took pride in her work, and looked forward to school every morning, now awakens with a stomach ache, a headache, or any other ache she can find to use as an excuse to miss school. This semester, Madison has had to drop out of ice-skating, a beloved after-school activity that resulted in shelves full of trophies. In addition, she is no longer able to keep up with her Girl Scout troop and her church youth activities. Madison's mom said that she leaves work in the afternoon and drives home with a knot in her stomach dreading what lies ahead. According to Madison's parents, her multiple hours of homework will leave the entire family stressed and apprehensive. How could this conference, I thought, have been so different than the one I just finished with Matthew's parents?*

*Matthew's parents made an appointment this afternoon to thank me for placing their son in Mrs. Ferber's class this year. In his previous grade, Matthew struggled academically and his parents worried that he might be a viable candidate for special education. Mrs. Ferber understands how to engage her students, and her classroom is a beehive of curiosity and activity. She doesn't believe in giving homework to her students just for the sake of homework. Her students are encouraged to read both fiction and non-fiction and are occasionally assigned a project in science or social studies. Matthew's parents stated that he has undergone a transformation in his attitude toward school this year. He loves coming to school, his grades have improved dramatically, and he has made many new friends. "We enjoy going as a family to watch Matthew's baseball practice and he provides a lively, though squeaky, concert each evening with his new saxophone."*

*Matthew and Madison are in fourth grade classes right next door to one another. How do I work with my teachers to understand the purpose of homework and the appropriate amount of time that should be spent on homework? Shouldn't the district office administrators help me with policy to establish consistency so that I don't have such opposing points of view on my campus?*

This position paper is intended as background knowledge to inform the work of California school administrators as they deal with the growing controversy that is surrounding the issue of homework. There is disagreement as to the appropriate grade levels that should be assigned homework, the amount of time spent on homework, the quantity and quality of homework, and whether homework is beneficial or potentially harmful to students. At the center of the disagreement is the crucial question of homework's efficacy for improving academic achievement.

Homework is generally viewed as a tool for developing skills and reinforcing content learned in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to provide administrators with 1) a basis for districts to create policy; 2) talking points to use in working with teachers and parents; 3) an overview of current research and opinion and; 4) a foundation for addressing the challenges educators face related to issues surrounding homework.

The report includes general statements in these areas:

- current opinion for and against homework
- positive and negative effects of homework
- academic and non-academic purposes of homework
- research findings
- suggestions for further research

The report also includes recommendations in these areas related to homework:

- purpose
- professional collaboration
- quality, quantity, consistency
- time allocations
- use of the Internet
- grading, feedback and monitoring
- student input
- equity issues
- support and intervention

## Introduction

The authors of this paper were invited to analyze current research for and against homework. The following methodology was used to produce this report: First, the professional literature written in the last five years for and against homework was studied. A survey of ACSA's Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability Council members revealing self-reports of homework challenges and current board policies was completed. Finally, the authors worked both individually and collaboratively to develop summaries, look at examples of good practice, and study resources in the area of homework.

### General Principles

- Homework has been a mainstay teacher strategy from elementary through the university level since formal education began.
- The principal purpose of homework is to develop skills and reinforce learning.
- Homework is not consistent from class to class, grade to grade, school to school and district to district.
- There are profound differences in opinions among researchers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students on the issue of homework.
- Research suggests there is a correlation between homework and higher levels of student achievement.
- Homework should be relevant and purposeful.
- Students should be provided with timely and specific feedback regarding their homework.

We recommend that administrators use this paper as a basis to:

- create policy
- work with staff to implement best practices
- dialogue with parents
- conduct action research
- address challenges related to homework issues.

### Summary of Current Opinion in Favor of Homework

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many educators and parents have believed that homework creates disciplined minds. The majority of educators maintain a firmly entrenched belief in the positive effect of homework and the necessity of extending the school day via this vehicle. This has been supported by research that correlates homework with higher levels of student achievement.

A common opinion of teachers is that homework will increase students' potential for academic success and, thereby, their general attitude toward school. In addition, it is felt that homework will help students learn more by increasing retention and understanding of the material covered in class.

Beliefs regarding the positive academic effects of homework include that it:

- fosters retention of factual knowledge,
- increases understanding of concepts,
- improves study habits and related skills,

- strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving ability,
- enables students to practice content skills,
- provides opportunities to summarize learning, and
- provides enrichment and/or elaboration of content.

In addition to the academic benefits of homework, opinion extends to a belief that there are nonacademic benefits of homework. First, students will learn independence and responsibility. For example, technology affords today's students the opportunity to gather and evaluate information independently. Second, parents have the opportunity to increase their involvement and appreciation of schooling. Also parents will have first-hand knowledge of their student's achievement and/or progress.

Beliefs regarding the positive non-academic effects of homework include that it:

- develops or improves attitudes about school and learning,
- develops or increases organizational and time management skills,
- increases the opportunity for independent problem solving,
- develops positive attitudes toward learning and school,
- develops self-direction and self-discipline,
- promotes inquisitiveness and exploration, and
- promotes the understanding that learning extends beyond the school walls.

Although homework is widely accepted as an integral part of the life of schools, there has recently been a great deal of homework backlash from parents who find that homework is disruptive to family life and other student activities.

### **Summary of Current Opinion Against Homework**

Critics have questioned the value of homework and the current practices and assumptions related to homework. Some have joined the plea for major modifications or the complete elimination of homework.

Some parents have expressed concern with the amount of time homework requires. They feel that students must spend too much of their out-of-school time on homework, often at the expense of other worthwhile activities. They argue that children are experiencing difficulty balancing after-school schedules that include homework, extracurricular activities, private enrichment lessons, sports, family and many other priorities. Critics also complain that much of the assigned homework is redundant, meaningless, and burdens the student and the entire family.

Joseph Simplicio (2005) has pointed out what he believes are major systemic problems inherent in the practice of assigning homework. First of all is the problem of lack of consistency. This inconsistency is evident among teachers within the same grade level, between grade levels, among schools and across district lines. Simplicio also claims there may be little or no coordination between teachers when students have multiple teachers who may be assigning homework. This lack of coordination can result in unequal distribution of time needed to complete homework assignments. As a result of this lack of consistency and coordination, he argues that students seldom learn viable strategies for completing homework assignments and do not develop consistent learning patterns from doing their homework.

Another opinion is that many homework assignments do not accomplish the educational goals they were designed to achieve. Generally, the entire class is given the same assignment. If a student has already mastered the concept, the additional practice does little to increase achievement. If a student does not understand the concept, the repeated incorrect practice leads to frustration, not to the development of the desired skills. In many cases, the parents end up doing the bulk of the work.

A third problem Simplicio states in his criticism of homework is that students' daily schedules are so overbooked that homework is often done in haste and is of poor quality. This issue is compounded when teachers grade homework solely on whether or not it was completed rather than on quality.

Alfie Kohn, in his book, *The Homework Myth*, (2006) argues that homework is pointless and that research does not support its value. He asserts that there is a lack of evidence that homework makes one a better thinker or more responsible. He disagrees that there is a correlation between homework and achievement.

Kohn states that teachers regularly see that many children are made miserable by homework and resist doing it; yet they rarely examine the premise that homework must be assigned. He states that if homework is to be assigned, students should have input and choice in the assignments.

Kralovec and Buell (2001) argue that homework disrupts families because of the frustration and time that must be spent away from other family activities. They also decry the stress created by adding homework to the overburdened schedules children have. Finally, they believe that homework actually limits rather than extends learning. They advocate for policies that eliminate homework.

The negative effects of homework mentioned by critics include:

- time lost from families and other important activities,
- tension and frustration for students and families,
- loss of interest and negative attitudes toward the subject matter,
- physical and emotional fatigue,
- parental pressure to complete assignments and to perform well,
- parental instructional techniques that conflict with those of the teacher,
- students copying from each other,
- students receiving assistance beyond tutoring and having others do the work for them, and
- variations in resources available to students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

While opinions about the value of homework are quite varied, the research, although limited, has yielded fairly consistent results and has raised important questions for policy makers.

# Research Findings

Studies on homework have sought to accomplish two goals: describe homework practices, and analyze the impact of homework on student achievement.

## Homework Practices

Historically, research has focused on the quantity of homework across time and countries. Homework practices have shifted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, homework was seen as an important aspect of academic discipline. By the 1940s, concerns were raised about homework interfering with home life. The mid to late 1950s witnessed an increase in the rigor of U.S. education as part of the U.S. – Soviet space race. In the 1960s, the approach to homework was more relaxed, but by the 1980s, with concern about the rigor of U.S. education, homework was once again on the rise (Cooper, 2001a) (Gill, 2004). With the advent of standards, annual assessments, and high stakes accountability, educators have felt pressure to use homework to increase student achievement. Despite differences of opinions regarding the amount of homework, a national survey by Public Agenda in 2000 showed that 64 percent of parents believed that their child was getting about the right amount of homework, while 25 percent thought there was too little homework and only 10 percent believed there was too much homework assigned. The Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) found similar homework levels between U.S. students and students in high-performing Asian nations. More information is needed, however, about the types of homework assigned and expectations for independent student work. The “quantity” question has been addressed, but not the “quality” question.

## Impact of Homework on Student Achievement

In his book, *The Battle Over Homework*, Cooper (2001b) summarizes research regarding the impact of homework on student achievement. Homework was shown to have a positive impact on achievement in comparison to no homework. The impact of homework varies by grade level and is greatest for older students. Homework had twice as large an effect at high school as at junior high. In turn, the impact at junior high was twice as large in comparison to elementary school. Marzano and Pickering (2007) reference Cooper’s work and note the following effect size and average percentile gains:

Grades 4-6:	Effect Size = .15 (Percentile gain = 6 points)
Grades 7-9:	Effect Size = .31 (Percentile gain = 12 points)
Grades 10-12:	Effect Size = .64 (Percentile gain = 24 points)

Marzano and Pickering further address the issue of how much time is optimal for homework to impact student achievement. They note Cooper’s meta-analysis finding that time spent on homework generally increases its impact at junior high up to 1 to 2 hours per night, with diminishing gains as additional time is required. An additional review (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006) found similar positive impacts at the high school level up to an average of 1.5 to 2.5 hours of homework per night.

## **Additional Research Needed**

Researchers recognize the need for additional studies on the impact of homework and the need to provide information that is helpful to practitioners in the design and implementation of homework practices.

Beyond quantifying the impact of homework on student achievement, school administrators and teachers could benefit from research in the following areas:

1. What makes homework effective?
2. What types of assignments best reinforce and extend classroom learning?
3. How can students be motivated to complete homework?
4. What feedback and grading practices best support learning from homework?
5. What should be the role of parents in students' homework?
6. How can schools support students who do not have sufficient academic resources at home?
7. How should homework be differentiated for students' specific learning needs?
8. How do the answers to the above questions vary by grade level and subject matter?

## Recommendations

We recommend that district-level leaders work with their Boards of Education to create policy in relation to homework and establish district-wide consistency that will enable site administrators to have tangible documentation to share with teachers and parents. Our review of the board policies of many school districts provides scant specific guidance as to homework expectations across an entire school district.

The district homework policy should be included in Back-to-School Parent Handbooks and published on the district website. Teacher autonomy within the policy can be encouraged; however, parents should know that all schools and teachers will follow the same conceptual framework regarding homework.

### Purpose

With collaboration from all stakeholders, districts should write and publicize a purpose statement regarding homework. This statement should include a reference to the research. A sample purpose statement might include the following:

*Homework is an opportunity for our students to practice skills that have been introduced by the teacher. Assignments to be completed at home are designed to extend classroom activities, nurture curiosity and foster a love of learning. Homework assignments provide opportunities for students to expand their learning interests and to use their unique talents and multiple intelligences to explore, discover, and create.*

There is no value in homework for homework's sake. The purpose should be to produce discernable achievement results. Homework serves a different purpose at different grade levels. For early elementary, the purpose of homework is to:

- promote a positive attitude toward learning,
- involve parents in the learning process, and
- develop early study skills and habits.

For later elementary and beyond there is a more direct role in supporting student learning.

Purposeful homework assignments may include:

- practice skills that have been introduced,
- extended learning by elaborating on information already introduced and,
- opportunities for students to expand their learning interests (Cooper et al., 2006).

### Quality / Nature Of Assignments

Because homework is commonly used for practice, extension of learning, and exploration of new topics, it is incumbent upon educators to provide thoughtful homework assignments that are relevant and meaningful. Purposeful assignments clarify what students are to do and how it relates to the outcome of what they are expected to learn. Since research lacks a clear definition of quality in relation to homework, we suggest that leaders begin by looking at indicators of quality teaching and learning. Research strongly supports teaching and learning strategies such as:

- writing in the content areas,
- summarizing and note taking,
- identifying similarities and differences,
- completing work using higher cognitive levels of thinking,
- reading extensively,
- using technology to access information.

## **Time Allocation**

Researchers vary on the recommended amount of time students should spend on homework. Recommendations for time allocated to homework increase as students progress through the grade levels. We endorse Cooper’s recommendation for the “10 minute per grade level” rule. (i.e. 5<sup>th</sup> grade – 5 x 10 = 50 minutes). The emphasis should be placed on the quality of the homework assignments and the amount of homework actually completed rather than how much is assigned. Effective homework assignments are well crafted and carefully planned based on student need.

## **Feedback/Monitoring**

Provide students with timely and specific feedback about their homework. Often teachers spend too much valuable class time having students exchange papers and correct homework assignments. Students are often left without a concept of what is right about the right answer and what is wrong about the wrong answer. Students must be given feedback about the quality of homework that has been completed. Homework should not be recorded or marked merely as “complete.” Students benefit from specific feedback delivered in a timely manner.

## **Support/Intervention/Equity**

Schools should provide after-school intervention and some kind of homework support. Not all students have the support at home or at school to maximize homework as a learning tool. Allowing students to complete homework assignments with additional support and assistance will better enhance the possibilities of success. There is little evidence to show that after-school programs make a difference in student achievement if the program is only a study hall. While students benefit from having a quiet place in which they can complete assignments, there is no academic gain to doing the same problems incorrectly over and over. Tutoring and explicit, directed teaching is needed for students to be successful. This is also true for homework that cannot be completed correctly at an independent level.

## **Teacher Collaboration**

Collaboration among teachers is essential to ensure consistency and coordination of homework assignments. This is particularly critical at the secondary level when students have multiple teachers and a variety of research projects assigned to them.

## **Administrator's Role**

Administrators must be responsible for:

- implementing district policy,
- supporting professional dialogue,
- promoting teacher collaboration,
- monitoring homework quality and quantity,
- communicating homework expectations with parents,
- facilitating intervention and support programs,
- ensuring that all students have the opportunity to complete quality homework.

## **Conclusion**

When homework assignments are connected to specific important learning objectives and of a reasonable length, and when meaningful feedback is provided in a timely manner, homework can be an effective strategy for improving student learning.

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