



Key Lessons: what research says about the value of homework

Whether homework helps students—and how much homework is appropriate—has been debated for many years. Homework has been in the headlines again recently and continues to be a topic of controversy, with claims that students and families are suffering under the burden of huge amounts of homework. School board members, educators, and parents may wish to turn to the research for answers to their questions about the benefits and drawbacks of homework. Unfortunately, the research has produced mixed results so far, and more research is needed. Nonetheless, there are some findings that can help to inform decisions about homework. What follows is a summary of the research to date:

- **The link between homework and student achievement is far from clear.** There is no conclusive evidence that homework increases student achievement across the board. Some studies show positive effects of homework under certain conditions and for certain students, some show no effects, and some suggest negative effects (Kohn 2006; Trautwein and Koller 2003).
- **Homework appears to have more positive effects for certain groups of students:**
 - Older students benefit more from homework than younger students. Some studies have shown that older students gain more academic benefits from homework than do younger students, perhaps because younger students have less-effective study habits and are more easily distracted (Cooper 1989; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001; Leone and Richards 1989; Muhlenbruck et al. 2000).
 - Students from low-income homes may not benefit as much from homework as those from higher-income homes. Some researchers believe that students from higher-income homes have more resources (such as computers) and receive more assistance with homework, while low-income students may have fewer resources and less assistance and are therefore less likely to complete the homework and reap any related benefits (McDermott, Goldmen and Varenne 1984; Scott-Jones 1984).
 - Students with learning disabilities benefit from homework under certain conditions. Students with learning disabilities can benefit from homework if appropriate supervision and monitoring are provided (Cooper and Nye 1994; Rosenberg 1989).
 - Asian American students may benefit more from homework than do students from other ethnic groups. A national study of the influence of homework on student grades across five ethnic groups found that homework had a stronger impact on Asian American students than on students of other ethnicities (Keith and Benson, 1992).

- **Homework may have nonacademic benefits.** Certain nonacademic benefits of homework have been shown, especially for younger students. Indeed, some primary-level teachers may assign homework for such benefits, which include learning the importance of responsibility, managing time, developing study habits, and staying with a task until it is completed (Cooper, Robinson and Patall 2006; Corno and Xu 2004; Johnson and Pontius 1989; Warton 2001).
- **Too much homework may diminish its effectiveness.** While research on the optimum amount of time students should spend on homework is limited, there are indications that for high school students, 1½ to 2½ hours per night is optimum. Middle school students appear to benefit from smaller amounts (less than 1 hour per night). When students spend more time than this on homework, the positive relationship with student achievement diminishes (Cooper, Robinson, and Patall 2006).
- **The amount of homework *completed* by students seems to be more positively associated with student achievement than the amount of homework *assigned* by teachers.** Some research has shown that students who spend more time on homework score higher on measures of achievement and attitude. Studies that have delved more deeply into this topic suggest, however, that the amount of homework assigned by teachers is unrelated to student achievement, while the amount of homework actually completed by students is associated with higher achievement (Cooper 2001; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, and Greathouse 1998).
- **After-school programs that provide homework assistance may improve student behavior, motivation, and work habits but not necessarily academic achievement.** Studies of after-school programs that provide homework assistance have found few definite links to improved student achievement. Several studies, however, noted improvements in student motivation and work habits, which may indirectly affect achievement (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, and Macias 2001; James-Burdumy et al. 2005).
- **The effect of parent involvement in homework is unclear.** Studies of parent involvement in homework have produced mixed results. Homework assignments that require interaction between students and parents result in higher levels of parent involvement and are more likely to be turned in than noninteractive assignments. Some studies have shown, however, that parent involvement in homework has no impact on student achievement. Other studies indicate that students whose parents are more involved in their homework have lower test scores and class grades—but this may be because the students were already lower performing and needed more help from their parents than did higher-performing students. (Balli, Wedman, and Demo 1997; Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye 2000; Epstein 1988; Van Voorhis 2003).
- **There is little research on connections between specific kinds of homework and student achievement.** Most teachers assign homework to reinforce what was presented in class or to prepare students for new material. Less commonly, homework is assigned to extend student learning to different contexts or to integrate learning by applying multiple skills around a project. Little research exists on the effects of these different kinds of homework on student achievement, leaving policymakers with little evidence on which to base decisions (Cooper 1989; Foyle 1985; Murphy and Decker 1989).

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