

# The Weak Case Against Homework

---

by Jay Mathews  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, November 21, 2006; 11:48 AM

Two provocative books criticizing homework came out recently. Both are by reputable, well-informed authors, so I was surprised to find these good people trying to get away with hyperbole and incomplete data unworthy of them.

One book is "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing," by Alfie Kohn, one of the nation's most knowledgeable critics of traditional education, of which homework is a big part. The other book is "The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It," by Sara Bennett, an attorney and activist parent, and Nancy Kalish, a journalist who specializes in parenting issues.

Bennett and Kalish annoyed me by going on the "Today" show and saying that the average homework load, according to the latest studies, has "skyrocketed," a word they also use in their book. Kohn did much the same by asserting in the first chapter of his book that the weekly time spent studying at home by six- to eight-year-old children "more than doubled for youngsters of these ages" between 1981 and 1997.

That sounds bad, very bad, until you look at the actual data. Kohn's books are always richly footnoted, which is one of the reasons I like his work even if I don't always agree with it. But this time he used a stunt favored by less honest writers. He took important data that should have been part of his text on page 7 and buried it in a footnote on page 199. Only when I read the footnote did I learn that scholars Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, apparently using University of Michigan data, said homework for that age group increased from 52 minutes a week in 1981 to 118 minutes a week in 1997.

Homework is usually a daily, not a weekly chore. Seen in that light, Kohn's "doubled" load and Bennett's and Kalish's "skyrocketed" numbers actually mean the average six to eight year old spent about eight minutes a day on homework in 1981 and 17 minutes a day in 1997. According

to a 2003 study, that homework load has since increased to 22 minutes a day. That is less time than it takes to watch one episode of "SpongeBob SquarePants," but maybe I am missing something.

Could it be that teachers are saving the really burdensome homework for high schoolers? I checked the latest report by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research and found that not to be true either. The report says the weekday average for 15- to 17-year-olds went from 33 minutes in 1981 to 50 minutes in 2003. Those teens, crushed by such punishing assignments, were recovering their sense of self and their need for play by spending on average two-and-a-half hours a weekday watching television or doing non-study-related computer activities.

Bennett and Kalish try to cover up this inconvenient fact by citing another study that suggests a much heavier homework load. They say that, according to a 2006 Associated Press-AOL Learning Services poll of 1,085 parents, "elementary school students are averaging seventy-eight minutes per night while middle school students put in an average of ninety-nine minutes."

Notice that they still do not disclose that their "skyrocketed" increase in the Michigan data is based on much lower homework time figures. And there are more problems with the AP-AOL study, which is probably one reason why Kohn, more careful with his numbers, doesn't mention it. University of Michigan economics professor Frank Stafford, one of the nation's leading experts on time use, explained to me that parents -- the source of the AP-AOL numbers -- tend to be inaccurate about what their children do with their time, particularly if they are asked the question in that general way. The University of Michigan research, the gold standard in this field, uses diaries kept by children, the younger ones getting help from their parents, for just 24 hours of activity. The Michigan researchers call or visit them within a day or two and go over each entry carefully to get the amount of time correct.

The Michigan data exposes another problem in the anti-homework argument. When students are not doing homework, their principal pastimes are not play or reading for pleasure or any of the other meaningful activities homework protesters say are being cut back because of too much homework. Instead, they are watching a lot of television: one hour and 51 minutes a day for the average six- to eight-year-old and two hours and eight minutes a day for the average 15- to 17-year-old.

Kohn does not deal with this much in his book, but Bennett and Kalish do, in a breathtaking way:

"Sometimes all we want is to cuddle on the couch and enjoy some TV together. One college professor told us, 'It's very pleasant to relax with your kid watching something stupid like "Wheel of Fortune." But I feel like the school is prepared to scold me for that.' [Child psychologist Dan] Kindlon agrees: 'Schools shouldn't make the assumption that they are the only ones who can make a decent person and decent society, that parents are clueless. When you watch TV with your kids, you form a bond over that. You can talk about the characters on "Lost." It gives you a common language that can bring you closer, make the kids feel like you really understand and connect with them.' "

I remember the trashy pleasure of watching "Dawson's Creek" with my daughter, but I don't think either of us would consider that a useful substitute for practicing Spanish or reading about the rise of organized labor in 19th century America. Bennett and Kalish ought to explore the possibility of starting a new movement to embrace the tube, and get all the major networks to promote their book. Maybe that is why they got on the "Today" show, and Kohn didn't.

Both books are right to note that the research shows little need for any homework in elementary school. But faced with data indicating that middle school and high school homework correlate with higher achievement, they dodge and weave and look for ways to discount those studies. That is where I think they go wrong.

Their biggest problem, which neither book addresses, is the common sense reaction of parents like me to their anti-homework interpretation of the experimental data. The formal research interests me, but it does not influence my thinking as much as my own personal experiments, conducted frequently over the 15 years or so of my own schooling. I remember what class was like on days when I had not done my homework. I remember what it was like on days when I had. The latter was a much more engaging and useful educational experience than the former. Neither book explains why that practical and personal research should be ignored.

My other objection to the anti-homework argument grows out of my life as an education reporter. Long ago I tired of educational theory and decided instead to visit schools that significantly raised achievement of students, particularly disadvantaged students, and base my views on what those schools did, rather than on what the theorists said they ought to do.

Both books throw in a few examples of schools with high achievement despite severe limits or bans on homework. But they appear to be elementary schools, where we already know

homework is not important, or private schools and public schools that draw affluent children whose parents are likely to make up for any deficiencies in the academic demands of school.

For two decades I have been writing about inner city middle and high schools that have significantly increased student achievement. I have yet to encounter any of those programs that did not insist that school work extend significantly beyond the normal school day.

I asked one of my favorite educators, Deborah Meier, about this. She is on most issues allied with Kohn. They both embrace a progressive approach to education. They shun standardized testing and emphasize projects and oral examinations and student choice in learning. Meier started Central Park East High School, which applied progressive methods to inner city students in New York and had great results.

This is what she said when I asked about her homework policy at that school: "We told kids at our secondary school (grades 7 to 12) that the school's explicit work probably required a 40 hour week -- maybe more, maybe less.

"The school's official day was about six of that -- or 30 a week. We assumed that everyone had more to read than could be done while at school -- surely five-plus hours a week. And probably another five for exploring and preparing and revising work done during school hours. We said we'd keep the school doors open another 10 hours a week for those who found it most useful to do that extra work in school. We'd open an hour earlier at least, stay open an hour later, and be open Saturday mornings. 'Open' meant the library, which had books, computers and always at least one adult who could be helpful.

"The assignments were not explicitly 'homework,' Homework I insisted was the stuff you did at home for home -- the work your family and you needed to get done; and then there was reading and exploring on matters of your own personal agenda. And then there was the school work that couldn't be crammed into classroom time both because there wasn't enough time to do it all, and or because we each had our own agenda, ways of working and times and places to get things done."

That strikes me as a sensible approach to the whole subject. School work is one thing, and might have to be done after normal school hours. Homework is something else. Meier explained to me that what students learned at home, such as how to cook and repair furniture and care for children, might enrich their lives as much as history and math.

The two anti-homework books argue, reasonably, that some of the homework assigned children does not make sense. Bennett and Kalish provide good advice on what parents should do about that. But improving homework quality is not the same thing as abolishing it. It is better to fix a broken clock than give up trying to tell time.

Meier did not see any sense in abandoning the academic work that needed to be done after hours to keep the students' conversations with their teachers going and to make sure time in class was not wasted. I don't care if you call that homework or not, but it is important, and we ought to give students all the time they need to do it.