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By Alfie Kohn

A parent wrote me today to express her frustration not only with homework but with the response she hears from teachers when she complains about homework. Even those teachers who are sufficiently knowledgeable and brave to admit that research fails to show any meaningful benefit from making kids do homework – particularly in elementary school – tend to insist that pressure to cover an absurd number of topics prescribed by the state standards means they just can't get through it all during the day. Hence the apparent need for homework.

Here are four responses to this claim:

1. Lengthy lists of specific standards and benchmarks for each grade level and in each subject can be just as damaging to learning as the tests used to enforce them. Yet many teachers – even at the high school level, and certainly below

it – find a way to teach the required material without pushing the burden onto families and making kids work a second shift at home.

2. The best teachers go a step further: Rather than focusing on how to cover a “bunch o’ facts” more efficiently, they see their job as helping students to discover ideas. These are the teachers who really succeed at helping kids to become critical thinkers and excited learners. And, as a rule, these teachers are even less likely to assign homework.

3. Just because the practice of assigning homework seduces some teachers with its promise to make-up the gaps in what they’re able to get through during the day, that doesn’t mean students will actually learn what they’re made to do at home on their own. Even supporters of homework generally justify it as a way to have kids practice skills they were taught during the day, not as a way for them to teach themselves new material!

4. In any case, the disadvantages of homework – frustration, exhaustion, family battles, loss of time for kids to pursue other interests, diminution of interest in learning – far outweigh any theoretical gain in curriculum coverage.

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