

Teachers Who Have Stopped Assigning Homework

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By Alfie Kohn

Is it really possible to completely eliminate homework – or at least to assign it rarely, only when it's truly needed – even in high school? We keep hearing from educators who say it's not only possible but preferable to do so.

*Some of these folks were influenced by the arguments and data contained in *The Homework Myth*, while others came to realize on their own that it simply isn't necessary to make students work a "second shift" after a full day in school.*

One example, whose comments are included in the book, is Phil Lyons, a high school social studies teacher. He noticed that homework contributes to a situation where students see learning as just an unpleasant means to an end – "a way to accrue points." Homework typically consists of tasks that are "time-consuming, dreary, uninspiring and serve only to kill whatever motivation remains in students," Lyons says. Interestingly, he confesses having assigned a lot of homework at the beginning of his career "as a crutch, to compensate for poor lessons. . . . But as I mastered the material, homework ceased to be necessary." And so he assigned less and

less of it as the years went by. Today he assigns none at all, even to his A.P. classes.

“In addition to reinforcement type worksheets which I do not assign for homework I also do not assign reading to be done at home,” says Lyons. “Instead, I begin each day with an article (1-2 pages tops) that relates to the topics we’re studying. Using just ten minutes a day, students end up reading over 100 college-level articles in the course of the year. Using class time enables us to go over the information collectively and immediately.”

And the result? “Each year my students have performed better on the [A.P.] test...I would feel justified encroaching on students’ free time and I’d be willing to do the grading if I saw tangible returns, but with no quantifiable benefit it makes no sense to impose [homework] on them or me.”

However, Lyons did notice one clear difference after eliminating homework: “Students come in all the time and hand me articles about something we talked about in class or tell me about a news report they saw. When intrigued by a good lesson and given freedom [from homework], they naturally seek out more knowledge.” Academically speaking, then, the absence of homework – even in a high-level high school course – created absolutely no problems. Intellectually speaking, it has been positively beneficial.

Yet, Lyons observes, the prospect of questioning homework leads some people to react in much the same way that creationists do “when you try to explain evolution to them...Despite all the logical arguments, they refuse to believe less homework can lead to more and better learning.” But he quickly adds that, even in the sorts of communities where high school is regarded mostly as a source of credentials for the purpose of admission to selective colleges, people can be successfully invited to reconsider their assumptions:

I've encountered a lot of hostility from parents who think their children are being shortchanged because they came home and said they didn't get any homework. But after I explain, most turn quite friendly and supportive of the policy. Adults freely admit that they can't remember anything about the election of 1876 from their high school U.S. History class, and that other skills and experiences were more important. Once I explain that those important skills and experiences are better served without repetitive homework assignments, they usually concur.

*Testimony from other teachers has been rolling in since *The Homework Myth's* publication. To wit:*

"For the past month of the final term I assigned no outside homework. I teach English, so all reading and writing was done in class. I had to plan more carefully and navigate those times when the quicker readers or writers finished earlier. There are many positives that resulted. The kids were better rested, more interested in what we were doing in class, and the quality of the work they did in class was better. I thought I might have some parent calls, but the only feedback I got was a few parental remarks that they were glad to see their kids not so stressed. [The students' written] reflections convinced me that homework has a long-term detrimental impact on student learning. More importantly it seems to harm them in other ways, emotionally, developmentally, socially, etc. I regret not having done this earlier in the year. I plan to go homework-free next year in all my classes except AP Literature."

– Jim Drier, English teacher, Mundelein (IL) High School

"I've assigned homework once this semester. That was Geometry. In Algebra, I'm not sure I've assigned any... [I believe] students need a certain amount of practice for

each new concept. That amount certainly varies by the student, however. [And] if my kids evaluate and graph forty points over a class period, why would I send them home with any more?...The issue for most math teachers, I believe, is one of time management. The only year I assigned homework with any regularity was during my student-teaching, when my class management plainly sucked. By assigning whatever practice we didn't finish [as] homework, I was transferring the cost of my poor teaching onto my students." [Mr. Meyer investigated this issue for his Masters thesis and found no statistically significant difference in achievement between students who were and were not assigned homework. Students' attitudes about learning, and about math, were much lower for those who got homework, however.]

– Dan Meyer, high school math teacher in CA [from his blog]

"I always felt weird about assigning specific books for kids to read. How could you possibly find a book that is at all 34 kids' reading levels. Not to mention the fact they would all have to be excited about reading the book! . . . [With most homework, students] do what they already did in class, and the ones that get it waste their time doing it again and the ones that didn't just get discouraged and struggle through it. It particularly would break my heart when parents would tell me. . . how nights would be ruined. How could any teacher not feel bad about that? Then I would correct it and put it in their files and then they would stuff it in their backpacks never to be looked at again. Not to mention the inequity of some kids' parents being able to help and some not. . . . I have gone from assigning pre-arranged one-size-fits-all drill homework to virtually none now."

– Richard Coleman, San Diego teacher

"Assigning homework was something I did without really

thinking because it was something that had always been done... Not assigning homework has drastically cut down on the amount of time I spend mindlessly grading student homework and has increased the amount of time I spend preparing for lessons . . . looking for interesting activities and ... finding 'real world' examples of mathematics..."

*– Kate Degner, math teacher, Williamsburg (IA) High School
[from her Master's thesis]*

"I first read The Homework Myth while trying to get my daughter through a middle school that was obsessed with making kids do 2-3 hours of homework every night. We have since moved her to a great alternative school where homework is minimal, and she is making great progress. After reading your book, I thought about how I was teaching my [college] classes – lecture, then assign pages in the text workbook to be turned in at the next class. I realized that what I needed to do was more 'hands on' teaching in the classroom. I eliminated most of the homework assignments (except for major projects), and had the students do the exercises in class while I walked around giving help where needed. I told the students that the few assignments I would give are for the purpose of giving me feedback – 'Are they getting it?' This has made for a lot less busywork for me and for the students, and has brought me into closer contact with the students and how they are learning."

– David Moore, music theory teacher, Univ. of Tulsa

"Many kids are burned out on school and learning before they leave 3rd grade due to the increasing amount of homework being demanded of them. Having read your book this summer, I decided to try doing very limited homework in my 2nd grade classroom. What I've found is that the kids are less confused in math [as a result]. I encourage

reading, studying math facts, and let parents know that the kids are responsible for learning any missed spelling words. (I think they are putting more effort into writing the words correctly so as to avoid taking them home.) My parents are all happy and other 2nd grade teachers are trying it.”

– Carol Tuveson, elementary school teacher, Stratham (NH)
Memorial School

We’ve also heard about whole schools that have virtually eliminated homework rather than merely adjusting the amount or tweaking the details of its implementation:

– After Christine Hendricks, the principal of Grant Elementary School in Glenrock, WY, implemented a no-homework policy, a survey of parents revealed that children had more time to play, sleep, read, and eat dinner with their families and spent less time watching TV. Children also had an improved attitude towards going to school and parents found themselves in fewer conflicts with their children. [Source: stophomework.com]

– Banks County Middle School in Homer, GA, a lower-income, rural, public school, has eliminated virtually all homework. Principal Matthew Cooper explained: “First, I want our students to have the opportunity to be kids. If they cannot learn what they need in seven hours, something is wrong. A ‘No Homework’ policy actually results in better classroom instruction. It puts more responsibility on teachers to maximize class time. Second, homework was setting many of our students up for failure. It resulted in lower grades and lower self-esteem. Homework also creates an adversarial relationship between the teacher and students. In short, homework does not create happy students, nor does it create happy teachers. And it definitely does not create successful students.” The abolition of homework, he reports, has had a positive

effect even when judged by conventional measures such as grades and the number of students meeting state standards. [Source: personal communication from Matthew Cooper]

– “Oak Knoll Elementary in Menlo Park [California] has mostly banned homework, except reading, occasional projects or catch-up work. Addison Elementary in Palo Alto and the Berryessa School District in San Jose are discussing the issue. Since Bubb Elementary School in Mountain View relaxed its homework regimen, fourth-grader Elyse Fitzsimons has been reading on her own, ‘devouring books,” said her mother, Renée Fitzsimons. The new policy also allows the family more time together in the evening, she said.” [Source: San Jose Mercury News – February 25, 2007]

*(For more examples of teachers who have eliminated homework, and suggested strategies for parents who are concerned about the toll homework is taking on their children, please see the book *The Homework Myth* and the DVD *No Grades + No Homework = Better Learning.*)*

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