It’s not uncommon for schools to distribute surveys to parents in an effort to learn more about families’ experiences with homework. While it might be even more helpful to ask the students themselves, it’s always commendable when someone wants to check out how a policy is affecting those on the receiving end. Unfortunately, what’s most striking about these surveys is the way they’re usually biased in favor of the status quo – both by the wording of the items and the topics that don’t appear at all.

For example, a Goldilocks-style question such as “Do you think your child receives too much / too little / about the right amount of homework?” assumes that it’s necessary for at least some homework to be assigned and effectively excludes critical responses to the whole idea of making kids work a second shift after the school day is over.

A mischievous person might be tempted to right the balance by asking some questions that are loaded, for once, on the other side:

– Given that research fails to find any academic benefit to homework for students who are younger than about 15,* do you have any reason to believe they should be assigned homework anyway?

– Do you think children should be required to devote their afternoons and evenings to academic tasks – even at the
expense of their social, artistic, or physical development — or do you think six hours a day spent on academics is sufficient?

— In your opinion, who should determine what happens during family time: the families themselves or the schools?

— How likely do you think it is that homework will lead to optimal learning if all the students in a class — regardless of differences in their backgrounds, interests, and aptitudes — are required to complete the same assignment?

Less controversial, perhaps, would be these questions, which could form the core of a survey on the subject:

1. To what extent does your child’s homework seem designed to deepen his or her understanding of important ideas? In your opinion, is it actually having that effect?
2. Many educators and parents believe that the most important criterion by which school practices should be judged is whether they help children to become more excited about a given topic and about learning in general. How does your child’s homework measure up on that score? Is its effect on his or her desire to learn generally positive, neutral, or negative?
3. Do you think it makes more sense to assign homework on a regular basis or only when it’s truly needed?
4. Would you favor a voluntary system whereby families that want additional academic assignments after school could receive them while families that would rather allow their children to pursue other activities could opt for no homework?

* See The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing, chapter 2.