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## [After years of teachers piling it on, there's a new movement to ... Abolish homework](#)

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High school teacher Phil Lyons has become a heretic: He refuses to assign homework. At Palo Alto's Gunn High School, where he teaches world history and advanced-placement economics, his no-homework policy leaves many new students anxious and their parents aghast, at least initially.

[[Podcast: Jim Finefrock and Vicki Haddock on the backlash against homework.](#)]

"At back-to-school night every hand goes up, and they bombard me with various versions of the same question -- 'What are you doing?' " Lyons says. "This year I pre-empted it by opening with an explanation of why homework is a failed approach, and why their kids will actually learn more without it."

He also noted that his students achieved a 94 percent pass rate on the advanced-placement test, one of the highest in the country -- and a success rate that has risen since he jettisoned homework assignments.

Like Lyons, a growing minority of educators and researchers are calling for an end to homework as we know it -- and some are out to abolish it altogether.

Vigorous scrutiny of the research, they argue, fails to demonstrate tangible benefits of homework, particularly for elementary students. What it does instead, they contend, is rob children of childhood, play havoc with family life and asphyxiate their natural curiosity. Learning becomes a mind-numbing grind rather than an engaging adventure.

In an era of more rigorous academic standards and vertebrae-straining backpacks, most American schools seem to be assigning more homework in earlier grades. For two decades, experts have propelled this trend with dire warnings that students in nations such as Japan are besting Americans because they diligently do more homework.

Even the youngest students have begun sweating over worksheets. In Prince George County, Md., a school superintendent famously suggested that preschools were frittering away time better spent on academics by having their little ones nap. In the Bay Area, tutoring companies began tailoring services to a new pool of clients who had just mastered tying shoelaces.

An AP-AOL Learning Services Poll released earlier this year showed that most parents and teachers say children are getting the "right amount" of homework -- an average of from 79 minutes per night in elementary school to 105 in high school. And those who were dissatisfied said they preferred not less but more.

The perceived failures of creative spelling and "there-is-no-right-or-wrong-answer" math have made Americans wary of any newfangled educational fad that seems to encourage slacking. No homework, indeed.

Yet a rebellion against homework is brewing.

"The preponderance of research clearly shows that homework for elementary students does not make a difference in student achievement. It is hard to believe that a strategy used so extensively has no foundation,"

principal David Ackerman of Oak Knoll Elementary in Menlo Park wrote in a letter to parents this autumn as he put the brakes on homework.

Two new books read like manifestos against what authors consider an avalanche of unproductive take-home assignments. Their titles lay their beliefs on the line: the research critique "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing" by Alfie Kohn, and the more anecdotal "The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It" by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish.

At the same time, an international comparison by two Penn State professors has concluded that junior high students who scored highest in math tended to come from countries where teachers assign relatively little homework -- including Denmark, the Czech Republic and (take note) Japan. Conversely, the lowest-scoring students came from countries where teachers assign tons of homework, such as Iran, Thailand and Greece.

"It almost seems as though the more homework a nation's teachers assign, the worse the nation's students do," concluded researchers Gerald LeTendre and David Baker, who found Americans in the mid-range in the amount of homework assigned and in achievement.

Both sides in the homework wars tend to sling around the phrase "studies show" to bolster their arguments, but pity the poor parent or teacher who starts as an agnostic in search of answers. It's a daunting task, pitting dueling methodologies against sparring statistics.

"Researchers have been far from unanimous in their assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of homework as an instructional technique," summarized the Journal of Educational Psychology. "Their assessments ranged from homework having positive effects, no effects, or complex effects to the suggestion that the research was too sparse or poorly conducted" to say.

Case in point: the glowing assessment of math homework that sprang from a 1997 study by Julian Betts, professor of economics at UC San Diego. He concluded that schools would do more to improve student learning by assigning more homework than by pursuing more costly alternatives -- say, for example, lowering class size or hiring more experienced teachers. He even reported that time spent on homework "appears as effective as time spent in the classroom." In fact, Betts predicted that if teachers doubled the average amount of math homework in grades 7 to 11, it would advance students almost two full grade equivalents and ultimately boost their wages by 25 percent.

At the other end of the spectrum, when two Harvard scientists tracked how well students were doing in university science classes and attempted to correlate that to the amount of homework they did in high school, they concluded that homework alone made no difference.

Proponents cite evidence suggesting that homework instills responsibility, and they note that learning would proceed at a sluggish pace if classtime were consumed with students reading novels, memorizing vocabulary or writing research papers -- assignments better accomplished at home.

Opponents counter with evidence that homeworks' dictatorial nature undercuts responsibility, generates family conflict, and takes away time for creative play and natural learning.

The experts can't even agree on whether the quantity of assigned homework has increased, decreased or stayed the same in recent years.

The most widely regarded analysis of the effect of homework has been done by Harris Cooper of Duke University, who synthesized dozens of studies over time. He just published his most recent conclusions, based on updated research. The six studies he deemed most reliable, which compared similar students who were assigned homework with those assigned no homework, found that in the short-term, homework boosted scores on unit tests of the material, whether it was second-graders learning number placement or high school seniors studying Shakespeare.

No great surprise there -- but does it stick over time? Do students with homework achieve better overall mastery of the subject down the road?

In 12 other larger studies that linked the amount of homework to how well students perform on national academic tests -- taking into account other factors that might influence the connection -- he reports that 11 found a positive link between time spent on homework and long-term achievement.

Among research without such tight adjustments for other factors, more than 70 percent found that homework seemed to have a positive effect, but age made a huge difference. In fact, the benefit was twice as large for high school students than it was for junior high students, and twice as large again for junior high students than for elementary school students.

But at a tipping point, too much homework actually seemed to have a negative effect.

"We're waiting for the absolutely perfect study in which kids are randomly assigned to do or not do homework for their entire academic careers, and then we'll see for sure who did best -- but don't hold your breath for that one," Harris said.

Until then, he's sticking by his old recommendation -- used by many schools in the Bay Area and across the country -- that teachers assign up to 10 minutes per night per grade. In other words, a fourth-grader should be doing about 40 minutes per night and a 12th-grader about two hours.

Homework hasn't always been a given. It emerged in the national consciousness in the late 1800s, as more Americans continued school past the eighth grade. Even in its infancy, homework was controversial, as Steve Schlossman and Brian Gill showed in the *American Journal of Education*.

The practice was simply "barbarous," declared *Ladies Home Journal* editor Edward Bok in a 1900 editorial, "A National Crime at the Feet of American Parents." Shortly thereafter, California advocates persuaded the state to ban homework for students under the age of 15 and restrict it for older ones. Their argument: better to let them play in the sunshine.

By the 1930s, reformers were publicly likening homework to child labor. The American Child Health Association tagged both as leading killers of children who had contracted tuberculosis and heart disease.

But at every historical moment when criticism of homework began to approach a crescendo, a national crisis roused the public to support it. In 1957 it was the Soviet launch of the satellite Sputnik. In 1983 it was the release of the report "A Nation at Risk."

And of course, much of the debate over the existence and quantity of homework ignores the obvious question: quality. Not all assignments are created equal -- some are busy work, others inspired.

At this point, the only common ground is that everybody seems to agree on the value of reading at home for pleasure, whether the reader is in first grade or high school.

Of course, what works for the academically high-octane students at Gunn High, in the shadow of Stanford University, may not work elsewhere. It's a point Lyons concedes, although he reasons that disadvantaged students juggling jobs are even less likely to do -- much less benefit from -- homework.

"It all comes down to whether adults trust us to learn," said Gunn senior Akila Subramanian. "Having no homework lets you find your own motivation."

It sounds good -- and yet invites the inevitable question: What if that doesn't work?

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