

2014/20:Should Australian schools continue to set homework?

What they said...

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Parenting researcher, Dr Justin Coulston

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Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools

The issue at a glance

Toward the end of 2014 two reports were published which questioned the value of homework.

On August 20, 2014, the final report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools was tabled in the Victorian Parliament. The report raised numerous concerns about the nature and effectiveness of homework.

In September 2014 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Education at a Glance 2014 report was released. It suggested that Australian private school students were spending more than two additional hours a week on homework than students in public schools for no obvious academic benefit. (A slightly revised version of this report was released in October, 2014.)

These reports have prompted a consideration of the value of homework among some educators. The Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools report has urged a number of reforms intended to make homework more effective.

On September 1, 2014, an elementary school in Quebec, Canada, announced that it would be trialling a no homework policy over the following 12 months for its Grade 1 to 6 students. To date, no such action appears to have been taken by an Australian school.

Background

(The definition of homework supplied below is a slightly abbreviated version of that found in the Wikipedia entry titled 'Homework'. The full text can be accessed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homework>

The overview of homework was taken from Homework for the 21st Century Queensland Parliamentary Library 2007 pp.2-3

This material can be accessed at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/explore/ResearchPublications/ResearchBriefs/2007/RBR200701.pdf>

Definition of homework

Homework refers to tasks assigned to students by their teachers to be completed outside the class.

Common homework assignments may include a quantity or period of reading to be performed, writing or typing to be completed, problems to be solved, a school project to be built (such as a diorama or display), or other skills to be practised.

The history of homework

It appears that homework became common in the mid 19th Century and the amount assigned has waxed and waned according to political ideologies of the times.

When there has been community concern about falling educational standards, the response by schools has tended to be to assign more homework.

It has been claimed that homework reached popular status after the Soviet Union launched its artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, in 1957 causing panic among the United States and its allies and a consequent focus on science and technology in the education curricula. The desire was to ensure that American students

were not left behind by their Russian counterparts who were seen to be working harder and achieving more. Homework was considered to be an integral part of the new Cold War strategy. Progressive education theories that had denounced the value of homework in the early 20th Century were blamed for causing the USA to fall behind in technological and military supremacy.

This led to more homework being set and the momentum increased from there (apart from a temporary lull during the Vietnam War period).

However, National Assessment of Educational Progress (USA) data indicates that throughout the last two decades, most students at all year levels in the USA averaged less than one hour of homework per night. Even among 17 year olds, it appeared that only 12% spent over two hours on homework each night in 1999.

In an Australian study, it was found that around 60% of students surveyed spent less than one hour per school day on mathematics and science homework and around 20% spent one to two hours on mathematics homework. Just over half spent less than an hour per school day on subjects other than mathematics and science.

It has been reported that it is usually parents who demand that homework be set and many of them - particularly those whose children attend private schools - believe the barometer of whether a school is doing a good job is the amount of homework they set.

In the first half of the twentieth century, when child health experts and the progressive education movement in the USA opposed homework believing that it affected children's physical and mental health and deprived them of important non-school learning activities and family time, most parents still appeared to support it. Indeed, some educators who attempted to abolish homework in their schools came up against serious parental opposition.

In 1901, the state of California in the USA banned homework on the basis of it being a health risk and, even today, some USA schools still ban homework on weekends and control how much homework is given to students.

It appears that in most schools across Australia, the average amount of homework set for students is a maximum of 30 minutes per day for students up to Year 4, increasing to around 45 to 90 minutes per day for Year 9 students. In senior years, homework can range from one to three hours per night, with a further six hours on weekends during exam periods.

Internet information

On September 11, 2014, Teacher, the magazine of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) published an opinion piece titled, 'Does homework contribute to student success?'

The comment is a discussion of the recommendations made by the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools. It draws on current literature to highlight the limitations of homework. The comment can be accessed at <http://teacher.acer.edu.au/article/does-homework-contribute-to-student-success>

On September 10, 2014, The Advocate published a news report titled 'Private schools: more homework but no academic advantage says OECD'

The report can be accessed at <http://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/2548024/private-schools-more-homework-but-no-academic-advantage-says-oecd/?cs=7>

On September 5, 2014, CNN published a comment by Etta Kralovec, associate professor of teacher education and director of graduate teacher education at the University of Arizona South, titled 'Should schools ban homework?'

The opinion piece looks at the effects of homework and discussions around whether it should be banned. It can be accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/opinion/kralovec-ban-homework/>

On September 1, 2014, the Canadian newspaper, The Star, published a report titled 'Quebec elementary school bans homework'

The full text of this report can be found at http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/09/01/quebec_elementary_school_bans_homework.html

On August 22, 2014, The Daily Telegraph published an opinion piece by parenting researcher Dr Justin Coulston titled 'Why kids are better off without homework'.

The comment can be accessed at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/why-kids-are-better-off-without-homework/story-fni0cwl5-1227032684827>

On August 20, 2014, the final report for the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools was tabled in the Victorian Parliament.

The report discusses the advantages and limitations of homework and suggests some reforms.

The full text of the report can be accessed at http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/etc/Homework_Inquiry/Homework_Inquiry_final_report.pdf

On March 10, 2014, The Stanford Report published an article on the findings of Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Education who co-authored a report published in 2013 in the Journal of Experimental Education. The report outlined research findings on the negative social and psychological consequences of homework.

The Stanford Report article can be accessed at <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/march/too-much-homework-031014.html>

In December, 2013, the Tasmanian Department of Education released its revised Homework Guidelines. They are due for review in June, 2015.

The current guidelines can be accessed at <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Homework-Guidelines.pdf>

In May, 2012, Public Schools New South Wales released their most recent 'Homework Policy'. The policy document includes detailed discussion of research findings regarding different aspects of homework.

The policy research scan can be accessed at https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/homework/Hwk_Res%20scan.pdf

On March 29, 2012, The Guardian published an article on the results of research conducted by academics from the Institute of Education, Oxford and Birkbeck College, part of the University of London.

The report was titled 'Two hours' homework a night linked to better school results'

The full text of the article can be found at <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/mar/29/homework-linked-better-school-results>

On July 10, 2009, familyschool.org.au released a discussion paper by Naomi Alanne and Rupert Macgregor titled 'Homework: What are the upsides and downsides? Towards a more effective policy and practice in Australian school communities'

The full text can be found at <http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/1913/7955/4766/homework090710.pdf>

In February, 2007, Nicolee Dixon produced a research brief for the Queensland Parliament titled 'Homework for the 21st Century'

The piece is a detailed study of the history of homework and the arguments surrounding it.

It can be accessed at <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/explore/ResearchPublications/ResearchBriefs/2007/RBR200701.pdf>

Arguments in favour of homework

1. Homework can have positive effects on academic achievement, especially for more senior students

There is evidence of a positive effect on students' academic achievement (as defined by school results)

from homework. In an analysis published in 1994 of 20 studies conducted since 1962, it was found that high schoolers aged 14 to 16 years who did homework performed 69% better than those who did not do homework but for those students aged 11 to 13 years, the average homework effect was much less. In primary school, homework appeared to have no effect on achievement.

Confirming the above findings is more recent research published in 2006 conducted by Duke University researchers in the United States, lead by Professor Harris Cooper which showed a positive correlation between student achievement and homework. The researchers reviewed over 60 studies on homework between 1987 and 2003 and found that the positive correlation was much stronger for high schoolers than for primary school students.

On March 29, 2012, the Department of Education of the United Kingdom published the results of a survey which indicated that there were substantial academic benefits to be gained for those students who completed regular homework. The research was conducted by academics from the Institute of Education, Oxford and Birkbeck College, part of the university of London.

Spending more than two hours a night doing homework is linked to achieving better results in English, maths and science, according to a major study which has tracked the progress of 3,000 children over the past 15 years. Spending any time doing homework showed benefits, but the effects were greater for students who put in two to three hours a night.

The findings on homework run counter to previous research which shows a relatively modest link between homework and achievement at secondary school. The academics involved in the latest research say their study emphasises what students actually do, rather than how much work the school has set.

Pam Sammons, a professor of education at Oxford University, said that time spent on homework reflected the influence of the school - whether pupils were expected to do homework - as well as children's enjoyment of their subjects.

Professor Simmons has stated, 'That's one of the reasons Indian and Chinese children do better. They tend to put more time in. It's to do with your effort as well as your ability.'

2. There are a number of activities that students can valuably perform at home

Historically homework has been condemned as often being made up of 'busy work', essentially pointless tasks set merely to keep students occupied, or drilling exercises requiring children to learn by rote.

The 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools states that 'legitimate purposes for homework including: introducing new content; practising a skill or process that students can do independently but not fluently; elaborating on information that has been addressed in class to deepen students' knowledge; and providing opportunities for students to explore topics of their own interest.'

The Tasmanian Department of Education Homework Guidelines has presented in detail the types of activity suitable as homework. These include activities which are short, frequent and regularly monitored by the teacher. The work should be clearly related to what is being taught in class and regular feedback should be given. It should be relevant in that it is in line with the achievement of set outcomes. It needs to be varied and engaging and differentiated so that students of differing abilities are all given work they can meaningfully complete. Generally, the work being set for homework needs to have been explicitly taught in class. The work should consolidate revise or apply classroom learning.

Some of the homework set should develop students' independence as learners through extension activities such as investigating, researching, writing, designing and creating. It should assist students to prepare for upcoming classroom learning by having them formulate ideas, collect relevant materials or complete surveys or questionnaires.

It has also been noted that homework should be set which is accessible to students so that they are able to complete it without significant external assistance.

3. Completing homework can improve work habits and students' attitude to school

It is claimed that homework can have positive effects on more than a students' academic achievements while at school. Some educationalists claim that it results in improved attitudes toward learning, greater

self-reliance and organisational skills.

In 2007 an overview was prepared for the Queensland Government titled 'Homework for the 21st Century'. It included the following observations, 'Some perceived long-term effects of homework on academic achievement and learning include an improved attitude towards school; better study habits and skills; and the encouragement of learning during leisure time. Non-academic long-term effects are said to include improved self-direction and self-discipline; better time organisation; more inquisitiveness; and enhanced independent problem solving.'

There is also a view that homework can help to develop good work habits and job management skills for later in life. A spokesperson for the Queensland Department of Education is reported to have said that 'Homework is... important for developing lifelong study habits that will hold students in good stead when they move into tertiary study and ...work.'

4. Homework can improve connections between parent and school

The New South Wales Department of Education and Training website states that 'homework bridges the gap between learning at school and learning at home and...enables parents/carers to see how their child is progressing.'

The same point has been made in the 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools which states, 'Homework can have the effect of helping a parent to understand the progress the child is making or otherwise and can therefore help make parent-teacher interviews more meaningful.'

This Inquiry's report indicates that 'one of the key benefits of homework is to engage and inform parents of their children's educational progress... [providing] a conduit for information that otherwise parents wouldn't have. By understanding what their children are doing, parents will be better able to provide appropriate support.'

The Victorian Association Catholic Primary School Principals (VACPSP) sees parents as vital element to a child's education, including homework. VACPSP members encourage parents to assist their child with his/her work at home in a number of ways, including asking whether homework has been set and ensuring their child keeps a homework diary; acknowledging their child's success and asking how his/her homework and class work are progressing; helping their child to plan and organise a time and space for completing work at home; assisting their child to complete work at home by discussing key questions and directing him/her to resources; and discussing homework in their child's first language (where English is not the main language spoken at home) and linking it to his/her previous experience.

Ms Trish Jelbart of the Mathematical Association of Victoria has stated that 'Homework provides a fantastic opportunity for a direct communication about the actual work that students are doing in the classroom to the parents so the parents can really interact with the actual learning that is going on.'

5. Homework can be an opportunity for students to utilise resources outside the school

It has been claimed that homework can be the first step toward lifelong learning as not only does it encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning it shifts the learning focus away from the school and into the larger community within which the student will spend his or her adult life..Thus homework tasks can be an opportunity for students to utilise community resources such as public libraries. It can also be a chance for them to access community groups of a variety of types for information to assist their studies.

The Homework Policy of the Queensland Department of Education states, 'Homework provides students with opportunities to consolidate their classroom learning, pattern behaviour for lifelong learning beyond the classroom and involve family and community members in their learning.'

A number of schools have explicitly made the link between homework and fostering lifelong learning. The James Young High School refers to its homework policy as its Lifelong Learning Policy and states, 'The Lifelong Learning Policy aims to enable each child to reach their full potential by developing an awareness and understanding, among all stakeholders, of the importance of homework in relation to learning.' The school's policy includes encouraging students to use community resources in order to

complete homework activities.

Another means of establishing connections between the students' enquiries and the wider community is the formation of homework clubs. These appear to have been of particular value in helping immigrant students.

The 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools has acknowledged 'the extraordinary cohort of students, student organisations and on the ground professional and volunteer groups, such as the Centre for Multicultural Youth, that are offering such worthy support for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, through their work with community based homework clubs.'

Arguments against homework

1. Homework does not appear to enhance student performance, especially among primary schoolchildren. It has been claimed that numerous studies in different countries over many years have failed to demonstrate a significant benefit to students from the completion of homework.

The 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools has concluded. 'The debate about the effectiveness of homework as a tool of learning has continued for more than a century. There have been more than 130 studies published related to the subject and these have reached different and, at times, quite contradictory conclusions.'

Similarly, the OECD's Education at a Glance 2014 report released in September 2014 and, in amended form, the following month stated that Australian private school students spend two hours a week more on homework than their public school counterparts but do not perform better academically when socio-economic advantage is taken into account.

Australian private school students achieved an average score 37 points higher than public school students, above the OECD average of 28 points. But - in a trend seen across the world - there was no statistically significant difference between the results of private and public school students when the economic, social and cultural status of students and schools was accounted for.

The report found that while private school students appear to benefit academically from their relatively privileged social backgrounds, the private school programs do not contribute significantly to these students' better outcomes. This includes the greater emphasis on homework in private schools, which does not appear to result, of itself, in improved academic achievement.

Primary school students, in particular, have been shown to demonstrate no academic benefit as a result of completing homework. A 1999 study led by a researcher at the University of Durham in the United Kingdom had found that there was no evidence that homework in primary schools led to increased academic performance.

Dr Sue Thomson, a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), has noted that many of the countries with the highest scoring students on achievement tests, such as Japan, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, assign little homework. Some critics have suggested that the more homework a nation's teachers give, the poorer that country's results on the achievement tests appear likely to be.

2. Homework is inequitable

Homework raises major equity issues because it highlights the difference in socio-economic and cultural background between students. Some students come from home backgrounds which facilitate the completion of homework tasks whereas others face impediments within their home environments. Disadvantage may result from non-English speaking home environments, from cultural disparities, from poverty or from intellectual disability.

Within the school setting, equity issues can be minimised as the same opportunities can be provided to all students, often by providing additional assistance to those who require it. When students are outside the school this is no longer the case. To the extent that homework is compulsory and forms part of an assessment regime, some students will face unequal opportunities to learn and earn grades. Those students from disadvantaged backgrounds are being effectively excluded from the opportunity to succeed.

The 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools concluded, 'Homework ... [impacts] on students from indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as well as those with a disability and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.'

A similar point was made by Etta Kralovec, associate professor of teacher education and director of graduate teacher education at the University of Arizona South, in an opinion piece published by CNN on September 5, 2014. Referring primarily to the United States, Kralovec stated, 'The experience of homework is very different depending on which side of the economic divide you sit. The unequal distribution of educational resources means that some students go home to nannies, well-stocked home libraries, tutors, well-educated parents and high-speed Internet. Others students go home to caring for siblings in crowded apartments and often-absent parents who barely make ends meet.'

The expectation that students will be able to access various forms of technology, including computers and the Internet, also creates problems for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are not able to do so.

In 2012 the newly elected French president proposed abolishing homework largely on equity grounds. President Francois Hollande stated, 'An education program is, by definition, a societal program. Work should be done at school, rather than at home.' He added that the homework ban was a matter of equality, since wealthier children have parental support at home that poor children do not.

3. Homework can lead to negative learning behaviours and attitudes

It has been claimed that homework fosters negative attitudes among students and that many resort to undesirable behaviours in order to appear to have completed it.

Consultant adolescent psychologist, Dr Carr-Gregg, recently undertook an Internet survey of 1,178 primary school students' attitudes to homework. The survey found that 71% thought they were given too much and 57% did not believe their teachers read it when they handed it in. Further, 20% of the students reported that they often copied and pasted their homework from the Internet and 22% had their parents complete their homework for them.

In 2009 Naomi Alanne and Rupert Macgregor completed a discussion paper on homework and its effects for familyschool.org.au. Their findings indicated 'The intense pressure to complete homework can lead to students cheating by copying from other students or getting their parents to complete the work for them - practices which could instill a negative long-term work ethic, such as a habit of relying too much on others.'

Alanne and Macgregor also noted, 'The American Psychological Association has found that students who "perceive that achievement is defined by schools and teachers in terms of grades and performance, worry about school, and believe they can get rewards for doing well in class such as getting out of homework" are more likely to cheat, and to "avoid using deep level cognitive processing strategies such as trying different ways to solve a problem".'

4. Homework can impede social and physical development

It has been claimed that homework commitments can have a negative impact on students' social and physical development, dramatically reducing the time they have available for interactions with family, friends and their local communities and limiting their opportunities to engage in activities which will promote their physical fitness.

In July, 2013, Denise Pope a senior lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Education published in the Journal of Experimental Education that in high-performing schools, too much homework can reduce student time to foster skills in the area of personal responsibility.

The report Pope co-authored stated that both the survey data and student responses indicated that spending too much time on homework meant that students were 'not meeting their developmental needs or cultivating other critical life skills.' Students were more likely to drop activities, not see friends or family, and not pursue hobbies they enjoy. Pope concluded, 'Young people are spending more time alone, which means less time for family and fewer opportunities to engage in their communities.'

It has also been claimed that homework has negative impacts on the family unit. In an article published in

The Daily Telegraph on August 22, 2014, parenting researcher, Dr Justin Coulston, stated, 'Homework increases family conflict. And the more parents help with children's homework, the more tension children experience.'

Dr Coulston further stated, 'Homework places additional burdens on parents - who often don't know how to help their children anyway.'

It is also claimed that reductions in student leisure time as a result of the need to complete homework is undermining students' physical health. More than half the Australian population is overweight or obese and 1.5 million of these are under 18. Adolescent psychologist, Dr Michael Carr-Gregg has acknowledged that there is no guarantee that giving children less homework will increase their physical activity, however, he has stressed that the current levels of assigned homework are an obstacle to being active.

5. Homework can prompt student stress and depression

In July, 2013, Denise Pope a senior lecturer at Stanford Graduate School of Education published in the Journal of Experimental Education that 'the effects of homework challenge the traditional assumption that homework is inherently good.' In a survey conducted on a group of 4,317 students from ten high-performing schools in upper-middle class California, 'the results regarding the welfare and behavioural engagement of the students showed that the homework they were being given was the main cause of their stress.'

Fifty-six percent of the students surveyed considered homework a primary source of stress. Forty-three percent viewed tests as a primary stressor, while 33 percent put the pressure to get good grades in that category. Less than 1 percent of the students said homework was not a stressor.

In an interview with CBS Sacramento, Pope further indicated that a 'clear connection' was found between homework-induced stress and physical health problems. These included migraines, ulcers and weight loss. Similarly, Dr Michael Nagel, Associate Professor of Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, has claimed that too much homework can play a part in causing students stress and anxiety, which 'can have a dangerous impact on their not-fully-formed brains.'

Dr Nagel explains that stress releases chemicals in children's brains with which they are too immature to cope.

It has also been claimed that children with learning deficits are prone to depression when confronted with learning tasks they cannot manage. The 2014 report of the Inquiry into the Approaches to Homework in Victorian Schools states, 'Children with learning disabilities may be more vulnerable to anxiety and depression than others because processing deficits may make the environment feel overwhelming.'

Unmanageable homework tasks can prompt such anxiety and depression in these children because when at home they are not in a situation in which they can seek teacher assistance with a problem.

Further implications

Though homework can clearly have deficiencies and negative consequences, it seems unlikely that any Australian state will follow the lead of the elementary school in Quebec which trialled a homework ban, though there are individual schools in Australia which have a no homework position.

Every state education department in this country has a homework policy which indicates its commitment to fostering homework. A number of these states, including Victoria, have undertaken research which indicates that homework needs to be thoughtfully set and part of an otherwise successful curriculum and school ethos in order to it be effective. Therefore, what seems likely is that attempts will continue to be made to improve the operation of homework so that its advantages can be maximised and its negative effects reduced.

The following suggestions come from an opinion piece published in The Conversation on November 13, 2012 and written by Richard Walker, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education and Social Work at University of Sydney, and Mike Horsley, Director, Learning and Teaching Education Research Centre at Central Queensland University. (The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://theconversation.com/should-australian-schools-ban-homework-10295>)

'Homework needs to be reformed. Generally speaking, homework needs to be better planned by teachers

and needs to be of a higher quality.

But it won't be easy - homework needs to be challenging for students but not too challenging, it needs to be interesting and motivating, and students also need adequate feedback.

So the way forward is to start a conversation between teachers, parents and students about the sort of homework students need. The routine of completing homework (if done well) can help with self-management, planning and organising skills, but these skills take a long time to learn.

Homework setting and practice will have to change so that students are learning about self-management and self-regulation. The sort of homework tasks that promote learning these skills will not focus on drill and practice but require homework tasks where students make some decisions and choices and also exercise some autonomy.

At the same time, guidance for students who do not have family support will require planning (and provision) to complete these sorts of more complex homework tasks.'

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

The Australian, September 10, 2014, page 7, news item by Justine Ferrari, 'Elite schools top for homework'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/education/private-schools-have-twohour-lead-on-homework-burden/story-fn59nlz9-1227053077678>

Herald-Sun, December 15, 2014, page 31, comment (peripheral interest - ref to benefits of travel / holidays, incl being taken out of school) by Rita Panahi, 'World can be our children's classroom'.

<http://m.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/world-can-be-our-childrens-schoolroom/story-fni0fhh1-1227155810898>