

EDUCATION

When Homework Is Useless

Education experts offer their thoughts on how—if at all—schools should assign, grade, and use take-home assignments.

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This is the third installment in our series about school in a perfect world. Read previous entries on [calendars](#) and [content](#).

We asked prominent voices in education—from policy makers and teachers to activists and parents—to look beyond laws, politics, and funding and imagine a utopian system of learning. They went back to the drawing board—and the chalkboard—to build an educational Garden of Eden. We’re publishing their answers to one question each day this week. Responses have been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Today’s assignment: The Homework. Will students have homework?

Rita Pin Ahrens, *the director of education policy for the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center*

Homework is absolutely necessary for students to demonstrate that they are able to independently process and apply their learning. But who says homework has to be the same as it has been? Homework might include pre-reading in preparation for what will be covered in class that day, independent research on a student-chosen topic that complements the class curriculum, experiential learning through a volunteer activity or field trip, or visiting a website and accomplishing a task on it. The structure will be left to the teachers to determine, as best fits the learning objective, and should be graded—whether by the teacher or student. Students will be held accountable for their homework and understand that it is an integral part of the learning process.

Nicholson Baker, *the author of* *Substitute: Going to School With a Thousand Kids*

No mandatory homework in elementary school. None. No homework in middle school and high school unless a kid wants to do it. Chronic nightly homework makes for guilt, resentment, and lies—and family arguments and bone weariness. Parents become enforcers. It gets ugly.

Carol Burris, *the executive director of the Network for Public Education*

When I was a high-school Spanish teacher, I never graded homework. If students came in with homework, I knew one of two things—either they did it, or they had a good friend who did it. I assigned a reasonable amount, never spent more than five minutes of class time reviewing it, and would collect samples as an informal assessment of whether my students understood the prior day's lesson.

There is really no reason to assign homework in the early grades, although I know it makes parents anxious when their kids come home without it. Middle-school students will not receive more than an hour of homework, and in high schools, no more than two hours a night will be assigned.

Homework in high school helps students reflect on new learning and it gives them feedback as to whether they understand what they were taught. It also develops good habits for college, especially writing and independent-reading skills.

The research on homework shows beneficial effects on learning when appropriate assignments are given and completed, and the benefits increase with grade level.

There is little to no learning benefit in the early grades but substantial benefit by grade 12.

Catherine Cushinberry, *the executive director of Parents for Public Schools*

Homework provides an opportunity for families to be engaged in the learning process, reinforces what has been taught during the school day, and provides students with an opportunity to learn how to be accountable and responsible to others and meet deadlines. Homework will not be graded, but will provide the class an opportunity to work together either as a large or small group to promote peer-to-peer learning while analyzing the assignment. Incentives that are student-specific will be used to encourage preparedness. If a student has mastered a topic, then he or she will be given an assignment that challenges them toward the next level of that work. The structure of homework will depend on the topic. Some assignments might require students to report on real-world observations, try at-home experiments, or allow them to develop ways that will each student best learn the information.

Michael Horn, *the co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute*

Students will have work that may be done in school or at home. We will cease seeing things as just “homework.” The goal of work is to help students build mastery of knowledge and skills that can be applied in different contexts. Students will do as much or as little of certain tasks until they have built mastery. For some students, that will take place at home. Others will do most of their work surrounded by their peers and teachers at school. We will move beyond the notion of letter grades, where we accept failure as part of the system, to a competency-based notion in which students either master a competency or keep working until they do.

As Sal Khan writes in his book, *The One World Schoolhouse*, “Homework [is] necessary because not enough learning happens during the school day. Why is there a shortage of learning during the hours specifically designed for it? Because the broadcast, one-pace-fits-all lecture—the technique that is at the very heart of our standard classroom model—turns out to be a highly inefficient way to teach and learn.” With blended learning on the rise, we can do better now.

Richard Kahlenberg, *a senior fellow at The Century Foundation*

Homework, in the popular parlance, is thought of as a necessary but dreary component of education. (An editor once disparagingly described a book manuscript I submitted as feeling like “homework.”) But if properly envisioned, homework can be exhilarating, an opportunity for students to venture independently to pursue in-depth topics first broached in the classroom.

To excite students, homework will be experiential and hands-on. It will encourage students to be explorers and to move beyond what is familiar to them. It will take them into new neighborhoods to interact with people of racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds different than their own. Amy Stuart Wells and her colleagues at Teachers College, Columbia University, note mounting evidence that “diversity makes us smarter.” They write that when students come in contact with people “different from themselves,” the “novel ideas and challenges such exposure brings leads to improved cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem solving.” The primary implication of the research is the need to diversify schools themselves, but short of that, homework assignments, even in racially isolated schools, will encourage students to venture out and learn from all that the world has to offer.

Michelle Rhee, *the founder of StudentsFirst and the former chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools*

Students will have opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of subjects through homework, but the days of elementary-school students carrying home backpacks full of homework that are heavier than they are will be gone. Students will have in-class and after-class opportunities to complete assignments, and homework will never be given merely for the purpose of being given. Teachers will emphasize the skill sets they would like to grow with assignments, from essay writing to computations. “Flipped” classrooms, where students watch lectures at home the night before and then use class time to engage in discussion and ask teachers in-depth questions, will also be more prevalent.

Randi Weingarten, *the president of the American Federation of Teachers*

Homework will depend on what's needed to inform the coming lesson or to reinforce the lesson students just learned. We will never give homework for the sake of giving it.

Excessive homework is excessively stupid—and more and more evidence tells us that assigning hours of homework for very young students is useless at best and counterproductive at worst.

Homework only helps if every child has a chance get something useful from it—so programs to provide resources for kids who might not have homework support at home are critical, whether that's tutoring, study labs, or just a safe place to sit and think. And while we're at it, let's not pretend that everyone has access to high-tech tools at home.

Check back tomorrow for the next installment in this series.

