**Homework: some is good, more is not better**

Every few years, usually at the start of the school year, researchers, parents, teachers and students debate the value of doing schoolwork at home.

There has been a shift towards less homework recently. School boards across Canada have different policies, but most of them have children do 10 more minutes of homework for each grade they complete. Some districts, such as Vancouver, do not allow homework up to Grade 3. However, by Grade 12, most students will take home two hours of work each school day. Parents and students are now asking what they should be getting out of those 10 hours a week.

Criticism of homework

Critics of homework point out that it can create an uneven playing field between students. "In shifting learning from the classroom to the home, we risk shifting benefits to middle and upper-middle class families. With a parent close by, a computer and internet access and a quiet, organized space for homework, kids in upper-middle class families have a real advantage," says Peter Chaban, a teacher and researcher at The Hospital for Sick Children.

Chaban's views are reflected in research conducted by Etta Kralovec, a long-time teacher and former professor of education. Her research into the effect of homework on families in general found that it often punishes students from lower-income families. These disadvantaged children "have family responsibilities, parents who work at night and no educational resources in their homes." The tasks that are done as homework, Kralovec says, need to be moved back into the school, even if that means extending hours and hiring more teachers. The payoff would be a school system in which working class and disadvantaged children get an equal chance to learn.

Another advantage to schoolwork instead of homework is closer teacher attention to the work students do. Parents cannot do a child's research or math problems for them if the work is done in the classroom.

Understanding the importance of homework

It is important for parents to talk to teachers and understand the importance of the homework they assign. Harris Cooper, an education researcher and professor at Duke University, led research into how children, parents and teachers feel about homework. He found that if parents are not convinced of the value of homework, their kids will not be as likely to do it.

This finding is especially true if parents and students both see homework as something that takes time away from other useful activities. For example, Grade 12 students working two hours each day on their homework may be giving up a lot of informal learning opportunities, such as a part-time job or the chance to practice a musical instrument or build an athletic skill.

Government and school board guidelines on homework

Sometimes students experience a teacher handing out busywork, consistently not marking homework or assigning students to learn new material on their own. "Homework should not be a discovery process - that's for the classroom. The curriculum is supposed to be taught, not assigned," says Chaban.

[H]omework guidelines and policies - and others - have a number of common themes.

* Homework works if it gives an opportunity to practice skills or reinforce information learned very recently.
* Too much homework is bad, especially in younger grades. Children find it hard to sit still and focus, especially with the distractions of home around them. Homework should fit into a child's [ability] to remain focused on a task. More is not better.
* Homework should not be used to introduce new material or difficult tasks. Parents should not be responsible for teaching the school curriculum.
* Homework should never be used to punish a child or to fill time. A guideline of an hour a day does not mean that the hour must be filled with busywork if it cannot be spent usefully on reviewing what was learned during the day.
* Parents play an important role in homework. Teachers rely on parents to neither **undermine** [remove the value of] nor take over a child's homework.

Homework: some is better than none

Although researchers may differ on where homework is best completed, there is general agreement that children need to time to practice the skills and reinforce the information they learn at school. Children also need to learn how to set aside time for important work, plan large projects, and discover information on their own.

If parents and educators keep these goals in mind, homework need not go in and out of fashion every decade or so and the work that students take home can be valuable to their education.