

# EDUCATION UPDATE

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## DOES HOMEWORK HELP?



Illustrations by Donald Eli

Homework is an age-old tradition, but could inequitably penalize students in poverty. Some educators are weighing whether to redesign it or stop assigning it.

**W**hen Christina Torres started teaching in 2009, she handed out nightly homework assignments—just as her own teachers had done. Her policy was not unlike those used in other classrooms in her school at the time or in classrooms all over the country.

But her students at Animo Ralph Bunche Charter High School in Los Angeles, about 95 percent of whom

received free or reduced lunch, often didn't do the assignments. In the first semester, she estimates that just 20 to 30 percent completed their homework. Many said they had simply forgotten about it.

The struggle to get kids to do their homework is not new. But while punchlines about the excuses students use to explain their incomplete homework are

many, the reasons why they don't complete an assignment are much more complex. And so is understanding the effects that punitive homework policies have on them. With rising poverty rates among the nation's public school students, educators are reconsidering how homework might hurt the very students it is expected to help.

### What We Don't Know About Homework

A robust body of research on the efficacy of homework exists, though the results are mixed. Education researcher Harris Cooper and his colleagues analyzed studies on homework conducted between 1987 and 2003. In some studies, they

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found, students who completed homework scored higher on unit tests than their peers who didn't do homework, but the correlation was weak at the elementary level. In other studies, the researchers identified no strong evidence between homework completion and higher grades.

"We've had doubts about whether homework was good or not for a long time," says Cathy Vatterott, education professor and author of *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs* (ASCD, 2009). "We still can't prove it's effective. The research is flawed and idiosyncratic."

At the same time, there is a renewed focus on the impact school practices like homework have on students in poverty. In her book *The End of Homework*, Etta Kralovec writes about her study on 45 former high school dropouts attending an alternative school in Maine. When asked why they wanted to drop out, the students mentioned crowded, chaotic home lives and overworked parents. An inability to complete homework was also among their top reasons for leaving school.

"That was about as powerful an indictment that you can get in terms of the effect homework has on kids in poverty," says Vatterott.

### How Can Homework Hurt Kids in Poverty?

Although some classrooms and schools have eliminated homework, most students will have to contend with it throughout their education careers. But at what cost?

"One of the most serious [consequences of homework] is the exacerbation of social and economic inequities that already exist," says Myron Dueck, ASCD author and vice principal at Summerland Secondary School in British Columbia, Canada. While most students struggle with the everyday pressures and stresses of adolescence, Dueck says students who lack income security, food security, or housing may find a small thing like homework an insurmountable task.

As a result of these barriers, students may experience worse educational outcomes, including not graduating from high school, completing college, or obtaining steady employment. Throughout his lengthy career as both a classroom teacher



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and administrator, Dueck came across many students who did not have the luxury of free time, a quiet space to work, reliable computer access, or even working electricity. All of that makes completing assignments at home difficult.

In districts that have become home to scores of recent immigrants, the inequities are exacerbated. Beginning 10 years ago, the Rogers School District in Arkansas saw an influx of Mexican and Central American immigrants who came to work in chicken processing plants or at Wal-Mart's world headquarters, among other employers. Toni Thorn, the district's counselor for Latino students, said that at least 35 percent of her students work at fast food restaurants, auto body shops, grocery stores, or on construction sites after school.

Even when students don't have part-time jobs, their household responsibilities can resemble one. For these students, after-school activities might include picking up and caring for younger siblings and, ironically, making sure *their* homework gets done, even if it means their own goes untouched.

"Very often both parents are working and the kids have to come home and clean the house and cook," says Thorn. A student from El Salvador who takes care of his younger siblings recently asked Thorn to assign him to in-school suspension, so he'd have time to catch up on his work. "He just felt so far behind," says Thorn. "He couldn't get caught up."

And often, students are too ashamed or embarrassed to explain their home situations to their teachers.

To address the problem of chronic missed assignments, high school teachers in Rogers incorporated music and sensory objects into their heavily scaffolded lessons. This engages students for longer periods of time, they say, enabling teachers to pack more learning into class and lighten the homework load.

### What Homework Is Good Homework?

For teachers looking to maximize its benefits, experts say the best homework is carefully thought out and assigned strategically. Vatterott recommends assigning homework only after students have mastered a

skill. “The most effective homework is used for practice or to check for understanding,” she says. “We want [homework] to give feedback to the teacher.”

Homework should reinforce a student’s confidence in their abilities, not shatter it. Avoid assigning a new concept as homework, even if it’s an attempt to make up for lost time in class, advises Vatterott. Also, consider *why* you’re assigning homework: Associating homework with learning responsibility, for instance, unfairly “assumes that our kids who are not doing homework aren’t already responsible,” says Torres.

Furthermore, try not to assign homework merely to give students something to do. When Torres began to reevaluate her classroom policies toward the end of her first year teaching, she looked at each homework assignment and asked herself, “Why did I assign this?” She found a host of assignments with no real learning objective attached to them.

Today, she rarely assigns homework, instead making time for students to practice skills in class, with supervision. It helps that at University Lab School, a charter school in Hawaii where she now teaches 7th and 9th grade English, middle schoolers have a study hall built into their schedule. When Torres does give homework, the assignments are short and students have ample opportunity to complete all or most of it in school, where fast Internet and resources are available to everyone.

### Should We Grade Homework?

While the mere assignment of homework can cause problems for some students, the lasting damage is done in the gradebook. For students who can’t complete homework because, for example, they don’t have working Internet, losing points (or a social activity such as recess) can be stigmatizing and counterproductive. “We are basically punishing them for their poverty,” says Vatterott. “We make it worse in terms of how kids feel about school and about themselves as learners when you put a point value on it,” she explains.

Dueck describes the penchant to grade homework as a focus on “process” instead of “product.” In other words, if the goal is to teach skills, then grades should reflect how well students perform them, not how many assignments they complete. He suggests avoiding traditional grading

scales for homework, opting instead for a standards-based grading system. The study skills homework helps teach are important, he says, but should be evaluated separately.

In his own classroom (Dueck spends one-quarter of his time teaching), he ditched the typical 100-point, A–F system (which leaves large gaps between failing and passing grades). Instead, he grades on a scale of zero to six, making the number of points between a failing and passing grade equidistant. This prevents a zero from becoming so punitive that students can’t recover from it.

In some classrooms, teachers might make homework completely optional. If you go that route, Dueck suggests following Torres’s lead and working in enough time for supervised practice of new skills during class. Teachers can opt to give short, graded quizzes the morning after an ungraded homework assignment that will not only help check for understanding, but will also encourage students to do the homework as a strategy to perform better on the quiz. It’s not entirely failsafe, notes Dueck, but even kids who can’t complete the homework have an opportunity to do well on the quiz.

A few schools and districts have eliminated homework altogether or at least minimized its impact on the gradebook. In 2015, administrators at P.S. 116, an elementary school in New York City, announced they would no longer assign traditional homework such as worksheets, citing research that says such assignments are ineffective for young students. Instead, the school encourages students to play after school and spend time reading independently.

In Virginia, Fairfax County Public Schools limits homework to 10 percent of a student’s grade. At Kelly Elementary in Holyoke, Massachusetts, Principal Jackie Glasheen put a moratorium on homework for the school’s K–8 students—many of whom live in poverty. Longer school days allow teachers there to work in more instruction and extra help. Schools in Massachusetts, Maryland, and elsewhere have enacted similar policies.

### How Can Homework Work for All Kids?

For teachers not yet ready to abandon homework, adjusting the volume and the structure of class time can lessen its potentially harmful effects on vulnerable

students. Torres assigns homework about every two weeks and tries to restrict it to finishing essays or projects students have already started in class. Other types of homework assignments are rare and are only graded for completion (no more than 10 points). “You could probably do no homework in my class and still get a B,” she says.

Vatterott cautions that assignments which require students to purchase materials, like poster board, should never be graded. A better plan, says Torres, is to collect suggestions from students and parents about what kind of homework assignments they think are most useful.

Teachers can also adjust their policies. In the Wood River-Hartford School District in Illinois, a “Zeroes Aren’t Permitted” program prevents students from earning zeroes on work, instead giving them time to finish assignments during lunch. In Fairfax County, students can earn no less than 50 percent for reasonably attempting to finish an assignment, and can retake exams they score less than 80 percent on.

Torres does deduct points for late work (10 percent for 7th graders and 20 percent for 9th graders), but she stresses to her kids that some points are better than none—and she never refuses late homework.

### Getting to the Root of It

Above all, Torres says teachers must acknowledge the struggle of students in poverty and respect their time. After repeated conversations with one of her students, who had a failing grade and couldn’t stay awake during class, she discovered he worked in a meatpacking plant late into the night. For Torres, that meant changing her practices to better accommodate students’ home lives.

“I came up with a strategy which included telling my kids, ‘I’m not going to give you [homework] if I don’t think it’s going to be useful,’” says Torres. “I want you guys to know that I’m invested in your education and not just grades.” ■

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