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## Do Students Have Too Much Homework?

By The Brown Center on Education Policy

**The Brookings Institution**

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# Do Students Have Too Much Homework?

*The Brown Center on Education Policy*

The Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution annually reports on the state of student achievement. Drawing on test scores and surveys, Part II of its 2003 report debunks the popular notion that students are being overwhelmed with homework.

To the contrary, children at all grades—including high school—do little homework and instead spend much time watching television or engaging in other leisure and recreational activities.

The Brookings Institution report has garnered considerable attention because it is at odds with widely circulated news articles about schoolchildren staggering under overloaded backpacks and angry parents demanding homework moratoriums.

It's true that exceptionally conscientious and high-achieving children spend several hours a night on homework. It's also true that some teachers assign large amounts of homework and that some children are regularly overburdened. But these are exceptions, not the rule. Objective research concerning homework agrees with the Brown Center's findings.

The typical student, even in high school, spends one hour or less per day on homework. About half of all schoolchildren have no homework at all.

These facts are especially important given the declining quality of education in America's K-12 schools and the spate of state and federal "fixes" aimed at reversing the situation. The bottom line is that the policy goal of improved student achievement cannot be reached without more learning by students and more learning will require more study at home or at school.

Public perception on the homework issue is especially important given the pressures put on schools by the "No Child Left Behind" reform effort. Conventional wisdom is that the higher academic standards, which form the bedrock of NCLB, have caused a substantial increase in assigned homework. But the studies on which media reports have been based actually show little change in homework over a period of years—a fact suggesting that the media have been misled or misinterpreted the research on the subject.

A study by University of Michigan, often cited as proof of the growing homework burden, actually reveals the opposite. With the exception of one subgroup—children aged 6-8—fewer students were doing homework in 1997 than in 1981. In 1981, only one in three of 6-8 year-olds did any homework. By 1997, 55% were doing at least some homework. In all other age groups, however, the percentage of students doing any homework went down between 1981 and 1997.

The annual college freshmen survey by University of California at Los Angeles also is revealing. In 1987, 47% students reported spending more than five hours per week studying or doing homework during the senior year of high school. The figure dropped every year since then, hitting a record low of 34% in 2002.

Report author Tom Loveless, director of the Brown Center, suggests that the misperception has been created by the recent resurgence of anti-reform interest groups. He wants the public to hear the real homework story.

In truth, homework ranks quite low on a list of activities that consume children's time at home. They spend large chunks of time watching television (13 1/2 hours a week), playing (12 1/4 hours a week), performing personal care, or participating in sports (each 8 hours a week). Studying (2 1/4 hours a week) comes in next to last, nearly on a par with passive leisure activities such as board games and collecting baseball cards.

It's true that more homework does not always produce more learning. Quality matters. Homework is too often comprised of projects that add little to a child's knowledge and skills. Still, policymakers should remember that despite exceptions, most students at all grade levels are neither overburdened with homework nor overworked during the school day.

To the contrary, the broad trend in student use of schooling opportunity is in the direction of decreasing efficiency: Youth literacy rates have remained flat or declined despite longer school days, longer school years, and higher expenditures. As importantly, schooling has absorbed an ever-increasing share of individuals' formative and productive years.

Rather than considering ways to reduce homework, educators should seek to promote more efficient uses of the already-substantial amounts of time students spend in classrooms.

There is no "royal road to learning;" but thanks to the work of anti-reform and anti-accountability interests, a perception that children are overburdened with homework is being created. Unless it is countered with facts, public education will continue to become more expensive and time consuming.

*The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com*