

January 19, 2007

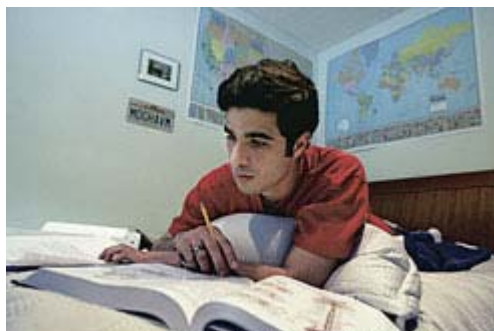
Schools Turn Down the Heat on Homework

Some Affluent Districts Limit the Workload; A 45-Minute Cutoff

By **NANCY KEATES**
 January 19, 2007; Page W1

Some of the nation's most competitive schools are changing their homework policies, limiting the amount of work assigned by teachers or eliminating it altogether in lower grades. There is also an effort by some schools to change the type of homework being assigned and curtail highly repetitive drudge work.

The moves are largely at elite schools in affluent areas, including the lower school at Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Gunn High School in Palo Alto, Calif., Harvard-Westlake in Los Angeles and Riverdale Country Day School in New York City. The effort is by no means universal, and in fact some national statistics show that the amount of homework is continuing to grow.



Ann Johansson/For the Wall Street Journal

Lightening up: Nuriel Moghavem in Los Angeles.


Still, the new policies at such schools are significant because moves by institutions of this caliber are closely watched by educators and often followed.

Seventeen-year-old Jacob Simon endorses the new approach. When he gets home from school, he usually watches sports on TV. But the senior at Gunn High School isn't slacking off: He's taking five Advanced Placement courses this year, including calculus and physics. What's changed is his school's efforts to -- in the words of one of its teachers -- "make the homework assignments worthy of our students' time." Mr. Simon says, "It's nice to be able to relax a little."

Last fall, the Greenville, S.C., school district reduced the amount of time students had to spend on assignments each night. The 74-school district also limited how much homework could count toward a final grade. This academic year, Sparhawk, a private school in Amesbury, Mass., eliminated homework up to second grade, delayed it for third grade until January and enacted time restraints for fourth through sixth grades.

Getting rid of busywork is the focus at Wellesley High School in Wellesley, Mass., which banished midterm exams this school year. And for the first time, juniors will spend 10 days in history class writing a required thesis, which they previously wrote at home. The change will free up students' evenings and will also ensure they're doing the work correctly, says social studies

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

director Diane Hemond.

LESS HOMEWORK, HIGHER SCORES

A new paper has found that world-wide, students with more homework often have lower math scores. Below, data from 2003 for the U.S., plus countries with the highest and lowest percentages of students who studied more than four hours a night.

COUNTRY	4 HRS + OF HOMEWORK PER NIGHT	MEAN MATH SCORE
Lebanon	24%	434
Armenia	23%	478
Romania	22%	474
South Africa	22%	266
Tunisia	20%	411
Moldova	19%	459
Jordan	19%	424
United States	5%	504
England	3%	498
Morocco	3%	387
Netherlands	3%	536
Scotland	2%	498
Korea	1%	587
Japan	1%	569

Source: Gerald K. LeTendre & Motoko Akiba. "A Nation Spins its Wheels: The Role of Homework and National Homework Policies in National Student Achievement Levels in Math and Science," 2007. Mean scores ranged from 266 to 605.

Several new books and studies have documented the negative effects of too much homework and found no corresponding improvement in academic performance.

"There's been a sea change," says Marilee Jones, dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who adds that a growing number of the more than 250 schools she visits a year are addressing the issues of stress, including homework. Stressed Out Students, a Stanford University program, is working with 52 schools across the country to help find ways to reduce pressure; some 30 other schools have asked for help. "Homework is a key component," says SOS director Denise Pope.

Dave Deggeller, Mr. Simon's math teacher at Gunn High School, has started giving students fewer problems for homework if he sees overlap in the exercises. He now occasionally allows them to choose which problems to review, and rather than assign all "drill and kill" problems, he mixes in exercises that "force students to think at a higher level."

Harvard-Westlake, an independent middle and high school in Los Angeles, now has a three-hour per course, per



Josephine Lipkin

Students at Gunn High School in Palo Alto, Calif.

week limit, and gives out anonymous surveys every semester to gauge the workload. English teacher Larry Weber says the revised policy might mean 20 minutes a night of "Jane Eyre" instead of 30 minutes, which has resulted in fewer books assigned per course. "We'd much rather have them read slowly and more in-depth," he says.

The Hopkins School in New Haven, Conn., has had ongoing discussions with teachers to encourage them to think more carefully about the kind of homework they give. "If five problems help students understand a concept then don't assign 15," says Assistant Head of School John Roberts.

There's little disagreement over making sure the homework assigned is effective. Still, some school administrators say teachers can have a hard time paring it down -- especially those who have higher level, AP classes and think the students need to learn too much to squeeze into class time. Many schools have started requiring teachers to hold weekly meetings to coordinate assignments so students aren't overwhelmed.

Less Crying

At her old school in Merrimac, Mass., 10-year-old Sammi Marden had up to three hours of homework a night. "I felt really overwhelmed because we didn't learn any of that stuff at school so I didn't know what to do at home," she says. When her mom, Sue Marden, switched her to Sparhawk, which recently cut homework at its lower school, Sammi says she stopped crying so much. "Now I have more time to play."

Sparhawk's program coordinator for the lower school, Bethany Nelson, cites several reasons for the new policy: research showing homework doesn't help elementary school kids learn, the tendency for parents to help so much that students don't get the organizational practice that is the one real benefit of homework, and the stress and conflict it creates during the increasingly fewer hours families have to spend together.

The University School in the Cleveland area held parent coffees last week in part to discuss stress and homework. The upper school of Episcopal Academy in Marion and Devon, Pa., is considering new guidelines for how much work each course should have. The National Cathedral School, an independent school for girls in Washington, D.C., is reviewing its curriculum and doing a time study that tracks how much homework students are doing.



Paula Lerner/Aurora

Sammi Marden, 10, has 'more time to play' and cries less now that her homework load is lighter.

To be sure, plenty of schools have added homework over the years, thanks to increased AP classes or more state-mandated tests. A 2004 survey by the University of Michigan, the most recent national comprehensive study, showed that American students aged 6 to 17 spent nearly four hours on homework a week -- or just under 50 minutes per weekday. That's up 51% over 1981.

Riverdale in New York is taking steps to address the steady increase. The school recently set a limit of no more than 45 minutes of homework in each subject area for the upper school. If kids aren't finished after that time, they're to stop working. Kent Kildahl, head of the upper school, says the school wanted to help reduce pressure and ensure students led a balanced life, leaving more room for activities like sports or music. "Homework is important but it should not be overwhelming," he said in a letter to parents in the fall. Mr. Kildahl says the experiment is working, but there are kinks. Not everyone works at the same pace, and teachers' estimates of 45 minutes of work can vary. In addition, kids tend to focus on upcoming tests and end up working longer hours.

Students may have a hard time taking advantage of the relaxed standards. Needham, Mass., High School senior Ariana Wermer-Colan approves of the recent "reduced homework" vacation this past winter break and the planned "no homework" vacation for April break. But she spent a lot of time studying over this Christmas break anyway. "It's too competitive not to," says Ms. Wermer-Colan, who has applied to 11 colleges, including Yale, Brown, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, and spends anywhere from six to eight hours on Sundays doing homework.

The Benefits of Play

The movement is being fed in part by a growing debate, both academic and popular, over homework and how children spend their time. Two books out last year -- "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing," by Alfie Kohn and "The Case Against Homework:

How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It," by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish -- argue homework can even impair young kids' ability to learn.

In October, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a report saying federal programs like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, as well as parents who push children too hard and put too much emphasis on schoolwork, have resulted in too little unstructured playtime, which helps in emotional development.

Ongoing research by Harris Cooper, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, suggests a small amount of homework may help elementary-school students develop study habits and skills that improve with practice, like reading. Beyond that, he says, he's found little or no relationship between homework and achievement. And while at-home studies are more important for older kids, he says, after a certain point -- about 90 minutes a night for junior-high students and between 90 and 150 minutes for high-school students -- the benefits of homework diminish.

Current National PTA and National Education Association guidelines say that for children in kindergarten through second grade, homework is more effective when it does not exceed 10 to 20 minutes each day. Children in grades three to six can handle 30 to 60 minutes a day, it says, and in junior and senior high, the amount of homework varies by subject.

The disagreement on how much homework is too much isn't new. In the 19th century, homework involved a lot of memorizing and recitation. A backlash rose by the late 1800s, along with fears that not only was homework an ineffective learning tool but also it hurt children -- even physically. Many schools started to specify that any extra work was to be done at school under teacher supervision.

The pendulum swung again in the age of Sputnik. After the Russians went into space, schools increased the workload as Americans worried their children might be behind other countries. The movement shifted to less homework in the 1960s, and back again when U.S. test scores paled in comparison to Japan in the 1980s.

Lagging World-Wide

U.S. students continue to lag behind many countries academically. A 2004 report released by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development looked at test scores for 15-year-olds in 40 countries. U.S. students ranked 29th in math and problem solving, and 23rd in science.

But most education experts say more homework isn't the solution -- the problem is that current classroom standards are too broad. For one, U.S. science textbooks cover more concepts than those in countries where students perform better on science tests. "If we could make the concepts more focused, then the homework could be more focused," says Nancy Butler Songer, Professor of Science Education and Learning Technologies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. "Just doing more isn't helping students understand concepts in a deep way."

Some surveys have shown the amount of homework assigned often doesn't correspond to academic achievement. The 2003 Third International Study of Mathematics and Sciences, by Dr. David P. Baker and Dr. Gerald K. LeTendre at Penn State University, which collected a large amount of data from schools in 41 nations, shows that many countries with the highest scoring

students, such as Japan, the Czech Republic and Denmark, have teachers who give little homework. Countries with very low average scores, like Thailand, Greece and Iran, have teachers who assign a great deal of homework.

Even the most elite schools in Asia don't pile on the homework the way the elite schools in the U.S. do, says Mr. LeTendre. In Japan, many high-achieving schools banned homework altogether in the mid-1990s.

Still, many students say their schools have no interest in easing the homework load. James Song, a sophomore at Henry M. Jackson High School in Mill Creek, Wash., has three hours or more of homework a night -- his classes include AP Calculus, AP Chemistry, AP World History and honors English. Several times a month he skips sleeping to study for exams. But he doesn't bother bringing up the issue. "We know our school will respond with a 'Who cares... you're in high school now' kind of answer," he says. The school's principal, Terry Cheshire, says he hasn't heard many complaints about stress and homework. However, when students have concerns, he says, "We try to make adjustments."

Even schools that try to limit homework get complaints. Nuriel Moghavam did notice a drop-off in physics homework at Harvard-Westlake after he and other students checked a box on a school survey this past fall indicating the course was taking more than the allotted three hours a week. But the 18-year-old senior says he still has up to five hours of work some nights -- on top of going to track practices, working at the school newspaper and participating in student government. There's one advantage, he says: "I've learned good time-management skills."

Write to Nancy Keates at nancy.keates@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB116916665114080897.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:nancy.keates@wsj.com>

Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.