

Part

II

# DO STUDENTS HAVE TOO MUCH HOMEWORK?



SEVERAL MAJOR NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES HAVE RUN ARTICLES describing a backlash against homework. The typical story is that dramatic increases in the amount of homework are robbing American students of their childhood, turning kids off learning, and destroying family life. A revolution is brewing. Kids are buried in homework. Parents are hopping mad, and they're going to do something about it.

Almost everything in this story is wrong. A wealth of data exists on the topic of homework. The evidence paints a more placid picture than the stories in the press. The most reliable data support the following conclusions: 1) the typical student, even in high school, does not spend more than an hour per day on homework, 2) the homework load has not changed much since the 1980s, 3) the students whose homework has increased in the past decade are those who previously had no homework and now have a small amount, 4) most parents feel the homework load is about right and, of those who would like to change it, more parents would rather see homework increased than decreased.

Why is it important to get the homework story right? Mainly because it is positively associated with student learning. Research shows that the relationship of homework with student achievement is positive for both middle and high school students and neutral for elementary school students. The research does not prove causality, an ever-present difficulty with research on many educational practices. High-achieving students in high school, for example, may do more homework because they enjoy studying. They take tough classes that require a lot of work.

That does not necessarily mean that homework is boosting their achievement. Low-achieving students in elementary school, on the other hand, may do more homework because they are struggling to catch up. The homework is not causing their learning problems.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these limitations, the evidence is convincing enough to provide sober guidance on the current controversy. Excessive homework is not a common problem. The critics of homework need to produce some very powerful evidence before policymakers start mandating reductions in homework or even banning it altogether. To date, the evidence put forth by homework critics has been weak.

So where has the notion of a crushing homework burden come from? And why has the press latched onto it with such zeal? Note that the summary above employs terms such as "typical student" and "most parents." There are children with too much homework. There are also parents who believe, correctly, that their kids are overworked. Generalizations, however, are meant to apply generally. Anecdotes can be woven together to create dramatic stories, but if they apply only to a small minority of people, they should not be construed to depict the experience of the average person. Most parents and

children are comfortable with the current amount of homework. The amount of homework assigned today does not appear out of line with the amount of homework assigned in the past.

Yet dramatic stories abound. In 1998, *Newsweek* ran an article called “Homework Doesn’t Help,” which begins by telling the story of Adam, whose “long, sad battle with homework” reached a crescendo of three hours per night in fourth grade. The article warns that “the trend among schools to pile on more homework, starting in kindergarten, could backfire.” Then *Time* published a 1999 piece, “The Homework Ate My Family: Kids Are Dazed, Parents Are Stressed, Why Piling It On Is Hurting Students.” In 2003, *People* produced “Overbooked: Four Hours of Homework for a Third Grader? Exhausted Kids (and Parents) Fight Back.” Newspapers have contributed, too. Since 2001, feature stories about onerous amounts of homework have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, *The Tennessean*, *Lexington Herald Leader*, and *Tampa Tribune*.

Schools piling it on. Kids exhausted. Parents fighting back. Families being eaten. Is this the truth about homework? Let’s examine data addressing two questions. How much homework do today’s students have? Has the amount changed appreciably over time?

### The Michigan Study

The study most often cited to support the idea that homework has gotten out of control was conducted by the Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. The research was led by Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg and focused on how families spend their time. Analyzing twenty-four

hour time diaries recorded by randomly selected families, the researchers compared data on the activities of children ages 3-12 in 1981 and 1997. Table 2-1 shows the average number of minutes devoted to activities that consume at least two hours of children’s time per week.<sup>14</sup>

Note that the relevant response category is “studying,” which certainly includes homework but could also include self-initiated studying or studying that parents insist children do, irrespective of whether the school sends work home. It ranks quite low on the list of activities that absorb children’s time at home. More than studying, kids are sleeping, going to school, playing, eating, attending to personal care, participating in sports, going to daycare, shopping, visiting, and working around the house. To put it in perspective, studying ranks close to the category “other passive leisure”—board games, collecting baseball cards, and the like.

For all ages, the amount of weekly time devoted to studying increased from one hour 53 minutes in 1981 to two hours 16 minutes in 1997, an increase of 23 minutes. That is 19 to 27 minutes per day of studying in 1997 and an increase of about 3-5 minutes per day since 1981, depending on

*Schools piling it on. Kids exhausted. Parents fighting back. Families being eaten. Is this the truth about homework?*

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#### AN ERRONEOUS VIEW FROM THE POPULAR PRESS



**Weekly Time Spent on Activities by Age**  
(hours:minutes)

**Table**  
**2-1**

	Age 3-5			Age 6-8			Age 9-12			All Ages		
	1981 (N=61)	1997 (N=665)		1981 (N=60)	1997 (N=602)		1981 (N=101)	1997 (N=851)		1981 (N=222)	1997 (N=2119)	
Sleeping	77:19	76:11		70:04	70:49		65:36	67:24	**	70:01	71:07	*
School	14:30	12:05		27:52	32:46	**	29:02	34:03	***	24:45	26:48	**
Television	15:14	13:52		15:55	12:54	*	20:01	13:36	***	17:35	13:29	***
Playing	25:50	17:21	***	14:58	11:10	**	7:24	8:54	*	14:30	12:12	***
Eating	9:43	9:24		9:08	8:05	**	8:13	7:23	**	8:52	8:13	***
Personal Care	6:18	8:32	***	6:13	7:53	***	6:21	7:53	***	6:18	8:05	***
Sports	1:31	4:08	***	6:01	5:13		4:51	6:33	**	4:15	5:25	
Daycare	0:10	7:30		0:12	1:33	***	0:18	0:24		0:14	2:57	***
Shopping	2:35	3:44	*	0:59	2:38	***	1:57	2:24		1:52	2:53	
Visiting	2:58	3:04		3:40	2:48		3:48	2:40	**	3:32	2:50	**
Household Work	2:09	2:20		2:49	2:07		5:18	3:42	***	3:46	2:49	***
Studying	0:25	0:36		0:52	2:08	***	3:22	3:41		1:53	2:16	*
Other Passive Leisure	2:59	2:35		1:58	1:33		3:24	2:19	*	2:53	2:11	***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001, for 1981-1997 changes

Source: Data resorted from Table 2, Sandra J. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "Changes in America's Children's Time, 1981-1997" (Report No. 00-456), Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, (University of Michigan 2000).

whether weekends are counted. It does not seem like a backbreaking load. Nor an extraordinary increase. Time spent on personal care and sports increased much more. Watching television decreased by four hours per week, and some of this freed-up time may have gone to the 23 minutes of increased study time. That sounds like cause for celebration, not hand wringing. Children have not abandoned TVs. The thirteen and a half hours that children continue to devote to television each week is more than six times the amount of time spent studying.

Changes in time devoted to studying were driven by a large change for ages 6-8, mostly first through third graders. The average amount of study time for that age group rose from 52 minutes a week to two hours and 8 minutes, an increase of 76 minutes. Based on a seven day week, the daily equivalents are about 7 minutes of homework in 1981 and 18 minutes in 1997, an increase of 10-11 minutes per day. For other age groups, changes in the homework load have been trivial.

Now we've reached the nub of the matter. If one is determined to use the

Michigan data to argue that homework is onerous, the analysis must be limited to changes that occurred with ages 6-8. Even for that age group, the change in study time was less than meets the eye. The total increase was no more than 11 minutes per day. And the average went up primarily because the percentage of children who had no homework at all declined. In 1981, only a third of children ages 6-8 spent any time at all on studying. In 1997, about half did. So the rising average has nothing to do with a crushing homework burden. It is largely attributable to children with no homework now receiving a small amount.

A remarkable story—overlooked in press coverage of the Michigan study—is found in the other age groups. In every case, fewer children were doing homework in 1997 than in 1981 (see Figure 2-1, page 20). Even among children ages 9-12, the oldest group in the study, only 62% spent time studying at home in 1997, down from 82% in 1981. In other words, more than one-third of American school children ages 9-12, who are mostly attending fourth through seventh grades, do not do any

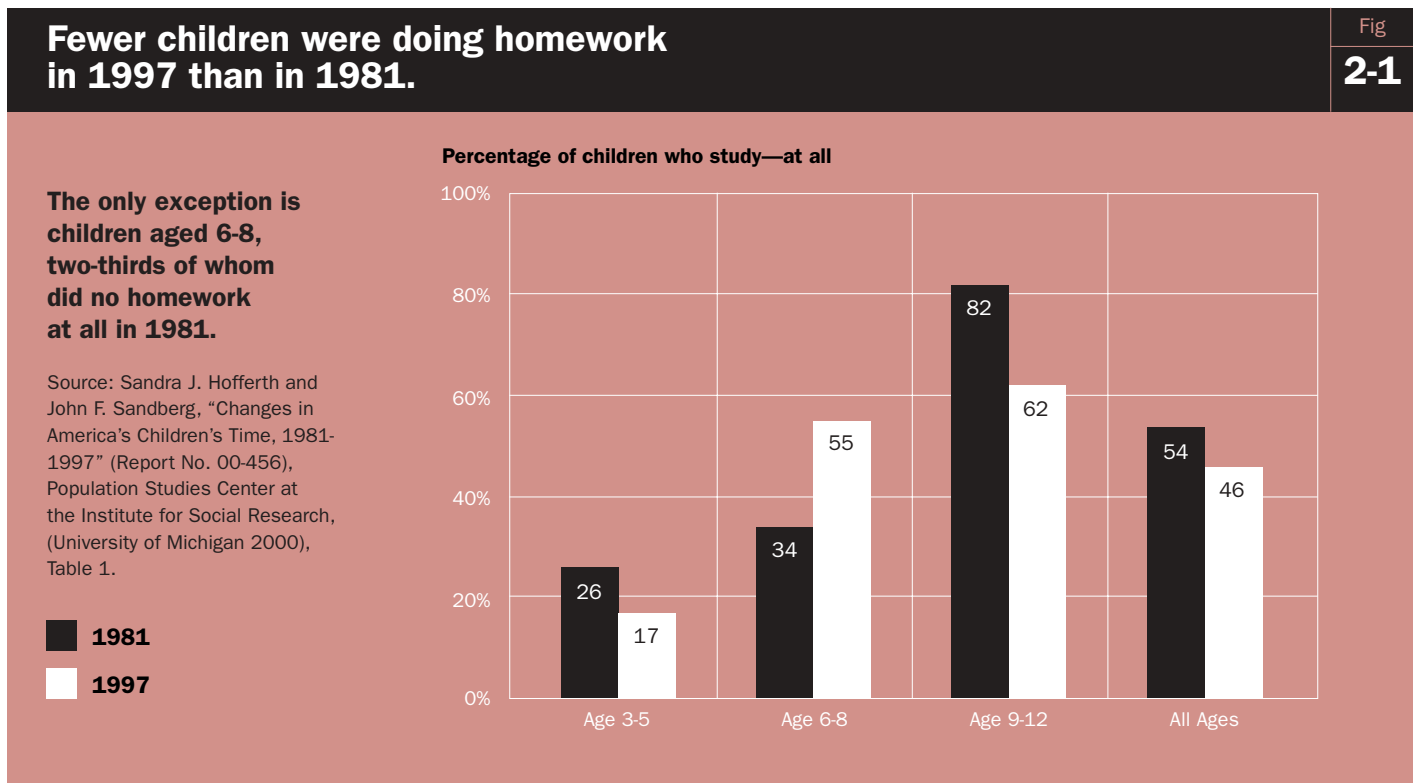
homework. For the broader group of children in the Michigan study, ages 3-12, half did no homework in 1997.

The Michigan study is an example of carefully conducted social science and the researchers' dispassionate reporting of results. The authors explain that fluctuations in the amount of time that children engage in various activities should be understood in the larger context of change occurring in families. Compared to 1981, children now spend less time in discretionary activities such as playing and watching television and more time in structured activities such as studying, reading, and participating in arts and sports programs. With both parents working and more things to accomplish during the day, today's families manage children's schedules more carefully. Nevertheless, the study's



findings have been used to give the impression that a rising homework burden is swamping families. "Homework Hours Tripled Since 1980," ran the Associated Press headline.<sup>15</sup>

This impression does not reflect how the Michigan study's authors interpret their own findings. As to whether the amount of time studying is large or small, Hofferth and Sandburg conclude, "While time spent studying increased significantly between



**Students Were Asked:  
How much time did you spend on homework yesterday?  
(percentage of students)**

**Table  
2-2**

*Age 9*

	1984	1988	1992	1996	1999
None Assigned	36	29	32	26	26
Did Not Do It	4	4	4	4	4
< 1 hr.	41	47	47	53	53
1-2 hrs.	13	13	12	13	12
> 2 hrs.	6	7	5	4	5

*Age 13*

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	1999
None Assigned	30	23	17	21	22	24
Did Not Do It	6	4	4	4	5	5
< 1 hr.	32	36	37	36	37	37
1-2 hrs.	24	29	30	29	27	26
> 2 hrs.	7	9	11	10	8	8

*Age 17*

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	1999
None Assigned	32	22	21	22	23	26
Did Not Do It	12	11	13	12	13	13
< 1 hr.	24	26	28	29	28	26
1-2 hrs.	23	27	26	25	24	23
> 2 hrs.	10	13	12	11	11	12

NOTE: Age 9 students were not surveyed on homework until 1984.

Source: NAEP 1999 Long-term Trend Reading Summary Data Tables for ages 9, 13, and 17 data.

*Asking Kids How Much Homework They Have*

As just reported, about 50% of kids have no homework at all, which means that a lot of zeros are going into computing the average student's homework load. Even a trivial increase in the average could hide the fact that students who once had some homework are suddenly getting a lot more. An excellent source of data to explore whether this is happening is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which for two decades has been asking a nationally representative sample of students how much homework they had the previous day. Table 2-2 shows the responses for ages 9, 13, and 17 since the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

The NAEP data reinforce the notion that it is students who once had no homework who have experienced a change. They now have some, but not a lot. For 9 year olds, the question about homework was first asked in 1984. The proportion with no assigned homework declined by ten percentage points between 1984 and 1999, while those with less than one hour, the lowest category indicating any homework, increased by twelve points. The same shift, although less pronounced, is evident at age 13. Students without assigned homework declined by six percentage points from 1980 to 1999, and there was a five point rise in students with less than an hour.

Seventeen year olds' homework appears to have peaked in the surveys conducted from 1984 through 1992, with slight decreases since then. Across all three age groups, the percentage of students with an hour or more of homework—the category where the horror stories should show up—has declined since 1984. In 1999 only about one-third of students at ages 13 and 17 had an hour or more per

1981 and 1997, the time spent studying is still small, only about two hours per week, and the increase was concentrated among 6-8 year olds." As to the cause of the increase among 6-8 year olds, the researchers explain, "The main reason for the increase in studying among 6-8 year olds was an increase in the proportion who did some studying at all, from one-third to more than half." Of the dozens of press accounts that cited figures from the Michigan study and were reviewed for this Brown Center Report, not a single one quoted how the researchers themselves interpreted their data.<sup>16</sup>

night. And combining the responses “none assigned,” “did not do it,” and “less than 1 hr” yields the percentage of children with less than an hour of daily homework. For 1999, the figures are 83% at age 9, 66% at age 13, and 65% at age 17 (see Table 2-3).

Based on these statistics, it appears that less than one hour per day is the typical amount of homework for American children, even for students in high school. Remember the third grader in the *Newsweek* story with three hours of homework? Or the families in the *Time* article, “The Homework Ate My Family?” Or *People* asking whether four hours was too much homework for a third grader? These tales, though very real to the children and parents experiencing them, are what statisticians refer to as “outliers.” They are not representative. A whopping 83% of 9 year olds have an hour or less of daily homework. Students with more than two hours constitute only 5% of 9 year olds. Reasonable people could argue that two hours is too much homework for a third grader, at least on a regular basis. But according to survey data, that amount of homework is quite rare.

### High School Students

Interestingly, high school students are usually left out of the public discussions of homework. Most of the stories of schools “piling it on” focus on young children. The NAEP data give a hint that high school students’ homework load might be considered light, with only about a third of 17 year olds having an hour or more of daily homework. That does not sound like a lot for students who are within a year of graduating from high school. How does it compare with students in other countries? It is an extraordinarily light load. The Third International Mathematics and Science Survey in 1995 asked students in their final year of secondary school how

many hours per day they spent studying or doing homework. Of twenty nations, the U.S. ranked near the bottom, tied for the next-to-last position. Students in France, Italy, Russia, and South Africa reported spending at least twice as much time on homework as American students.<sup>18</sup>

Even when surveys are restricted to the top high school students in the country, those who go on to attend college, the homework load does not appear heavy. Researchers at UCLA have been surveying college freshmen nationwide annually since 1966. The researchers began asking a question about homework in 1987. That year, 47% of respondents reported that they spent more than five hours per week studying or doing homework during the senior year of high school. The figure has dropped every year since then, hitting a record low of 34% in 2002 (see Figure 2-2). That means two-thirds of college-bound high school seniors have no more than one hour of homework per night and none on weekends. And remember that these are students who were preparing for college and probably took the toughest courses that high schools have to offer—honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate.<sup>19</sup>

Two additional findings from the UCLA survey stand out. First, at the same time students are reporting record lows in the amount of homework given in high school, they are reporting record high grade point averages. Almost half, 46%, of the college freshmen reported graduating from high school with an A average. Second, in a pattern remarkably similar to the young children in the Michigan study, college students in the UCLA survey seem to live well-rounded lives. Socializing with friends, working at paid employment, and exercise and sports took up more of the students’ time as high school seniors than

Age	Percent
9 Year Olds	83%
13 Year Olds	66%
17 Year Olds	65%

Source: NAEP 1999 Long-term Trend Reading Summary Data Tables for ages 9, 13, and 17 data.

*Most parents are satisfied with the amount of homework, and of those who favor a change, more parents would increase rather than decrease the amount.*

studying and homework. About one-fourth of college freshmen report that they spent more than five hours per week partying or watching television as high school seniors, a little less than the one-third who spent that much time studying (see Figure 2-3, page 24).

### *What Do Parents Think?*

Impressions matter, and despite the large amount of empirical evidence to the contrary, parents may think children have too much homework. If so, that would explain the reports of rebellions cropping up in local areas. What do parents think about the homework load? Public Agenda Foundation conducted a poll on the matter in 2000, surveying a representative sample of parents. They were asked to evaluate their children's homework load (see Figure 2-4, page 25). Almost two-thirds,

64%, described the amount of homework as "about the right amount," 25% said there was "too little homework," and 10% responded that there was "too much homework" (2% responded "don't know").<sup>20</sup> These attitudes are the opposite of those expressed by parents in the anti-homework articles. Most parents are satisfied with the amount of homework, and of those who favor a change, more parents would increase rather than decrease the amount. Only one out of ten parents believe there is too much homework.

### *Summary and Discussion*

In recent years, newspapers and magazines have published several stories about a growing amount of homework in the United States. Facing mounting pressures to perform, schools are piling on the homework,

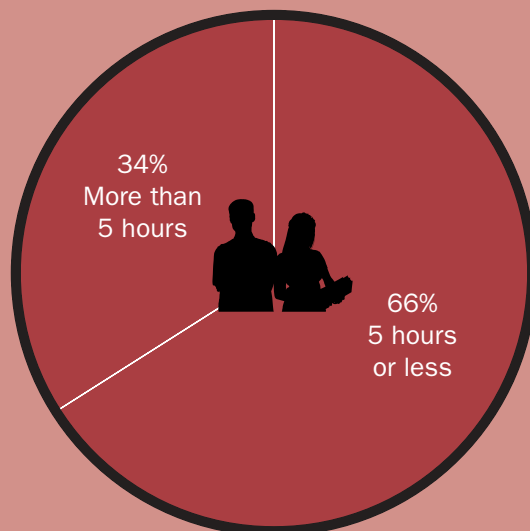
## **Two-thirds of college-bound seniors do five hours or less of homework per week.**

Fig

**2-2**

**College freshmen were asked: During your last year in high school, how many hours did you spend in a typical week studying or doing homework?**

Source: Linda Sax, J.A. Lindholm, A.W. Astin, W.S. Korn, and K.M. Mahoney "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002," Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2002.





kids are stressed out, and parents are demanding relief.

The stories are misleading. They do not reflect the experiences of a majority—or even a significant minority—of American school children. The best social science on the topic, which consist of studies collecting data from nationally representative samples of students, are in general agreement. A University of Michigan study shows that homework for elementary schoolchildren has increased slightly since the early 1980s. But the increase was due to fewer children ages 6-8 getting no homework and more children receiving some homework. Homework has not become overwhelming. Data from NAEP indicate that more than 80% of children at age 9 have less than an hour of homework per day. Only one out of twenty have more than two hours. For students in middle

school and high school, the amount of homework has remained stable—and hardly burdensome. According to UCLA's annual survey of college freshmen, the homework required in the senior year of high school is particularly light. And it has been declining since the late 1980s. According to the TIMSS international survey, American high school students have one of the lightest homework loads in the world. Parents are not concerned about too much homework.

According to a study by the Public Agenda Foundation, only one of ten parents want less homework for their children, 25% want more, and two-thirds describe the homework load as about right.

OK, we can all relax; kids aren't being worked to death. But what about parents with legitimate concerns? What should they make of the homework controversy? The problem

*According to UCLA's annual survey of college freshmen, the homework required in the senior year of high school is particularly light. And it has been declining since the late 1980s.*

## Studying does not dominate the lives of high school seniors.

Fig

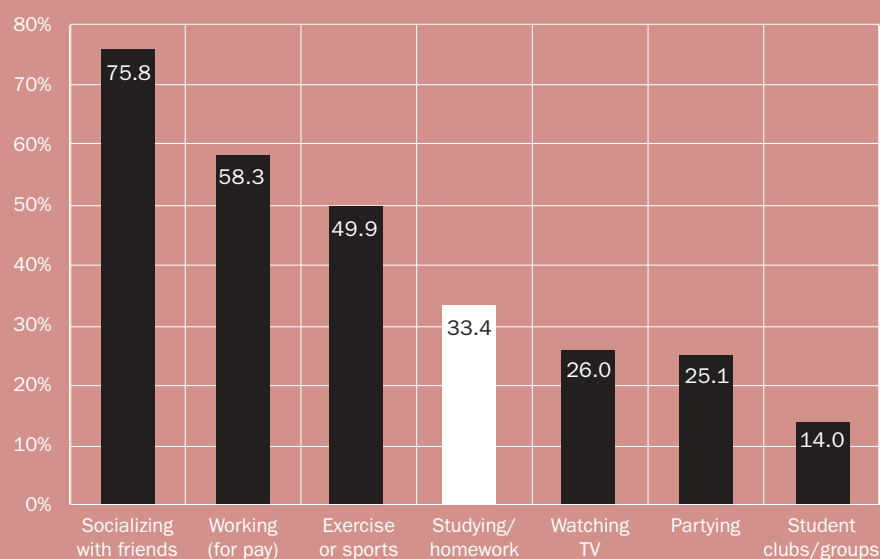
2-3

### Socializing, working, and sports command more time than studying.

Source: Linda Sax, J.A. Lindholm, A.W. Astin, W.S. Korn, and K.M. Mahoney "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002," Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2002.



Students spending more than five hours per week on activities in their last year of high school (percentage)





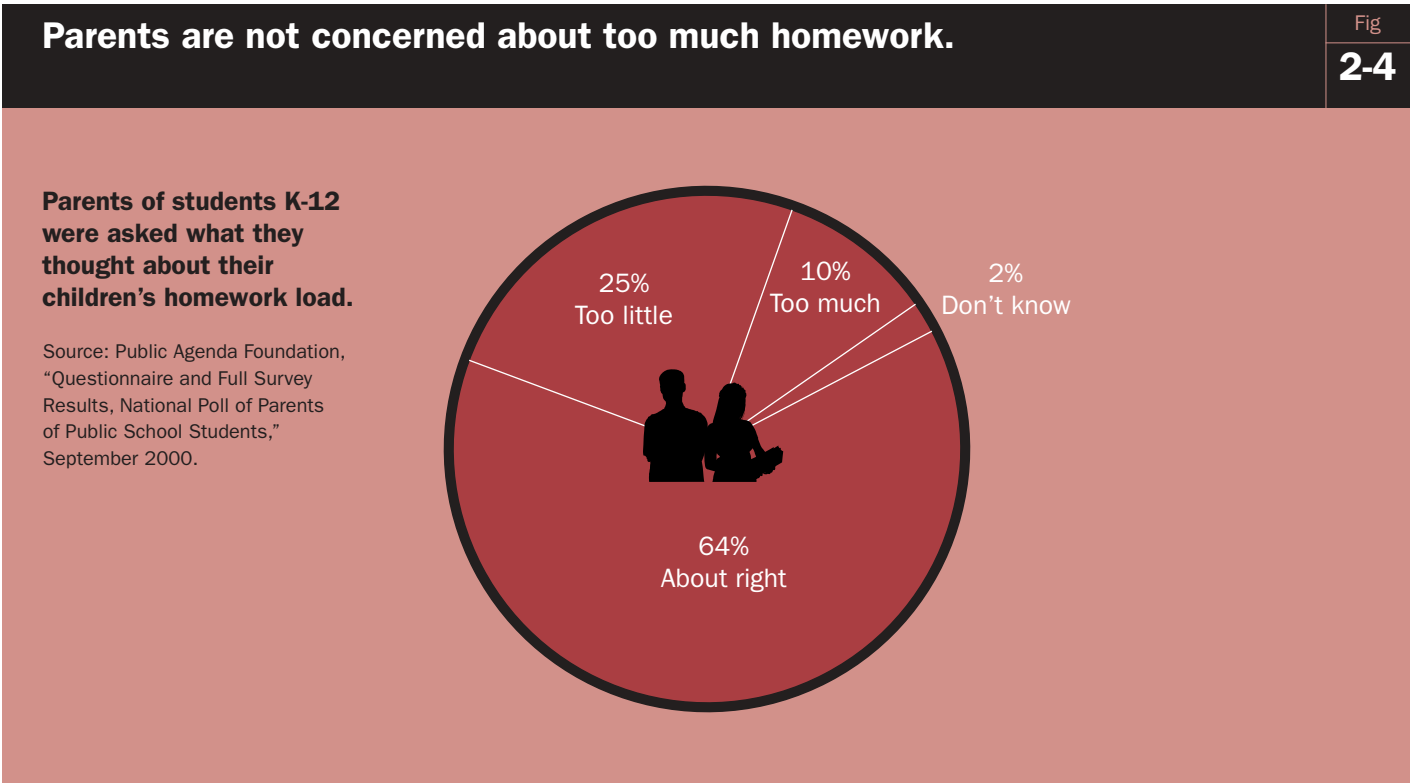
of too much homework may be exaggerated in the press, but it can exist. On any particular school night, the most diligent student in the world may come home with an unmanageable amount of homework. Or the most reasonable teacher in the world may assign an unreasonable amount. Teachers are human and they make mistakes. What can parents learn from the homework controversy that will help them monitor their children's workloads? The following suggestions make the most sense.

**1. Take anti-homework articles with a grain of salt.**

Opposition to homework has been a mainstay of progressive education for the past 100 years. Edward Bok, editor of *The Ladies Home Journal*, launched a campaign against homework in 1900. Bok argued that children under the age of 15 shouldn't be

assigned any homework.<sup>21</sup> After an intensive media campaign in the early twentieth century, progressives managed to persuade lawmakers in one state, California, to ban homework. Progressives charged that staying indoors, reading books, and engaging in other intellectual activities were unhealthy for children.

Progressives revere children's natural development, which they believe unfolds through play and self-guided exploration. Homework is work. It interferes with play. It is assigned by an adult. Progressives are hostile to homework because "children need time to be children." Progressives also believe that education is best left to experts. Children who take home schoolwork might be taught "incorrectly" by their parents. And parents who scrutinize their children's homework will have a good idea of what's being



taught at school, an invitation for parental meddling in school affairs.<sup>22</sup>

## **2. Follow the PTA guidelines on homework.**

Based on the work of Harris Cooper at the University of Missouri, the Parent-Teacher Association offers as a rule of thumb 10 minutes of homework per grade—for example, 30 minutes a night for third graders, 60 minutes for sixth graders, 90 minutes for ninth graders. That seems reasonable. However...

## **3. Understand that homework varies.**

Homework fluctuates from day to day. Teachers assign different amounts depending on what is being studied. Kids have days when they are extremely productive and get a lot of work done at school. Other days they are not productive, and the work comes home. Homework also naturally varies from child to child. Some kids use every spare minute at school to complete their work. They take home virtually nothing. Other kids enjoy socializing at school. Companions are sitting next to them when they are at school, not when they are at home in the evenings. Others simply prefer to work at a leisurely pace. These students take home full backpacks. Plus, once at home, some kids spend an hour just to get ready to do homework—not actually to do it, mind you, but to get ready—sharpening a pencil, getting the lighting just right, making sure that the pet dog is in his proper place, adjusting the mirror on the wall, pouring a glass of water, sharpening a back-up pencil...and on and on. Some kids get right to work and finish quickly. The upshot is that individual circumstances must be considered when hearing about huge amounts of homework. Children do not all possess the same study habits.

## **4. If a homework problem exists, solutions should come from parents and teachers, not policy interventions.**

This recommendation flows from the previous point. Homework loads vary by student. Even in the same family, children experience homework differently. If parents believe their child has too much homework, they should talk to the teacher, or teachers in the case of high school. It is a conceptual mistake to try to standardize school assignments in units of time. If the page you are currently reading were assigned to thirty high school students to read, they would take varying amounts of time to complete the task. Teachers should try to standardize the content of schoolwork, not the time to complete it. Only teachers and parents working together can assess the individual circumstances regarding homework and determine whether children's homework loads are appropriate. Making such decisions away from classrooms is inappropriate. For school districts to place limits on homework, such as the Piscataway District in New Jersey recently did, seems unwise.<sup>23</sup> For state legislatures to pass laws on homework seems downright silly.

*Only teachers and parents working together can assess the individual circumstances regarding homework and determine whether children's homework loads are appropriate.*

### **2003 Brown Center Report: Part II Endnotes**

13. Harris Cooper, *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents*. (Corwin Press, 2001).
14. Sandra J. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "Changes in America's Children's Time, 1981-1997" Report No. 00-456, Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, (University of Michigan, 2000).
15. The website for CBS Evening News lists a story for December 10, 2002, "Study Says Kids' Homework Load Bigger," which includes the following, "Since 1981, homework has stayed about the same for high school students—but for 6- to 9-year olds, it's tripled." The report does not list a source. The Michigan study did not include high school students, but the CBS report's reference to 1981 and ages 6 to 9, reasonably close to the ages 6 to 8 category in the study, indicates it probably was the source. The website for CNNfyi.com includes an AP story, July 25, 2001, "Homework Hours Tripled Since 1980," stating the following, "One University of Michigan study suggests that young children are seeing up to three times as much homework as children did 20 years ago."
16. Sandra J. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "Changes in America's Children's Time, 1981-1997" Report No. 00-456, Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, (University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 20, 23.
17. NAEP Reading 1999 Long-term trend summary data. Other NAEP surveys ask for a daily estimate using different response categories. The results lead to essentially the same conclusions reached here.
18. Maryellen Harmon, Teresa A. Smith, Michael O. Martin, Dana L. Kelly, Albert E. Beaton, Ina V.S. Mullis, Eugenio J. Gonzalez, and Graham Orpwood, *Performance Assessment in IEA's Third International Mathematics and Science Study*, The International Study Center at Boston College, September 1997.
19. Linda Sax, Jennifer Lindholm, Alexander Astin, William Kirn, and Kathryn Mahoney, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002* Higher Education Research Institute, (University of California, Los Angeles, 2002).
20. Public Agenda Foundation, "Questionnaire and Full Survey Results, National Poll of Parents of Public School Students," September 2000.
21. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, (Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 90
22. Brian Gill and S.L. Schlossman, "'A Sin Against Childhood:' Progressive Education and the Crusade to Abolish Homework, 1897- 1941," *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (November 1996) pp27-66; Gill and Schlossman, "Parents and the Politics of Homework: Some Historical Perspectives," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 105, No. 5 (June 2003), pp.846-871.
23. CNN.com "Restrictions on homework put New Jersey school district in spotlight," October 23, 2000.