

# Does homework contribute to student success?

## LONG READS

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Homework – an eight letter word likely to spark an immediate and impassioned response.

As students, we've all had to do it. We've handed it in on time, late, or not at all (sometimes offering up creative and amusing excuses into the bargain).

Most of you reading this will have set homework, marked it and, at one time or another, questioned whether it's worth the time and effort ... for you and for your students.

It continues to be a hotly debated topic, not just among those in the school community, but in the academic community too.

'The debate about the effectiveness of homework as a tool of learning has continued for more than a century. There have been more than 130 studies published related to the subject and these have reached different and, at times, quite contradictory conclusions,' a report from the **[Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools \(http://acer.ac/hwinquiry\)](http://acer.ac/hwinquiry)** points out.

After conducting its own literature review, receiving 32 submissions and hearing from 16 expert witnesses during three days of public hearings, the inquiry committee had this to say: 'It is not possible from the available data to make unequivocal statements about the effectiveness of homework overall in assisting student learning.'

It does, however, want the state education department to support schools and teachers in this area by explaining current research.

So, what research is it referring to?

Most of the studies deal with the United States and Europe. 'There is limited research undertaken in Australia, however a book published in 2012 by two Australian academics [Associate Professor Richard Walker and Professor Michael Horsley], *Reforming Homework*, provided valuable context for the inquiry,' the report says.

Supporters of homework argue it not only has academic benefits, but also helps youngsters develop important study and time management skills, and gives parents a chance to engage in their child's learning.

On the other side of the debate: 'For those opposed to homework, many feel that it creates unnecessary pressure on students for limited or disputed academic benefit, robs children of time to develop other life skills, through recreational and artistic activities and social interaction, and places pressure on family life,' the report says.

Walker, of the University of Sydney, told one of the public hearings that research on homework tends to focus on three things: student learning and achievement; the development of student learning skills; and parental involvement.

In *Reforming Homework*, the academics comment on the differing conclusions reached by the studies. 'Researchers have variously concluded that homework is beneficial (Cooper et al.) or harmful (various), that homework has no effects (Kohn), that it has complex effects or that the research is too sparse or too problematic to be able to justify the drawing of strong conclusions.'

As John Buell (2004) puts it: '... for a practice as solidly entrenched as homework, the scholarly case on its behalf is surprisingly weak and even contradictory.'

### **Timely feedback**

The inquiry report does highlight research (Cooper, 2007) showing that students are more likely to complete homework if they know teachers are keeping track of their progress and giving feedback on errors and areas for improvement.

Walker told the committee that's not an easy task. 'Providing every student with targeted feedback about their homework is very difficult for teachers, so it often falls between the cracks.'

Professor John Hattie, of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, has famously calculated the 'effect-size' of more than 100 education innovations. He recently told the **BBC** (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0252t4j>) that homework in primary school has an effect-size of around zero 'which is why we need to get it right, not why we need to get rid of it...'

He added homework does make a bigger difference in secondary school, mainly because the tasks are often about reinforcing and giving students another chance to practice what they've learnt. 'The worst thing you can do with homework is give kids projects, the best thing you can do is to reinforce something you've already learnt,' Hattie told the broadcaster.

### **How much homework?**

This week **The Australian** (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/education/private-schools-have-twohour-lead-on-homework-burden/story-fn59nlz9-1227053077678>) highlighted OECD data showing Australian 15-year-olds are set six hours of homework a week - higher than the OECD average of 4.9 hours.

Walker told the inquiry committee that there is 'absolutely no research advice' on how much time students should spend doing homework. That hasn't stopped some Australian education departments from making recommendations on the 'optimum' amount of homework.

Victorian DEECD guidelines (2012) indicate no more than 30 minutes per day and no homework during weekends or holidays for Prep to Year 4; 30 to 45 minutes per day in Year 5 extending to 45 to 90 minutes by Year 9; one to three hours per night for Year 10 to 12, plus six hours on weekends during peak VCE periods.

Queensland education department guidelines in 2012 suggest: no homework for Prep students and weekly limits of one hour for Years 1 to 3; two to three hours for Years 4 and 5; three to four hours for Years 6 and 7; and no more than five hours a week for Years 8 and 9. For Years 10 to 12 it says hours will vary according to individual learning needs.

The remaining state and territory education departments all have homework policies but do not make recommendations on hours.

Even if you look beyond the fact that guidelines on 'optimum hours' aren't backed by research advice, suggesting set times - as the inquiry committee points out - is about the quantity of work set, rather than the quality. Not everyone works at the same pace and has access to the same resources and support network.

On the question of quality, Hattie is urging schools to think about outcomes. He told the committee that education departments shouldn't encourage schools to adopt a set policy. 'Rather than prescribing a particular way of doing it, let us ask them to provide evidence that the homework policy the school is adopting is improving the outcomes for kids.'

Discussing whether or not homework has more of an impact according to the subject area, the academic says it does have more influence in maths, again because often tasks set for this subject are about 'deliberate practice' of things learnt in class as opposed to a 'project'.

Researchers Ozkan Eren and Daniel J Henderson found assigning homework in subjects like Science, English and History has little to no impact on test scores.

And so the debate continues. As the inquiry report committee concludes: 'Until a causal relationship between homework and academic achievement and personal development is established in studies in Australia, based on Australian educational and cultural structures, this argument is likely to remain unresolved and will continue to be one of perception.'

### **Findings from the Victorian inquiry**

- Feedback on homework is a crucial step in the learning process and without timely feedback some of the learning benefits of homework may be reduced;
- New teachers in Victorian schools may currently lack support to identify and set quality homework;
- Homework can reduce the amount of time available to pursue other activities and interests which may have equal or greater long term benefit;
- Flipped learning offers a new way of engaging children in education and may allow for a better use of time in the classroom;
- There is strong evidence and general agreement that homework at the primary school level has little impact on academic performance, but may play an

important transitional role in preparing students for secondary school and beyond;

- Measuring homework by the time spent doing it is an imprecise and inadequate measure that does not take into account the quality of the work or the ability of the student or, increasingly importantly, student access to technology;
- Homework can have the effect of helping a parent to understand the progress the child is making or otherwise and can therefore help make parent-teacher interviews more meaningful;
- Successful schools see education as a collaborative process between the student, parent and the school, and consider parents to be ‘partners’ in their children’s education. Schools that assist parents in providing support to their children tend to have better educational outcomes;
- Homework’s value is largely as a tool to develop the capacity of students, even when it has no mark or grade attached;
- The proliferation of private tutors may place undue financial pressure on families and has the potential to undermine the value of the assistance they can provide, by shifting the focus from the work assigned by the teacher to work assigned by the tutor;
- Homework may need to be adapted for children with learning disabilities to ensure they obtain the same benefit from homework as their peers;
- Homework clubs provide a vital service for students who experience a form of disadvantage. They engage students who may otherwise drop out of the system.

## References

Buell, J. (2004). *Closing the book on homework: Enhancing public education and freeing family time*. Temple University Press.

Cooper, H. (2007). *The battle over homework*. Corwin Press.

Eren, O., & Henderson, D.J. (2011). ‘Are we wasting our children’s time by giving them more homework?’ *Economics of Education Review* 5(30).

Horsley, M., & Walker, R. (2013). *Reforming homework: practices, learning and policy*. Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan.



How is homework improving outcomes for your students? What evidence do you have?

Research shows timely feedback is an important part of the process - how and when do you provide feedback to students on homework tasks?

Visit the **Victorian Parliament website (<http://acer.ac/hwinquiry>)** to access the inquiry committee's full report.