



AFTERSCHOOL news



Engaging Students in Homework

Most of us have heard Benjamin Franklin's saying that nothing is certain but death and taxes. Share this with a student in the United States, and he or she might add homework to the list. It is no surprise, then, that homework help has become an important part of afterschool programs. In fact, 90% of 21st Century Community Learning Centers reported offering tutoring and homework help in the 2004–2005 school year.¹

Afterschool professionals can help students set and meet homework goals and keep parents and day-school teachers informed about students' progress. Begin by letting day-school teachers know that homework help is available in your afterschool program, and stay informed about teachers' homework expectations and students' progress.

For students who work better in a structured environment, a homework agreement signed by students, parents, teachers, and staff can describe each person's role in homework and what is expected during homework time. Students can use a homework log to record assignments, track progress, and communicate with teachers and parents. A homework log can also be used to help students manage their time, prioritize the things they need to do, and assess their own progress. These and other resources are part of the National Partnership's Afterschool Training Toolkit for Homework. To find the homework agreement and homework log, go to www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/homework/pr_student_progress.html and look at the bottom of the page.

¹ Naftzger, N., Kaufman, S., Margolin, J. & Ali, A. (2006). *21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) analytic support for evaluation and program monitoring: An overview of the 21st CCLC Program: 2004–05*. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.

The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning helps state education agencies and local practitioners develop high-quality programs for academic enrichment as well as youth development activities.

www.sedl.org/afterschool/

Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement? If So, How Much Is Best?

By Harris Cooper, PhD



A recent poll conducted for the Associated Press found that about 57% of parents felt their child was assigned about the right amount of homework. Another 23% thought it was too little, and 19% thought it was too much.

Educators should be thrilled with these numbers. Pleasing a majority of parents regarding homework and having equal numbers of dissenters shouting "Too much!" and "Too little!" is about as good as they can hope for.

What the Research Says

But opinions cannot tell us whether homework works; only research can. My colleagues and I have conducted a combined analysis of dozens of homework studies to examine whether homework is beneficial and what amount of homework is appropriate for our children.

The homework question is best answered by comparing students assigned homework with students assigned no homework but who are similar in other ways. The results of such studies suggest that homework can improve students' scores on the class tests that come at the end



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of a topic. Students assigned homework in second grade did better on math; third and fourth graders did better on English skills and vocabulary; fifth graders on social studies; ninth through 12th graders on American history; and 12th graders on Shakespeare.

However, 35 less-rigorous studies suggest little or no relationship between homework and achievement for elementary school students.



Why might that be? Younger children have less developed study habits and are less able to tune out distractions at home. Studies also suggest that young students who are struggling in school take more time to complete homework assignments simply because these assignments are more difficult for them.

How Much Homework?

So, how much homework should students do? The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Education Association have a parents' guide called *Helping Your Child Get the Most Out of Homework*. It states, "Most educators agree that for children in grades K–2, homework is more effective when it does not exceed 10–20 minutes each day; older children, in grades 3–6, can handle 30–60 minutes a day; in junior and senior high, the amount of homework will vary by subject." Many school district policies state that high school students should expect about 30 minutes of homework for each academic course they take (a bit more for honors or advanced placement courses).

These recommendations are consistent with the conclusions reached by our analysis. Practice assignments do improve scores on class tests at all grade levels. A little amount of homework may help elementary school students build study habits. Homework for junior high students appears to reach the point of diminishing returns after about 90 minutes a night. For high school students, the positive line continues to climb until between 90 minutes and 2.5 hours of homework a night, after which returns diminish.

Keeping It Balanced

Beyond achievement, proponents of homework argue that it can have many other beneficial effects. They claim it can help students develop good study habits so they are ready to grow as their cognitive capacities mature. It can help students recognize that learning can occur at home as well as at school. Homework can foster independent learning and responsible character traits. And it can give parents an

opportunity to see what's going on at school and let them express positive attitudes toward achievement.

Opponents of homework counter that it can also have negative effects. They argue it can lead to boredom with schoolwork because all activities remain interesting only for so long. Homework can deny students access to leisure activities that also teach important life skills. Parents can get too involved in homework—pressuring their child and confusing him or her by using different instructional techniques than the teacher.

My feeling is that homework policies should prescribe amounts of homework consistent with the research evidence, but they should also give individual schools and teachers some flexibility to take into account the unique needs and circumstances of their students and families. In general, teachers should avoid either extreme.

Harris Cooper is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, where he also directs the Program in Education, and author of *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents* (Corwin Press). He is also a member of the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning's steering committee.



FEATURED *resource*

AFTERSCHOOL TRAINING TOOLKIT FOR HOMEWORK

www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/homework/

This free online staff development resource includes video clips, resources, and lesson plans on promising practices in homework help.

Russian Jack 21st Century Community Learning Center

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA



For the Russian Jack 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) in Anchorage, Alaska, communicating with the day school is a key part of afterschool homework help. The 110 students who attend the afterschool program range from kindergarten to sixth grade, and they all bring their homework with them to the after-

school program. Day school teachers provide weekly copies of homework to afterschool instructors. Younger students who do not have homework on a regular basis still have the opportunity to practice skills and reinforce learning through hands-on games and activities.

It is not difficult for Russian Jack and the 10 other Anchorage 21st CCLCs to maintain ties with the day school considering 70% of the day-school staff also work in the afterschool program, and 70% of the afterschool staff are certified teachers in the district. "Students like to have their regular classroom teacher as the 21st CCLC program instructor, and we strive to make that arrangement," says site coordinator Linda Wetherby. "The next best arrangement is to schedule the 21st CCLC [afterschool] class to meet in the student's own classroom. These arrangements provide familiar expectations in a familiar setting for the student."

These close ties also allow for more fun and flexibility in the homework setting. Wetherby says that afterschool and

day-school staff work together to incorporate hands-on activities into homework time. "Activities and games can accomplish as much or more than just one handout, and students like them," says Wetherby. Visitors and guest presenters also help students understand the importance of education. These presenters come from different professional backgrounds and demonstrate what can be achieved through hard work and setting goals.

Like most afterschool programs, Russian Jack offers recreational activities, including Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, cross-country skiing, and cooking. These activities help round out the afternoon, and the precondition of completed homework assignments helps motivate some reluctant students to finish their work. Wetherby says that she and her staff find built-in motivations helpful for students, but she adds that "it doesn't have to involve a big budget. Caring staff can do the trick."



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LINDA WETHERBY
site coordinator

Partner WGBH Wins CINE Award for Toolkit Videos



WGBH Educational Foundation, one of the seven partners in the National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning, which is supported by the U.S. Department of Education 21st Century Learning Centers program, has won a highly acclaimed CINE Golden Eagle Award for video production on the Afterschool Training Toolkit.

Held annually since 1957, CINE's Golden Eagle Film and Video Awards recognize excellence in documentary and informational film and video production. Past recipients of CINE Golden Eagles include Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Barbara Kopple, Ken Burns, and many others distinguished for their work with film and video.

The three winning videos were "Rehearsing the Tempest," "Integrating Science Across the Curriculum," and "Investigating Science Through Inquiry." Cynthia McKeown, video producer at WGBH, worked with associate producer Jayne Sportelli, editors Karen Silverstein and Mary-Kate Shea, and executive producer Amy Tonkonogy to create all the videos for the site.

McKeown says, "It is an honor to be recognized by CINE with a Golden Eagle Award, and it is also very gratifying to know that the Partnership's important work in promoting promising practices in afterschool is being honored as well."

See the award-winning videos at www.sedl.org/afterschool/toolkits/.

IN YOUR *words*

What role do you think homework help should play in an afterschool program?

- Homework help should be a top priority in afterschool. It can really make a difference in improving a student's academic performance.
- Homework help should be offered in afterschool, but it should be one of a variety of enriching activities that students do after school.
- Homework should be just what its name describes: work done at home. Afterschool programs shouldn't spend their time on homework help.

To participate in this survey and view results, submit your vote at www.sedl.org/afterschool/afterwords/survey200801.html.

TRAINING *tip*

The Three Ms of Homework Help

Motivation, monitoring, and modeling, the three Ms of homework help, are essential to student success. To increase *motivation*, create an open and positive atmosphere, help students feel valued, and give frequent and positive feedback. *Monitor* students by circulating and looking for verbal and non-verbal cues for help. When helping students, ask open-ended questions and give students time to think before answering questions. Provide *modeling* for students by showing them how to obtain the information they need through teachers, librarians, and the Internet.

Do you have a training tip you would like to share? E-mail us at afterwords@sedl.org with "Training tip" in the subject line.

EVENTS *calendar*

Feb. 14–17 Beyond School Hours 11
JACKSONVILLE, FL

Feb. 28–29 Peak Afterschool Workshop: Literacy and Arts
KANSAS CITY, MO

Mar. 12–14 National AfterSchool Association Conference
FORT LAUDERDALE, FL

For more events, visit our calendar at www.sedl.org/afterschool/training/calendar.html.

ANNOUNCEMENT

There are only a few days left to register for the **Peak Afterschool Workshop on Literacy and Arts**. Learn more at www.mcrel.org/PEAK/literacy_arts/.

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