

Is Homework Worth The Time? 2-25-2013

Posted By [staff and wire services reports](#) On December 28, 2012 @ 1:20 pm In [Curriculum,eClassroom News,McClatchy,Top News](#) | [No Comments](#)



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Schools need to take a closer look at what they're assigning to students and why, some experts say.

A recent study led by an Indiana University professor found that traditional homework assignments won't improve a student's grades but could boost standardized test scores.

With many students reporting they spend more than 100 hours each year on homework, it begs the question: Is homework still worth the time?

While most experts believe it is, some recommend that educators rethink their approach to giving homework. Traditional assignments might become a thing of the past as teachers move toward assignments that are more project-based or require more critical thinking, they say.

Indiana's Taylor High School is among the schools making those changes.

"Some districts are toying with the idea of eliminating homework completely," said Taylor High School Principal Eric Hartman. He said he doesn't think that's the answer.

Neither do the authors of the study.

"We're not trying to say that all homework is bad," said Adam Maltese, co-author of the study and assistant professor of science education in the IU School of Education. "It's expected that students are going to do homework."

Schools just need to take a closer look at what they're assigning to students and why, Maltese said.

(Next page: What Maltese's study found)

The authors of the study examined survey and transcript data of more than 18,000 10th-grade students to uncover explanations for academic performance, IU officials said.

The data focused on individual classes for students. It looked at transcripts for students from two nationwide samples collected in 1990 and 2002 by the National Center for Education Statistics.

What they found contradicted some of the published research on the subject.

They analyzed the time spent on homework and the final class grades and found no substantial difference in grades between students who complete homework and those who do not, university officials said.

But the analysis found a positive association between student performance on standardized tests and the time they spent on homework.

"Our results hint that maybe homework is not being used as well as it could be," Maltese said.

He said the results indicate the types of homework assignments typically given might work better toward standardized test preparation than for retaining knowledge of class material.

Maltese said maybe teachers should be thinking about quality over quantity.

"So in math, rather than doing the same types of problems over and over again, maybe it should involve having students analyze new types of problems or data," Maltese said. "In science, maybe the students should write concept summaries instead of just reading a chapter and answering the questions at the end."

Taylor High School is already heading in that direction.

Students in Jessica Breedlove's math classes play corn hole to learn about the quadratic equation. They have to adjust their toss and equation to hit their target from a set distance.

One class was tasked with re-creating a crime scene to learn about trigonometry and geometry concepts. One student said her group had to build a bank vault.

"What we're trying to do is eliminate the busy work," Hartman said.

They're trying to move away from assignments that require students to memorize or regurgitate information, Hartman said.

They want to test a student's problem-solving skills and challenge them to think critically, he said. The principal said it's also important for them to understand a lesson's real-world application.

"A lot of the reason they don't do [their homework] is because they don't understand the relevancy of it," he said.

(Next page: How Taylor's change in homework assignments has benefitted students)

With Taylor's increased focus on project-based learning, students are more engaged in their assignments. And more engaged students are more likely to do their homework, the principal said.

Eastern Elementary School is using its new iPads to engage students and get them more excited about homework, Principal Randy Maurer said.

"There's so many distractions for kids after school," he said. "We've got to make sure they're interested."

Students in a science class at Eastern had to record themselves giving a weather forecast.

Instead of writing or memorizing definitions for weather terms, students had to be able to use those terms correctly during their forecast.

"It gives it more meaning, helps them remember," Maurer said.

Even the traditional assignments that involve practice and repetition are done in a new way, he said. Children can practice adding and subtracting or reading using iPad applications that are set up like a game.

"Because it's a game, they want to do it," Maurer said.

Hartman said he thinks Taylor is ahead of the game.

He said there are new national assessments being developed that focus less on regurgitation and more on application.

His students have a head start, because their assignments already target those critical-thinking skills, Hartman said.

"I think you're going to see a move to that all over the country," he said.

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