

Does Homework Help?

Herbert J. Walberg

Because surveys show U.S. students near the bottom of rankings of achievement test scores, educators and parents have asked if homework helps. Legislators and business people have also expressed concern. They know today's youth will compete with Asians and Europeans for good jobs that require more skills and knowledge.

Increasing numbers of Americans worry about our youth's future. They believe students can use after-school time to better prepare themselves for college and jobs. Despite such beliefs, teachers may not assign and grade homework, and parents may not insist on it. As a consequence, students may not do much.

How Much Time for Study?

A survey of eighth-grade students in eleven countries showed countries whose students averaged the most homework, eight to nine hours per week, also had the highest average scores on tests. Swedish and U.S. students did the least homework, an average of four to five hours a week, and had the lowest scores.

Of course, students vary in how much homework they do. For those who only add two hours of homework per week to 25 hours of class time, homework increases total study time by seven percent. But those who do four hours every day more than double their study time to 53 hours per week. This total amount of time is a major cause of how much students learn.

By the standard of total study time, American students suffer another handicap. Not only do they skimp on homework but they go to school fewer days than most other students. Of 27 countries surveyed, only two have shorter school years. U.S. students have a 180-day school year. Japanese students have 243 days, and German students go to school about 230 days.

Japan's education system has attracted the most interest from those trying to improve U.S. education. Among advanced countries, Japan spends the least on education but has the lowest dropout rates and top

achievement test rankings. How do Japanese do it? A long school year and rigorous homework policies help. Measured by the amount of study time, a high school diploma in Japan is equivalent to a college degree in the United States. The knowledge and discipline acquired may be the keys to Japan's industrial might and economic progress.

Teachers in Japan, moreover, encourage students to make use of out-of-school time for study. They visit students' homes to discuss school progress and advise parents how they can foster effective home study. They also encourage parents to observe their children perform in class.

In addition, many Japanese students attend evening schools for tutoring and preparing for tests. Others go to the schools to pursue such hobbies as piano playing, flower arrangement, and martial arts.

All this effort does not appear to hurt Japanese youth. They have nearly the lowest delinquency rates in the world. Their life expectancy is above that of Europe and the U.S.; and Japanese youth suicide rates are about half the U.S. rates.

How Much Homework Should Be Done?

Studies of prize-winning American youth in various fields such as art, chess, and music show that they put in many hours of well-coached effort. Mastery of academic subjects is no different. Although it is difficult to state exact time requirements, elementary school students may have to study two to three hours to get the most from school. Junior high students in grades seven and eight may benefit most from three to four hours. High school students might be best with four to five hours.

More homework is usually better, though not to the point of exhaustion. Clear school guidelines, moreover, help parents and students set goals.

In deciding the amount of time for homework, we should ask what other activities would be given up. For U.S. students, the biggest block of time is devoted to television—an average of 28 hours per week. In addition, many students work to earn money for cars, dating, and stylish clothes. In the long term, however, they would learn and earn more by investing their time in homework to increase their knowledge and skills.

Homework quality is also important. Unsuitable homework that is too easy, too difficult, or unclear wastes students' time. Teachers, however, can double homework's effects by carefully and promptly correcting it. Writing, for example, is learned by writing, correcting, and re-writing. But teachers might be reluctant to correct a two-page essay, a laboratory report, and other written work that should be assigned each week.

One solution is to employ part-time aides to help teachers. Japan provides a cost-free alternative: Students assigned to small work groups help each other in planning, conducting, and marking

individual work. In this way, they not only acquire more knowledge for competitive examinations but learn a valuable skill for the future—cooperation.

Taking homework and school time more seriously calls for big changes in American education. Of course, students' abilities, good teaching, and parental encouragement also make a difference. These may sustain present mediocrity, but world-class learning will require more study time.

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