

By Megan Lindow

Do your children get too much homework? Not enough? The right amount?

For different groups of kids, different schools, and different needs, the answer isn't the same," cautions Mary Perry, deputy director of EdSource, a think tank on California schools.

Still, teachers, parents, and kids often disagree about homework policies. One Half Moon Bay school board member recently called for an outright ban on homework, while some parents are demanding more. And nearly half of parents surveyed by the research group Public Agenda reported having a serious argument with their child over homework during the past year.

Many school districts follow guidelines that limit homework to between 20 and 40 minutes a night, depending on grade level. But parents still tell stories of children working for hours each night.

Mike Dreebin heard plenty of these disagreements in his 31 years of teaching in Los Angeles elementary schools. Now a vice principal, Dreebin says, "Parents often have different concerns about homework, depending on the area you're teaching in."

"In downtown L.A., the number one item parents wanted was more homework. They knew their kids had more to catch up on. In an area with upscale homes, some students and parents complain they have too much homework.

"It's difficult to both communicate with parents and meet the needs of the kids, and it's getting more difficult because of increased class sizes and standardized curriculum. Teachers are now under more pressure across the board."

We asked parents in different communities: Do your children get too much homework? Not enough? The right amount?



JANET BROWN MCCracken

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Deputy Director of EdSource

What do YOU think?

- Do elementary school kids have too much homework? Too little?

Weigh in on this topic at CaliforniaVoices4Children.org

Too much!

Teresa Gallegos, San Francisco, son in fourth grade

"With my son, he had so many problems with homework that what he was supposed to be getting out of it wasn't worth it. It wasn't doing anything to further his education. Instead, he hated doing it and it was a fight every time. He would spend over two hours on it. I had a conversation with the teacher and said, 'we need to figure out how to make this a 20-minute thing.' After that, his headaches went away."

Maria Rios, San Francisco, son in third grade and daughter in first grade

"I think they have too much homework. When my kids were in kindergarten they were so excited to go to school, and now my 10-year-old is saying 'I wish I was back in preschool.' The homework is staggering. The younger one has to do a book report every day and she's seven. She's an honor student, but I still see her struggling with having to do it day in, day out. There's just no time to relax. I think homework somehow takes the joy out of learning. It's a burden for everybody. With my son, he's given up on homework. It's either a major argument at home or I let him take the consequences. He started reading at age four and now he's regressing. He hates reading, hates lugging a big backpack every day. I think everybody's pressured to make kids perform, but it's counterproductive."

Not enough!

Isabel Cervacio, San Jose, son in fifth grade and daughter in fourth

"My son has a page or something every day. I don't think this is enough. My daughter, same thing. I think homework is important because it's reviewing whatever they learned. For me, it's an opportunity to work with them, to be a part of their education. My kids were born here but we are from Mexico and our culture is different. I always teach my kids and I try to let them know how important it is for them to have a good education. They learn more when they have homework. It's getting used to that habit. I know they can do it."

Just right!

Belinda Nghieu, Whittier, daughters entering second and fifth grades

"For this year, they got the right amount. The previous year they didn't. They get math every night, they get vocabulary, spelling every week, they have reading every night including weekends. They sit down at a certain time and finish the homework, then go watch TV or play. They're more advanced because they're getting more knowledge. By doing the homework, I can tell or the teacher can tell if they got what was taught, so I can explain it or go to the teacher. It is a good habit for them. Homework helps them to be responsible and face the challenges they have."

Depends on the neighborhood!

Rose Reed, Los Angeles, children entering third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades

"My fourth and fifth grader don't receive much homework, but my child in the sixth grade goes to school in the suburbs and she has tons of homework. In L.A. she wasn't getting any of the homework she receives now, and she was lacking in a lot of things. Her reading and math weren't up to par.

I think it has a lot to do with the area you're in. Here in L.A. we're basically low income, versus in the Valley you have more areas that are well-to-do. In L.A. you have a lot of good teachers who are willing to give the kids what they need, but they don't have the books or the resources. There's also a lack of knowledge. My kids, they do struggle.

And for me as a parent, the math homework they have now, I don't understand it. If I don't know how to do it, how can I show them how to do it?

I'm all for having more homework, but at the same time I don't want my children thrown down with lots of homework like they're in college. My daughter has improved this year, but it was a big, big challenge for her. She leaves at 6:10 to be at school at eight. She gets home at five o'clock and sometimes she's at the table until nine or 10 doing homework.

I just think all kids should get a fair share of learning, no matter where you live or what disability you have, and regardless of color."

Wrong kind!

Jan Waldman, Mill Valley, son entering third grade

"Homework ties into such a bigger issue of education. My son brings home a packet of worksheets, and he'll just run through the whole thing in 20 minutes. It hasn't interfered with his life, but I don't know that it's doing much for him. I think that young kids learn most of the stuff they're going to learn from interactions in the home, so I'd just as soon have more time for interaction as a family.

I feel that a lot of the routineness of the homework comes from standard expectations that the state has of what students need to be learning in order to do well on the standardized tests they're preparing for all year long. It's a terrible waste of time and energy. They cram all this stuff down kids' throats so they're ready to take these standardized tests to show that the school is a good school. I see homework as funneling right into that whole issue."