

## They Say/I Say Practice: Homework Ban Policies

Junyk, Myra. "Homework Ban Policies: Overview." *Canadian Points of View: Homework Ban Policies*, Jan. 2017, p. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=p3h&AN=120625457&lang=en-ca&site=pov-can.

### Introduction

For decades, parents and teachers have considered homework a natural extension of the school day. The rationale for assigning homework is that assignments done at home allow students to reinforce what they learned at school. Canadian supporters of the traditional homework model in elementary schools cite the positive effects of regular, structured homework assignments at an appropriate level to promote student learning. They believe that homework reinforces key concepts through repetition, as well as teaching time-management and organization skills. It encourages students to understand that learning occurs outside of a school building. These activities not only promote student achievement, but also give students time to improve their learning skills while developing a work ethic that will serve them well in the increasingly competitive global economy.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, however, Canadian parents and educators began questioning the need for homework in elementary grades. Parents argue that homework assignments are causing undue physical and mental stress in families. Instead of engaging in repetitive homework assignments such as worksheets or drill and practice activities, students need to spend time away from school to decompress and engage in social, physical and recreational activities. Young children need time to play with their friends and to engage in creative activities in order to relax from the stresses of the school environment. Parents also need time to interact with their children and model leisure activities. Eliminating homework would relieve stress on families and promote wellness. Teachers cite research studies that question the effectiveness of homework to improve academic achievement in elementary schools. Homework is also seen as a social justice issue. Students who do not have access to home-based technology are at a great disadvantage in completing their homework assignments.

In Canada, because education is regulated by the provincial government, homework policies vary widely throughout the country. Some provinces, such as Alberta, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Ontario, have left homework policies up to individual school boards. However, the province of British Columbia has specific guidelines on how much homework should be given to elementary students. Several elementary schools throughout Canada have banned homework entirely.

### Homework ban policies today:

Homework ban policies continue to be an issue in Canadian elementary schools. Schools throughout Canada have launched homework bans. In September 2014, Collège de Saint-Ambroise in Saguenay, Quebec, launched a ban on homework for grades 1 through 6. This pilot project eliminated assignments done by students at home while restructuring their time in school to ensure that all students were getting adequate preparation and reinforcement of their learning. In Peterborough, Ontario, elementary French teacher Lisa Noble stopped assigning homework to her core French classes because the work they were doing at home was memorization, which she felt did not meaningfully develop their French-language speaking skills. An elementary school in Calgary, Alberta, has limited the homework for grade 2 students to fifteen minutes of reading per night. There are numerous other examples of homework bans throughout Canada.

Most provinces in Canada allow school boards and schools to enact specific homework policies for their communities. This kind of disparity causes confusion for parents. One school in a community such as Toronto, Ontario, might choose to ban homework entirely for primary students, while the school across the street might still assign homework in the form of worksheets or projects that involve heavy parental supervision. Even within the same school, teachers may assign differing amounts of homework.

**Point Thesis:** Homework is a burden on students and their families rather than an effective tool to promote learning and should be severely reduced or eliminated in elementary schools across Canada.

**Taking Points:**

- Homework assignments prevent children from engaging in other worthwhile activities outside of school.
- Banning homework would create more equality among students.
- An excessive amount of homework puts undue stress on families.

**Summary:** Opponents of homework, such as Heather Shumaker in her Time article "Why Parents Should Not Make Kids Do Homework," argue that homework assignments prevent children from engaging in other worthwhile activities outside of school. Children need to have time to relax from the stresses of the school environment, Shumaker says, and they also need time to pursue their own interests such as recreational activities, art classes and music classes that are not available to them at school. In response to these calls for more free time for elementary school children, the Vancouver School Board in British Columbia (BC) has put out a brochure for parents, "Understanding Homework in BC Elementary Schools-Kindergarten to Grade 7." The BC Ministry of Education guidelines for homework recommend that kindergarten to grade 3 students have no homework at all. In grades 4 to 7, the recommended homework time is half an hour per night.

Some critics also feel that banning homework would create more equality among students. French president François Hollande, a socialist, argues that homework reinforces an achievement gap between richer and poorer students, as not all students have equal access to the resources needed for many homework assignments at home. BC Teachers' Federation president Jim Iker also points out this problem to Paul Luke for an article in the Province, saying, "When you have kids come to school without any breakfast and sometimes without lunch, how can you expect them to do homework?" A study cited in the same article found that economically advantaged fifteen-year-old students spend nearly six hours per week on homework, while disadvantaged students spend only four. In these instances, homework becomes a social justice issue since poorer students are disadvantaged by these assignments compared to their peers.

The amount of homework in Canadian schools has long been a source of conflict between parents and educators. It has even been the subject of lawsuit in 2009 in Calgary, Alberta. Tom and Shelli Milley sued their local school over the amount of homework their children were required to do. They won the lawsuit, and the settlement allowed their son and daughter not to do homework. Their grades would only be based on work done in the classroom.

Homework opponents also argue that parents having to enforce rules about homework creates tension within the home. Shumaker describes this new family reality in her Time article: "Overtired children complain and collapse. Exasperated parents cajole and nag. These family fights often end in tears, threats, and parents secretly finishing their kid's homework."

**Counterpoint Thesis:** A moderate amount of homework for elementary school students effectively reinforces key concepts, develops time-management and organization skills and offers families a way to support their children's learning.

**Talking Points:**

- Homework for elementary school students can be a useful tool when it enhances their learning and understanding of key concepts taught in the classroom.
- Homework has a positive effect on students by helping them to build an effective work ethic through the development of time-management and organizational skills.
- By getting involved in homework activities, parents gain the opportunity to support their children's learning.

**Summary:** Advocates for homework argue that homework is constructive when it extends classroom learning. In Nova Scotia, the Provincial Homework Policy (Grades P-12) was introduced on September 1, 2015. It states that "Homework can help students develop academically and personally when the work is carefully planned, directly connected to classroom learning, meaningful to students, and appropriate for a student's age and stage of development." According to this document, homework should only be assigned to enhance student foundational skills in subjects such as reading and math, to practice learning in other subjects or to apply students' understanding of a subject in new ways. In other words, students must be engaging in learning activities that expand the knowledge gained in the classroom environment. These activities can include independent reading, researching new information on topics in the classroom, and preparing podcasts or other types of presentations.

Proponents of homework argue that it helps students to build an effective work ethic through the development of time-management and organizational skills. In an interview with the Province, Sandra Mathison, a University of British Columbia education professor, explained that the defenders of homework believe that it nurtures "a strong work ethic, self-discipline and sustained concentration." In the same article, parent Scott Verwold expressed disappointment that his daughter's teacher did not assign homework, fearing that she would miss out on the chance to build skills she might later need. "It seems like schools are not preparing our kids for the competitive worlds that they will be entering in a few years," he said. Grade 6 French teacher Tanis Maxfield added that the ability to deal with the differing expectations of teachers regarding homework was itself an important life skill, saying, "You want your children to be able to accommodate a wide range of people, expectations and workloads."

In an article for Literacy Today, Sirpa Eskelä-Haapanen, a senior lecturer in special education at the University of Tampere, Finland, argues that by getting involved in homework activities, parents gain the opportunity to support their children's learning. Parents and children spend little time together in the twenty-first century, she says, so doing homework together offers the opportunity to engage in high-quality family time. This interaction provides time to share daily experiences and offers parents a concrete way to assist their children in the learning process. However, she cautions, effective parental involvement in homework depends on cooperation between parents, teachers and students. Communication about assignments and expectations must be clear and concise so that there is no misunderstanding about how assignments are to be completed. Eskelä-Haapanen concludes that these cooperative family activities support student skill development and provide the foundation for lifelong learning.