

Chicago Tribune Schools

Worked up over homework

Assignments pile up as pressure builds to improve school performance. But everyone fails to agree on the right amount.

The daily grind starts as early as kindergarten, sometimes even preschool, for today's kids, as any parent will tell you. And it rarely lets up.

"The amount of homework is and has been just ridiculous — my child can't have a real life," one parent complained in a school district survey. "There have been nights where we have been up until 12 or 1 a.m. because my child is still working on some school assignment."

From incomprehensible assignments, like dressing up as [Mae West](#), to group-project [headaches](#) to a workload that robs time from family, almost every aspect of homework has been under scrutiny for decades. But an unprecedented outpouring of frustration in Wheaton's Community Unit School District 200 has opened a new window into the debate in local homes and schools.

A survey of the district's 13,500 mostly affluent, college-educated families yielded more than 11,000 responses, criticisms and comments about the quality and quantity of homework, with parents saying their kids have had to give up athletics, religion classes, playtime and sleep because of the avalanche of homework.

Researchers and educators say pressure has grown to assign even more take-home work as schools are forced to boost student achievement.

"When the expectations from the federal and state government ramped up, the big push was for rigor, or stepping it up," said Wheaton Superintendent Brian Harris. "The expectations on teachers, on schools, on principals, superintendents, all of us, ramped up and became very visible. What happened, I think, is that districts including this one, started to really pile it on."

Even so, studies have shown almost no link between homework and student achievement in elementary grades, in part because "little kids have short attention spans and don't know how to study," said Harris Cooper, a homework scholar and professor at [Duke University](#).

"As kids grow older, the relationship between how much time they spend on homework and how well they're doing in school grows stronger," he said.

A common practice among teachers, Cooper said, has been to assign 10 minutes of homework per grade, such as 10 minutes in first grade and two hours for a 12th-grader. After two hours, however, the benefits of homework for high school students may wane, he said.

The debate has sprouted academic research, blogs, websites and books with titles such as "The Case Against Homework." The publicity spurred districts to re-examine policies, and some schools in California banned or reduced homework a few years ago.

"But the number of places that did it didn't match the rhetoric," said Colorado education researcher and author Robert Marzano, in part because homework is so ingrained in school culture.

Cathy Vatterott, an author and associate education professor at the University of Missouri at [St. Louis](#), sees signs that the homework debate is heating up again.

She pointed to the 2010 [documentary](#) "Race to Nowhere," which is playing at schools around the country and showcasing the stressed-out lives of students pressured to achieve. The film may cause districts to rethink homework practices, she said.

A [Chicago Public Schools](#) policy suggests limits on homework, such as 30 minutes a day for first-, second- and third-graders.

But elsewhere in the state, "I don't think there's a groundswell going on out there," for homework reforms, said Anna Lovern, director of policy services at the Illinois Association of School Boards.

[Wheaton](#) began looking at homework issues more than two years ago, after hearing concerns from parents, teachers and students. The homework survey was conducted in November 2008, questioning third- through 12th-graders, parents and teachers. Margo Sorrick, Wheaton's assistant superintendent for educational services, said results weren't released until recently because of a focus on district budget woes and a turnover in superintendents.

Many parents understand the role of homework and some question why their kids don't get enough. Educators view homework as a way to create a connection between school and home.

"I see it as a window into my child's day," one parent wrote in the survey. "I am able to see what s/he is doing in school and help my child with any concepts that they are struggling to learn. When report card time comes around, there are no surprises."

Wheaton North High School parent Cynthia Hummel told the Tribune that her daughter, a high school freshman at the time of the survey, was taking honors classes and sometimes had more than three hours of homework a night. Her son, now a freshman, doesn't have as many advanced classes and has less homework. "A tough night for him would be two hours," she said.

Meg Beasley, parent of an eighth-grader and fifth-grader in the district, said her son recently had to write a paper about the amount of homework, part of a lesson on persuasive writing. In that essay, Drew Beasley described his homework as the "perfect amount."

He wrote: "I finished my homework in about an hour last night. ... I had time to kick back and be a kid, but not enough time to watch TV or play [Wii](#)."

Sorrick said the district is not inclined to set specific homework requirements, allowing for teacher discretion.

But as a result of the survey, the district is proposing changes in homework practices for 2011-12, including no group projects unless time is given in class for students to coordinate and complete them.

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