

In the fall of 2006, two books about homework were published that caused quite a stir in the popular media: Alfie Kohn's *The Homework Myth: Why our kids get too much of a bad thing*, and Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish's *The Case against homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*.

Jay Matthews, columnist for the Washington Post, wrote an article claiming the “anti-homework” movement was without merit. The following is my email to him:

Rant to Jay Matthews

When someone asks my opinions about homework, I usually ask “How much time do you have?” I’ll try not to overwhelm—but I am passionate.

You claim that the recent backlash against homework is without merit and has been exaggerated by the two latest books on the topic. First of all, I agree with you that the research has been cherry-picked to support the author’s conclusions. But this has been happening for years—both pro and anti forces have been interpreting the same research differently to support their beliefs. Whatever research one chooses to cite, it is doubtful that the data is an accurate representation of the diversity of socioeconomic levels in the schools in this country, as well as the diversity of homework practices across elementary, middle and secondary schools.

And there lies the dilemma. The two new books you mentioned are written for the *affluent*, in whose schools homework IS often out of control. Excessive homework is usually driven by a belief system(think “religion”) that lots of homework=a rigorous curriculum(regardless of the tasks), that if 10 problems are good, 30 is better, and hard work is painful but virtuous, and that children who don’t do homework are lazy and

irresponsible and should be punished with failing grades (the puritan work ethic gone bad!).

Several years ago I started lecturing about homework at teacher and principal conventions. I am a former teacher and principal, but back then I was a frustrated parent. Like Alfie, Sara and Nancy, I started out very anti-homework, primarily because it seemed to be an unexamined practice. I was and still am quite annoyed at the moralistic attachment many people have to the inherent value of homework. Yet I have seen that many teachers and parents are ready to rethink that “religion”.

Over the years, in the process of presenting my ideas to over 4800 teachers and parents in the United States, Canada, and Europe at conventions and in individual school districts, I have learned several things from my discussions with teachers and parents:

1. Most teachers and parents are not comfortable abolishing homework completely. They understand that it is important for children to learn how to work on their own, and that practice is necessary to develop and refine intellectual skills. They understand that well-designed, meaningful homework has benefit.

2. There’s a lot of bad homework out there. It’s often busy work, or made intentionally difficult or lengthy. It is often not well-designed or meaningful or able to be completed by the student without help, thus negating it’s value in fostering independent learning.

3. The parent-school relationship ain’t what it used to be. Many parents no longer want the job of helping with homework. Homework is an added burden that interferes with family life and parents want the right to control their child’s free time. The rich want to feed their child’s resumes with activities while the poor often need

children to cook, clean and care for younger children. In terms of parents “making” their children do homework, the dictatorship is dead, leading to more and more struggles with homework.

4. **It’s not fair to fail children for not doing homework**, because it may be due to family environment, lack of support, lack of resources, or lack of time.

That’s the real tragedy of homework--disadvantaged students are often failed for not completing homework, or are not given the chance to develop independent learning skills because teachers know they don’t have the home environment to do homework. So homework can actually widen the achievement gap when the poor do less and the rich do more. When students are failed due to incomplete homework, it can cause them to be retained, have a lower GPA, reduce their chances of getting into college, and yada, yada, yada.

You’re right--we don’t need to abolish homework, we need to fix it . We need to:

- show teachers what quality tasks look like and how to use homework to check for understanding
- limit homework to a reasonable amount that allows a child to sleep, play, and interact with their family
- respect the right of families to control their child’s free time.
- prohibit teachers from failing students for incomplete work(many schools now have “Zeros aren’t possible” programs) which force students to complete all work.
- provide afterschool homework support programs for students who need them (this is getting to be more and more prominent around the country).

This is what I help schools do—MY book(in the works now) will be about “Homework that works”—how to most effectively use the process to enhance learning.