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## Homework in primary schools an exercise in futility, say academics

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A new kind of homework  
A school in Sydney is trialling a new kind of homework.  
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It's not just parents who suffer; teachers waste valuable time too, writes Andrew Stevenson.

CONSIDERING the effort invested by so many students in so many homes, the evidence that homework actually works - particularly for young children - is patchy at best.

Even the noted international researcher and advocate Harris Cooper says the seemingly ubiquitous photocopied homework sheets with no immediate correlation to current learning are "probably not" of any benefit.

"Homework works but how effective it will be depends on the developmental level and home circumstances of the student," Dr Cooper, Professor of Education at Duke University, North Carolina, said.

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"It shouldn't be given in such large amounts that the child loses their motivation and begins to wonder whether they're truly interested in the activity: that's when homework turns from being good to bad."

But John Hattie, the director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, says homework as it is usually undertaken is likely to have little to no effect in primary schools.

"I do not advocate abolishing it but trying something different," he said, suggesting schools should consider inviting parents into the classroom to work with them on developing more appropriate homework challenges.

For young children, Professor Hattie says homework should not take more than five minutes and it should be used to deliberately practise something already taught in the classroom.

However, Richard Walker, an associate professor at the University of Sydney and co-author of a forthcoming book, *Reforming Homework*, is even more sceptical about the efficacy of homework.

"If the question is does homework improve learning and achievement as assessed by tests, then the answer, at primary level, is no. There is very little evidence to support it," he said. "At junior high school there's a little bit of evidence to support it but it's pretty weak and at senior high school level there's more support."

It's not just parents who struggle. Setting homework, marking it and ensuring compliance eats up teaching time. "You've got to ask yourself is the benefit sufficient to justify the trouble," Professor Walker said.

But many parents remain enamoured with homework. "In a lot of schools, the executive, the principal and deputy will emphasise homework because they know it's good public relations: they know that parents are concerned about it. But a lot of teachers think it is a bit of a waste of time," Professor Walker said.

That view is echoed by Sue Thomson, the head of educational monitoring and research at the Australian Council for Educational Research. "Parents like kids to have homework because they think it is part of what schooling is all about," she said.

The best Professor Walker can say for homework is it can help develop skills of independent learning and time management - a view strongly advocated by Dr Cooper who says starting young is important.

"The idea of not introducing homework until kids are 14 years old suggests they might have already developed patterns of behaviour and expectations of what they do outside of school that would make it very difficult for them to introduce homework into their daily routines," he said.

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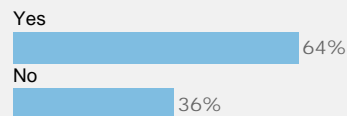
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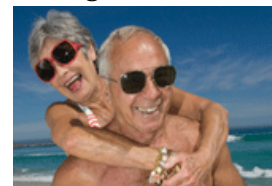


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