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## Paul Bennett: Ignore the whiners: Homework's making a big comeback



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School has resumed for another year and most parents, teachers and students are once again confronting the thorny issue of homework. After a decade-long campaign against assigning kids too much work to be completed at home, homework is definitely making a comeback in Canadian schools.

The latest revival was clearly spawned by recent research, summarized in a 2014 Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) booklet, testifying to the “positive benefits” of homework. Instead of asking “how much is too much?” the key question today is, “how much is enough?”

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American education writer Alfie Kohn's 2006 book, *The Homework Myth*, provoked a rethinking of homework across the continent. It also sparked a movement, supported by a vocal minority of parents and educators, to curtail homework and eliminate it in the early grades.

Kohn succeeded in challenging the purported benefits of homework in improving student academic performance and attracted friendly researchers such as Dr. Linda Cameron at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

In February 2008, Cameron and her OISE colleague Dr. Lee Bartel produced a study of parent opinions and attitudes that supported Kohn’s claims that homework was excessive, especially in lower grades, and that it reduced “family time” and affected “family relationships.” That opinion research, buttressed by teacher union workload studies, gave credence to moves underway in Ontario to “ban homework” in lower elementary grades.

Limiting or eliminating homework gained favour in the Toronto District School Board and a few of Canada’s major urban school boards, most notably in Metro Vancouver and the Halifax Regional School Board.

Common sense would suggest that it is desirable for students to come to class each day, prepared and capable of contributing to activities and discussions. A body of educational research had accumulated by the late 1990s documenting its “positive benefits” for reinforcing classroom lessons, teaching responsibility and self-discipline.

## Parents and teachers are now recognizing that too little rather than too much is now expected of

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Assigning a steady diet of programmed-learned repetitive exercises and “busy work” — to be sure — gave conventional homework a bad name. The short-lived North American backlash against homework in the mid-2000s.

By 2012, the impact of the changes was being felt in mathematics. New studies also pointed to a decline in student resilience.

Fifteen-year-olds around the globe, the OECD reported in 2013, spent an average of 5.9 hours a week in 2012 doing homework. In the United States, students were assigned 13.8 hours and 9.7 hours and 5.5 hours of homework. The OECD Education Office attributed it to adolescents spending more time on the Internet and to changes in homework policy.

The direct benefits of homework for student academic achievement are not clear before Grade 3, but researchers have identified and confirmed other important merits of the practice. The benefits tend to vary according to the subject and grade level, as well as the amount and type of homework. Spending a lot of time on homework in the early grades does not translate into better reading performance, but it does contribute to developing self-discipline reflected in more focus, better time management and improved self-confidence.

The latest research confirms that doing homework is essential to performing reasonably well in junior and senior high school. Since Canadian high schoolers now report doing less than one hour per day, most education authorities reject Kohn’s claims and see a positive “return on the time invested” in subject-specific homework, balancing the multiple demands of competing subject areas. All recent studies concur that older students continue to benefit more than younger students because of the edge it gives them in academic achievement.

The homework backlash is fizzling-out as parents and teachers recognize that too little rather than too much is now expected of most public school students. In Nova Scotia, the proclamation of a Provincial Homework Policy (Grades P-12), effective September 2015, reflects the current trend, setting an “expectation for educators” to assign homework in graduated amounts, to evaluate it promptly and to provide regular feedback to students.

Assigning homework is now considered avant garde in the 21st century digital learning world. Some of the most exciting innovations emerging across the continent are based upon homework activities. The best example is the so-called “flipped classroom” model where students are expected to utilize the Internet to watch videos as 21st century-style “homework” and teachers are encouraged to utilize class time for interactive, follow-up learning activities.

School boards without clear, flexible and expandable homework policies are now at a distinct disadvantage. In the absence of that enabling framework, the “flipped classroom” is rendered more difficult to implement and learning is limited to traditional pen-and-

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