



THE GREAT HOMEWORK DEBATE

WASTE OF TIME OR LASTING VALUE?

IAN WALKER & BRUCE McDOUGALL

Desperate parents are hiring private tutors to turbo-charge their children's education because they are unhappy with the amount and quality of homework set by schools.

Education experts are so divided about the merits of homework that growing numbers of families are signing up their children for outside coaching to supplement classwork. Schools are also facing a groundswell of opposition to homework as doctors advise it is bad

for children's sleep and educators and academics claim it is of little benefit.

Education insiders have told The Saturday Telegraph that homework policies vary enormously between schools and often between teachers at the same school.

The homework row has been fuelled by a parliamentary inquiry in Victoria that found it had almost no academic benefits for primary school students. And in France a plan by President Francois Hollande to abolish homework in French schools reignited a long-running debate.

The Australian Tutoring Association said many parents

enrolled their children in private coaching to ensure they received "structured support" outside of school.

Chief executive Mohan Dhall said homework was often given to primary school children without explaining why it was set and without an obvious reason and purpose.

"There does not seem to be a sense of order or purpose about school homework — just an ad-hoc program that does not always meet the needs of kids," Mr Dhall said. "A lot of parents think it is unstructured — additional work for children needs to be meaningful and engage them in higher-order thinking."

Teachers argue there is no one-



size-fits-all policy for homework.

Some experts claim children should spend their time after school playing and letting their brains wind down so they can get a good night's sleep to absorb the day's learning.

Newly released data reveals Australian children have the fifth greatest homework load globally, with 15-year-olds receiving about six hours' a week compared to the OECD average of 4.9 hours.

The research shows private school

students do about two hours of homework more than their peers in public schools.

Children's Hospital at Westmead sleep paediatrician Dr Chris Seton said homework overload was making children anxious and ruining their sleep.

"Homework delays sleep and late at night they don't learn, then they go to bed late and they can't sleep because they're stressed — they're not absorbing," he said.

"The second problem is the stuff they learnt earlier in class they don't consolidate because of a lack of sleep. So it's a compounding problem."

University of Sydney educational psychology Associate Professor Richard Walker said homework should not start before Year 5 and the key was to make it interesting and to have good feedback.

"Repetition is not a good thing, it's boring and not going to be all that helpful," Professor Walker said.

"Good-quality homework is challenging but not too difficult, and it involves some degree of new learning activities rather than repetition of previous learnt activity."

Parenting expert Dr Justin Coulson believes homework for children aged

under 14 has no benefit for motivation, learning outcomes or grades.

"If they can have any homework it should be playing more," he said.

"It is through play they develop social understanding, cognitive skills and spatial awareness. So it is through play they are developing as people."

Dr Coulson said homework cut into family time and extra-curricular activities and put pressure on parents asked to help with unfamiliar work.

But mum Rebecca Vella loves helping her sons Will, in kindergarten, and Lachlan, in Year 1, at West Pennant Hills Public School with their reading and spelling homework.

"I enjoy being able to see what they do at school and what they read, and to follow up on that at home. They enjoy it too, showing me what they've read," she said.

NSW Primary Principals Association president Geoff Scott said generalisations about homework did not take into account the range of children's needs and parents' expectations.

He said some parents judged a school's effectiveness on how much homework their child got. "They'll come up and say 'you're not giving enough homework, there's not enough challenge here'," he said.

« FOR HOMEWORK

MOTHER-OF-TWO REBECCA VELLA, CHERRYBROOK

"My kids do not do too much homework — they are only in kindy and in year one.

"Most of the time they will read something at school, then they will read it to me and I can keep them on track.

"My son in kindy just does reading for 10 minutes. My son in year one does about the same, then he does writing and spelling, which takes all of about two minutes.

"Then at the end of each term he has a mini-project which we work on. I love being involved with it, I really enjoy it. They enjoy it too and showing me what they have read."



The Coulson family: Kylie with baby Emilie, Annie, Chanel, Abbie, Lilli, Ella and Justin. Pictures: Simon Bullard, Tim Hunter



Rebecca Vella with her kids Lachlan, 7, Will, 5, and Georgia, 4.

« AGAINST HOMEWORK

Dr Justin Coulson, parenting expert, author and educator, has six children

"The evidence is pretty clear. For kids who are under 14, homework has no benefit in terms of motivation, learning outcomes or in terms of grades and performance on standardised tests.

"It adds pressure to parents, and one of the biggest issues for me as a parent is I do not know how to do what my Year 5 children are doing – the things that are being taught in the classroom today are different to when I was there.

"One of the most important things is it takes away from the time for kids to just be kids.

"My approach to my kids is they do homework in high school.

"I do insist that my children read because I do not see reading as homework."