

# American Journal of education

Volume 105, No. 1 Pages 1-126

November 1996

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0195-6744(199611)105:1;1-V

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*American Journal of Education* (ISSN 0195-6744) is published quarterly in November, February, May, and August for the Department of Education, University of Chicago, by The University of Chicago Press, 5720 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637. Subscriptions (U.S.A.), 1 year: individuals, \$30.00; institutions, \$71.00; students, \$24.00 (photocopy of validated student I.D. must accompany subscription); Department of Education alumni, \$24.00. Subscription agent for Japan: Kinokuniya Company, Ltd. Individuals have the option to order directly from The University of Chicago Press. Single copies: individuals, \$7.50; institutions, \$17.75; in Canada, add 7% GST to subscription price; outside U.S.A., add \$5.00 per subscription to cover postage. Volumes 1-96 are available from Periodical Services Co., 11 Main Street, Germantown, New York 12526. Microfilms are available from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106. For information for authors, see section following book reviews. Business correspondence should be addressed to The University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Illinois 60637. FAX: (312) 753-0811. E-mail: subscriptions@journals.uchicago.edu.

Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *American Journal of Education*, University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

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## "A Sin against Childhood": Progressive Education and the Crusade to Abolish Homework, 1897-1941

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No item on the nation's educational reform agenda seems more solidly grounded than support for homework—indeed, the more the better. But today's consensus on the virtues of homework represents a sharp break with the past. Many "progressive" educational experts of the early twentieth century regarded homework as inconsistent with the best pedagogical thinking. They lobbied—often successfully—for school policies designed to curtail or eliminate homework. Unlike many other central components of American schooling, which remained largely unchanged over long periods of time, homework has been distinguished by major shifts in policy and practice over the course of the century.

A variety of deeply divisive issues dominate American educational debate in the mid-1990s—busing, choice, tracking, affirmative action, school prayer, multiculturalism, drug education, and condom distribution, for example—but homework is not among them. A strong consensus supports homework as a vital and integral requirement of American schooling (Cooper 1989a, 1989b; Walberg et al. 1985; Walberg and Paschal 1994; Epstein and Pinkow 1988; Ziegler 1992). During the past decade, leading educational spokespersons have celebrated homework as essential to raise educational standards, foster high academic achievement, upgrade the quality of the labor force, and link family and school in a common teaching mission (*What Works* 1986; Keith 1986; England and Flatley 1985; Maeroff 1989, 1992; Cooper

*American Journal of Education* 105 (November 1996)  
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0195-6744/97/0501-0002\$01.00

1994; "Homework, Sweet Homework" 1995).<sup>1</sup> No item on the nation's educational reform agenda seems more solidly grounded than the belief that students at all grade levels will benefit from more homework; indeed, the more the better.

To be sure, there are exceptions in practice. In a Pittsburgh suburb where one author lives, for example, the recently retired elementary school principal discouraged teachers from assigning any homework. Far more common today, however, are schools and school systems that are moving rapidly in the opposite direction, seeking to expand homework substantially and articulating mandatory homework policies that are communicated to teachers, parents, and students alike. In the southern California community where the other author lives, for example, a 1993 circular distributed by the elementary school principal glowingly praised the virtues of homework for all grade levels. Indeed, the circular even indicated, matter-of-factly, the homework expectations for kindergarten students. Many school districts across the country have developed policies that formally structure homework assignments for the entire K-12 student clientele (Cooper 1994, pp. 36-54; *Homework Policies and Guidelines* 1984; *Attendance, Homework, Promotion and Retention* 1984).

Has this widespread consensus on homework always existed? It turns out that no one really knows; like many other commonplace experiences in the history of American schooling, homework has been almost entirely ignored by scholars.<sup>2</sup> This article is a preliminary exploration of the topic. It focuses particularly on expert opinion about homework in the United States between the 1890s and the 1930s. In forthcoming publications we will extend the story outward from the pages of education journals, school board reports, and newspaper commentaries to the classrooms and living rooms of America and forward in time

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through the crises of Sputnik (1957) and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) to the consensus of the mid-1990s.

Our main historical argument is that—contrary to what many assume about the rigor of educational standards in the "good old days"—today's solid consensus on the virtues of homework represents a sharp break with the past. To most educational experts in the early twentieth century, the benefits of homework were anything but self-evident. Rather than stimulate consensus, the subject of homework prompted regular battles in school districts across the country. Homework, in short, has been a highly contentious topic in American educational history. Unlike many other central components of American schooling, which remained largely unchanged over long periods of time, homework has been distinguished by major shifts in policy and practice over the course of the century.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to our historical argument, we also want to suggest that the present-day consensus on homework masks important philosophical and policy issues regarding relationships between school and home, issues that remain wholly unresolved in American society.<sup>4</sup> The stakes in the homework wars of decades past involved much more than the time, place, or amount of study required of students at different grade levels. The opposing sides held sharply divergent views of the purposes of schooling and of the appropriate role of parents in schooling. Despite the apparent resolution of the great homework wars in the 1990s, these underlying issues remain highly contentious.

## I. Homework and the Organization of Schooling in Nineteenth-Century America

Educational historians in recent years have done pioneering studies of the organization, politics, clientele, curriculum, attendance patterns, and teaching force in nineteenth-century schools (Cremin 1951, 1980; Reese 1995; Kaestle 1983; Kaestle and Vinovskis 1980; Clifford 1978; Katz 1968; Schultz 1973; Jorgenson 1966; Troen 1975). But the content and methods of day-to-day instruction in both rural and urban schools remain only partially understood (Finkelstein 1989; Kaestle 1973; Fuller 1982).<sup>5</sup> Our ignorance about nineteenth-century school life extends to homework.

Historians remain uncertain how frequently children at each grade level were assigned homework, how much and what variety of homework they were assigned, how closely their homework was checked or evaluated by teachers, what kinds of punishment attended nonperformance of homework, and what kinds of assistance parents were



expected to render, and actually did render, in monitoring children's homework. About all we can say with some certainty is that the intellectual demands made on children in the primary grades (grades 1–4)—at a time when the school year tended to be short and attendance was unpredictable—were not particularly heavy. Moreover, the settings in which teachers found themselves—whether in a multiage, one-room rural schoolhouse or a badly overcrowded urban classroom—made it extraordinarily difficult to require common homework assignments.

By fifth grade—the point at which, during the nineteenth century, large numbers of students customarily dropped out of school—the intellectual requirements and methods of instruction shifted rather sharply. (Inevitably, the distinctions were less clear-cut in one-room rural schools that taught students of many different ages and ability levels.) Courses were now clearly broken down by fields (e.g., geography, history, literature), grading became more stringent (correspondingly, the prospect of being left back grew more likely), discipline became more overt and harsh (including corporal punishment), and, most important for our purposes, the classic trinity of nineteenth-century pedagogy—drill, memorization, and recitation—was integrated fully into the instructional process.

The centerpiece of classroom life in almost all academic subjects was the recitation: nineteenth-century students were quite literally correct when they recalled the daily practice of “saying their lessons” (Finkelstein 1989, pp. 12, 84). To perform adequately in recitation—and avoid the ridicule and customary hand, shoulder, or buttocks smack that accompanied unpreparedness—children had to memorize for oral presentation lengthy lists of history facts, geography facts, math facts, and grammar rules, as well as formidably lengthy selections in literature, poetry, and history.<sup>6</sup> Precisely how long it took most grammar school students to prepare their lessons is unclear, likewise, the degree of assistance and cajoling that parents generally gave them (healthy doses of both, very likely). But the ritual of recitation was relentless, and the need to reserve substantial blocks of time each night at home to prepare lessons was surely unavoidable. Before a child could continue his or her schooling through grammar school (i.e., fifth through eighth grade), a family had to decide that chores and other family obligations would not interfere unduly with the predictable nightly homework hours that would go into preparing the next day's recitations.

Before the turn of the century, few American children continued their formal education beyond grammar school. As William Reese (1995) has shown, public high schools in the nineteenth century often

broke away from the prep-school tradition of a classical curriculum, but they nevertheless imposed rigorous academic demands on pupils. While students were taught to write prose and analyze natural and social phenomena with much greater sophistication than in grammar school, high school pedagogy continued to rely overwhelmingly on the trinity: drill, memorization, and recitation. Students had no choice but to devote lengthy hours at home preparing for daily recitations and examinations that would determine their eligibility for promotion—an earned privilege, not a right. According to Reese (1995, p. 201), nineteenth-century high schools expected students to spend at least two or three hours at the books every night, weekends included. While nonacademic distractions (such as organized athletics) were few, the arduous demands of homework compelled families to reduce required chores, provide a reasonably quiet and private place for late-night study, and, of course, absorb the loss of a potential wage earner. At a time when children were not required to attend school beyond age 14, and when many employment opportunities still existed for grammar school graduates, accommodating the demands of high school homework required conscious parental sacrifice.

## II. The Emergence of Antihomework Sentiment

In many nineteenth-century families, as today, squabbles over homework no doubt raged regularly between parents and children. Disagreements over homework may also have contributed to the incessant conflicts between parents, teachers, and school administrators that often characterized nineteenth-century home-school relations (Kaestle 1978, pp. 1–17). At the high school level, as Reese (1995, p. 201) has shown, concerns that overstudy was threatening children's health occasionally led to school regulations limiting, abolishing, or making homework optional in such cities as Boston and San Francisco. But educators imposed such regulations reluctantly, and they did not last long. School officials consistently defended homework, denying that it harmed pupils and maintaining that it was a necessary pedagogical tool. Compulsory education statutes did not require children to attend high school. Educators reasoned that those who wished to attend high school must be willing to study; conversely, those unwilling to study were free to drop out (Reese 1995, pp. 100, 201–3). Those parents who were willing to sacrifice their children's labor for several years for the sake of a diploma presumably held similar views. Without broad-based support among teachers and parents, nineteenth-century antihomework regulations had little staying power.

As the century came to a close, however, this broad base of support for homework began to weaken noticeably, as many respected educators and influential parents joined a growing national movement against homework. Homework became a matter of serious debate, not just in a few school board meetings but in the pages of widely read publications (e.g., the *New York Times*, *Ladies' Home Journal*) and prestigious scholarly journals (e.g., *Pedagogical Seminary*). The results were dramatic, as public and private schools around the country began to impose limits on the home study time expected of students, especially (but not solely) in the elementary and grammar school grades.

Although it was not until the late 1890s that homework captured the attention of education reformers nationwide, a preview of the coming homework debates occurred in Boston in the 1880s. General Francis A. Walker, a Civil War hero then serving as president of the school board, strongly criticized arithmetic homework in the elementary schools, leaving no doubt that his concerns derived from harrowing personal experience: "Over and over again have I had to send my own children, in spite of their tears and remonstrances, to bed, long after the assigned tasks had ceased to have any educational value and had become the means of nervous exhaustion and agitation, highly prejudicial to body and to mind; and I have no reason to doubt that such has been the experience of a large proportion of the parents whose children are habitually assigned home lessons in arithmetic" (quoted in Burnham [1905], p. 213).

In this brief statement Walker articulated two concerns that would become central to the antihomework crusade of the early twentieth century. First, he doubted the utility of homework as a pedagogical tool: his children's ability to learn had been substantially eroded by the late evening hours, despite their best efforts. Second, he worried that homework sapped children's health, mentally and emotionally as well as physically. Walker persuaded Boston's school board to issue a tepid order restricting the city's public school teachers from assigning arithmetic homework: "Home lessons in arithmetic should be given out only in exceptional cases" (quoted in Burnham [1905], p. 213). How this advisement was interpreted by teachers, and how closely it was adhered to, we do not know.

Building on the kinds of complaints that Walker articulated, a movement to abolish homework began to coalesce in several major American cities in the late 1890s. The rise of antihomework sentiment was coeval with and integral to the broader reform movement known as the "new education," "scientific education," or, most commonly, "progressive education,"<sup>7</sup> which first achieved nationwide attention in the early 1890s with a series of muckraking articles by the physician Joseph

Mayer Rice, decrying what he termed "mechanical schooling."<sup>8</sup> While Rice is best remembered for this initial series, he also fired one of the first shots in the antihomework war, in an 1897 article decrying "the futility of the spelling grind." This article reported the results of a 16-month research project. Remarkably, Rice concluded, arduous devotion by young children to their spelling homework—that epitome of the drill, memorization, and recitation routine—bore no relation to later spelling ability. "Is it not our duty to save the child from this grind?" he asked. "Have we not here discovered an element of waste, which, if eliminated, would open the way to an equal enrichment of the course of study without detriment to the formal branches?" (Rice 1897, p. 171). Opposition to homework, and, more generally, to the tyranny of memorization, would soon become a badge of honor among educators who viewed themselves as in the vanguard of progressive education (Fuller 1982, pp. 204–5; Gilbert 1895).<sup>9</sup>

Although educators were key actors in the early stages of the antihomework movement, the primary complaint against homework before World War I was not that it failed muster in academic terms but that it caused pupils physical harm. By far the most vocal proponent of this view was Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*. Between the 1890s and the 1910s, *Ladies' Home Journal* was an influential vehicle for disseminating new ideas on education, child psychology, and public health to a middle-class female audience. Bok had a special talent for recognizing incipient malaise in the culture and nurturing it into full-fledged public outrage. Never one to understate, he pulled out all stops in his 1900 antihomework article, "A National Crime at the Feet of American Parents."<sup>10</sup>

The crime of which Bok spoke was "overstudy," by which he meant a crammed, overly academic curriculum that was developmentally inappropriate for young children and a heavy reliance on homework to drill students and prepare them for recitations. Homework, Bok insisted, was a severe hazard to children's mental and physical health, "the most barbarous part of the whole system."

The merest novice in mental science knows that the last work given the brain to do often continues to exercise it during sleep. And yet there are thousands of mothers and fathers throughout this enlightened land of ours who wonder why their children toss themselves about in bed, why they mumble and talk in their sleep, why they are frightened by their dreams, and why they are so afraid of the dark. Now, all these are simply the results of unsettled nervous conditions. Is it any wonder that children have to be called over and over again in the morning, and that they at length rise unrefreshed and without appetites for their breakfasts? When are



parents going to open their eyes to this fearful evil? Are they as blind as bats, that they do not see what is being wrought by this crowning folly of night study? Is all the book-learning in the world worth this inevitable weakening of the physical and mental powers? (Bok 1900a)

Bok was strongly influenced by the ideas of the famed psychologist G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the child study movement. Hall built on a Romantic tradition of opposition to precocity, in which children were viewed as fragile, innocent creatures who would only be harmed by strenuous intellectual challenges. This tradition went back to the 1830s, but, as Joseph Kett (1978; see also Beatty 1989) has argued, it achieved its greatest popular support between the 1890s and 1920s. The person most responsible for this popularization, and for legitimizing it with the stamp of science, was Hall. Hall stressed universal, biologically determined growth stages through which young children must be allowed to progress freely, lest their physical well-being, psychological balance, and intellectual maturity be forever impaired. It was parents' responsibility to see that distinctly adult demands, including academic learning, were not foisted on children too early. Hall was quite content to delay formal schooling until age 8 or later—the better to stay out of nature's way and thereby safeguard children's health. But if force of social custom demanded that schooling begin earlier, Hall insisted that academic instruction per se be delayed for several years and that alternative educational methods be introduced so as not to undermine children's health or derail them from their destined developmental paths (Ross 1972).

Hall sought to spread his gospel through a national network of mothers' clubs that would practice the principles of child study. Between the late 1880s and early 1900s, hundreds of these clubs were formed in order to facilitate study of Hall's ideas about early childhood education.<sup>11</sup> The child study movement was hugely popular among middle-class women across the nation—including, undoubtedly, many readers of Edward Bok's *Ladies' Home Journal*.

In accordance with child study ideas, Bok proposed that children not begin formal schooling until age 7. Even after age 7, the school's main concern ought to be to preserve children's health, not cultivate their academic abilities.<sup>12</sup> Four hours of school and three hours of play—the remainder of the day occupied by family affairs and lots of sleep—were ideal to provide a solid foundation for entry into adulthood.

Almost needless to add, Bok proposed the complete abolition of homework for all children under age 15 (i.e., until the end of grammar

school). Even in high school, no more than one hour per night should be assigned. If additional study were necessary, schools ought to incorporate a study period into regular class hours or reduce the school day by an hour to enable students to study while they still had energy to do so.

Notwithstanding its jarring hyperbole, Bok's 1900 article stimulated a flurry of serious commentary, pro and con. School superintendents throughout the nation even felt compelled to address his charges in their staid annual reports (e.g., *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Allegheny, 1899–1900* 1900, pp. 45–50). *Ladies' Home Journal*, Bok reported, received hundreds of letters from parents and physicians confirming his allegations and many sympathetic letters from teachers who were helpless to protest against homework for fear of losing their jobs. The time for action was now, Bok insisted, but parents had to lead the way. As a first step, he urged a simple and concrete form of protest: every parent with a child in school should inform the teacher "that under no circumstances whatever will the father and mother permit any home study by the child." Teachers, principals, and even the corrupt politicians who ran most public school systems would thereby have no choice but to end "the infernal cramming system." Bok went on: "It makes no difference what the cessation of home study means in the readjustment of the school system. That is for our educators to find out and adjust. But on this one point there can be no doubt, no question, and there should be no delay: There must be absolutely no home study. Books must be left at school, and the studies with them" (1900b).

Even before Bok issued his challenge, a few school districts were already taking action against homework. The impact of child study ideas in stimulating school reform was nowhere clearer than in turn-of-the-century Los Angeles, where women's organizations were especially successful in introducing the kindergarten—another favorite reform of the child study movement, with solid roots in the Romantic suspicion of intellectual precocity in children (Raftery 1992).<sup>13</sup> By 1900, the mothers' clubs in Los Angeles had fought for several years to transform elementary school curricula and teaching methods to make them more consistent with child study ideas.<sup>14</sup> After receiving many complaints from the clubs about the early primary grades, the school board asked their assistance in evaluating the entire elementary school curriculum. Inevitably, this evaluation involved homework because homework in the elementary grades was anathema to basic child study principles.

Two fundamental changes issued from the evaluation. First, the curriculum was redesigned so that the primary grades made fewer academic demands on students. The play principles embodied in the

kindergarten would now soften the tone of, and set the direction for, instruction in the primary grades. Thus, instruction in basic number familiarity and arithmetic was largely eliminated from grades 1 and 2 and delayed until grade 3. Grammar instruction was eliminated from the primary grades entirely; so, too, was the introduction of advanced arithmetic problems. As a result of these reforms, the primary grades were, in a sense, "kindergartenized."<sup>15</sup>

Second, the curricular evaluation led to a new, formal policy on homework.<sup>16</sup> Quite simply, teachers in Los Angeles were proscribed from assigning homework in grades 1 to 6. In the early grades, the teachers were to organize classes so that no assignments needed to be brought home for drill, review, or advance preparation. Starting in the fourth grade and proceeding through the sixth grade, in-school study periods of 15 to 30 minutes were to be set aside, ideally at day's end. Students could thereby review what they had been taught while still under the teacher's supervision and have her readily available to answer questions. Recitations were prohibited during this study period; teachers were to be entirely free to direct the students' reviews and assist as necessary. Under the new directive, teachers who had not completed their lessons could not ask students to catch up at home (*Annual Report of the Board of Education of Los Angeles, 1899-1900* 1900, pp. 63-65).<sup>17</sup>

To the school superintendent, the advantages of the supervised study period, as contrasted with homework, were self-evident. "The children are taught to study during the study period. The moral, intellectual and social conditions are the best, thus causing the child to feel while at school that he is still in a place similar in many ways to his home" (*Annual Report of the Board of Education of Los Angeles, 1901-2* 1902, p. 58). The president of the Los Angeles school board agreed, echoing the sentiments of Edward Bok: "The object specially in view in these changes has been to remove the obvious pressure which has been burdening the children. . . . These changes will leave more fully to parents the direction of the time of the child except during school hours" (*Annual Report of the Board of Education of Los Angeles, 1899-1900* 1900, p. 12). To the reformers, in other words, the abolition of homework was both prochild and proparent.

Los Angeles was not alone in seeing antihomework sentiment grow and achieve concrete policy victories. California women's groups were equally effective in San Francisco in 1900, where homework was abolished in grades 1 to 4 and limited to no more than one hour nightly in grades 5 to 7 (*Annual Reports of the Common Schools of San Francisco, 1899-1901* 1901, p. 6; *Rules of the Board of Education and of the Public Schools of San Francisco, 1899-1900* 1900, pp. 32-33). Homework was

also abolished that same year in the elementary schools (grades 1 to 5) of Washington, D.C. Teachers in Washington were "instructed to plan the day's work so that all necessary preparation may be made within school hours. Under this plan pupils are to be taught how to study to the best advantage under the teacher's eye" (*Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1900-01* 1901, p. 69). Even the U.S. commissioner of education, the eminent philosopher William Torrey Harris<sup>18</sup>—no friend of G. Stanley Hall, to say the least, and a skeptic regarding many progressive educational ideas (Cremin 1961, pp. 14-20)—lent his support to the homework abolition forces. In testimony before Congress, he declared that homework was "a prolific source of abuse . . . it ought to be rigidly limited so that the child does not study more than two hours per day out of school after he is 12 years old, and not any out of school before that time" (*Public Schools of the District of Columbia* 1900, p. 114).

The antihomework crusade quickly spread to school districts nationwide. By 1901, one investigator reported that 40 of 62 city school districts surveyed had regulations restricting homework in certain grades (*Annual School Report of the City of Fall River, 1900-01* 1901, p. 26).<sup>19</sup> In Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, the superintendent declared that "no home study should be assigned below the eighth grade" (*Annual Report of the School Committee of Lynn, 1899-1900* 1900, p. 30). Some educators went further. In Joliet, Illinois, and Newark, New Jersey, principals tried to abolish homework from their high schools; another principal pronounced homework "a waste of time and energy" and prescribed "its complete abolition in all grades" (Hall-Quest 1916, pp. 134-36; Wiener 1912; Bok 1913, p. 4).

In California, the rising antihomework sentiment found expression not only in the regulations of local school districts but also in the statutes of the state itself. In 1901, the state legislature amended the laws regulating the course of study in California's public schools in two significant ways: first, high schools could no longer require more than 20 recitations per week; second, "no pupil under the age of fifteen years in any grammar or primary school shall be required to do any home study" (California Civil Code 1901, p. 797). This was homework abolition with a vengeance: school districts that might not be in sympathy with child study principles now had no choice but to follow Los Angeles's lead and abolish homework in grades K-8. The new limits on recitations, moreover, were clearly intended to impose reductions on high school homework as well.

The homework abolition movement thus gained this major, state-level victory at the turn of the century. It remained to be seen whether the campaign—and the larger progressive education movement of



which it formed an integral part—would fizzle and be dismissed as a temporary fad or whether it represented an enduring shift in the goals and methods of American education.

### III. "Mental Abortion": Homework and Children's Health, 1900–1917

Edward Bok did his best to keep the issue in the public consciousness. In January 1913, he declared (as he had 13 years earlier) that the "first step to change the public schools" was a grassroots parent strike for the complete abolition of homework. *Ladies' Home Journal* told parents that "absolute refusal to let [children] study in the evening can be made the most effective entering wedge for the readjustment of a magnificent institution gone lamentably wrong" (Bok 1913, p. 3). Bok's crusade was not a lonely one. From the turn of the century until World War I, homework was a hot topic in both the education press and the nation's leading newspapers. Opinion pieces denouncing homework and laudatory reports of no-homework schools appeared in the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *School Review*, *Elementary School Teacher*, and *Pedagogical Seminary*.

These early twentieth-century denunciations found many common objections to homework. First and foremost—and consistent with the classic critique of school health conditions by Luther Gulick and Leonard Ayres (1908)—homework was a major health hazard. The "evil effects of home study upon the health of our pupils" were portrayed as conventional wisdom (Bok 1913, p. 3). Consider, for example, the testimony of Winthrop Talbot, M.D.:

Every young mammal normally toward evening will suckle or eat, but not gorge, then play a while—a natural diversion of blood pressure from the brain—and then settle itself to quiet sleep. With the young human mammal that should be the usual procedure. If the boy at that time is incited, or allowed actively to congest his brain, the blood necessary to digestion is diverted to the head, the food as a result lies inert in the stomach or intestines, fermentation follows, and sleep, when it does come, is for hours shallow or else disturbed, and is followed by a sluggish awakening. High blood tension will invariably preclude sleep altogether or produce restless sleep. So by evening study we systematically allow our boys and girls to follow methods of working which definitely defeat the purpose we have in mind—namely, that they shall be kept in the highest degree of efficiency. (Bok 1913, p. 3)

Physicians played a key role in the early years of the homework abolition campaign (as they did in the larger progressive education movement) and helped make the health issue the primary argument against homework during the years prior to World War I. The well-known public health advocate Dr. Woods Hutchinson, for example, urged that "the carrying home of school books at night should be forbidden by law" (Bok 1913, p. 3). In San Jose, California, the county medical society appointed a committee of three local doctors to determine whether excessive schoolwork was damaging the health of that city's students (*Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools of San Jose, 1898–99* 1900, p. 18). The alleged health consequences of homework were quite serious. A Brooklyn doctor declared, "I have met many cases of lateral curvature of the spine that were attributable to carrying heavy books" ("Question of Homework for Children" 1913, p. 41). In Philadelphia, a nerve specialist announced that excessive schoolwork assigned to girls ultimately caused many ailments in adulthood ("Question of Homework for Children" 1913, p. 34). In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, one opponent of homework implored readers to "go into any high school classroom. The wan, anemic, careworn faces are appalling. Most of them are pale and pinched." Indeed, he claimed, "The manner in which we force 'young America' to study is nothing more or less than mental abortion" ("Question of Homework for Children" 1913, p. 40). Extreme claims were not uncommon; one editorial reported that a 15-year-old girl, an A student, had actually died "from overstudy" ("Question of Homework for Children" 1913, p. 34).

The opponents of homework marshaled other objections in addition to the alleged health hazards. They lamented the loss of educational activities outside of school, such as "voluntary reading and music practice" (Bok 1913, p. 4; Burnham 1905, p. 228) and, more generally, "such moral, cultural, and religious influences that would do much to educate . . . in the highest sense" (Wiener 1912, p. 527). They argued that "the home is, as a rule, no place for study. The calls, the interruptions, the duties, the illnesses, and the pleasures of the home defeat study" (Bok 1913, p. 4; Burnham 1905, p. 214). And they claimed that homework bred bad character traits. One educator declared that "the principal contribution of home lessons to [students'] education is the training it affords a majority of them in the evasion of duties, and in disobedience to authority" (Bok 1913, p. 4.). Another educator asserted that "the present undercurrent of immorality in the lives of boys and girls is, in part, due to this loss of parental association and the lack of the moral influence of the family. Home study is a frequent excuse for the children to remain away from church on Sunday" (Wiener 1912, p. 527). Even students with supportive, helpful parents were



ruined by homework because they were "coddled along from day to day without learning the most important lesson the school should teach—namely, how to study" (Bok 1913, p. 3).

Experts of various kinds viewed homework as a bane not only to children but also to parents. Homework interfered with "the ordinary interests of the home." It forced families to play a nightly "comedy of fathers and mothers teaching the children their lessons, with the teachers playing the detective the next morning to see how well the parents have done the work of instruction" (Bok 1913, p. 3). Homework cut into the time that parents could spend with their children, leading to "children's rampant disrespect for parents and elders, who cannot understand or know their offspring because of a lack of association" (Wiener 1912, p. 527). One principal claimed that "the parents who own the children and who pay the wages to the managers do not want home work." Indeed, "Now for the teachers, who are public servants, to continue to thrust upon parents, who support them, this unpopular, unwarranted and doubtful usage is a piece of academic impertinence dating back to the Middle Ages, when the teachers and the priests were the only people who could speak with authority on matters of education. Those days have passed" (Bok 1913, p. 4).

#### IV. "Happy Schooling": Health, Play, and Family Integrity versus Homework, 1925–41

Curiously, the combatants in the great homework wars appear to have called a cease-fire on America's entry into World War I. This uneasy peace lasted through the first half of the 1920s before debates about homework heated up again. As in the prewar period, some critics portrayed homework as a serious threat to children's health. Most protagonists, however, adopted language less shrill and alarmist than that favored by their prewar predecessors. In the education press, moreover, student health became only one of a number of complementary arguments against homework. During the 1920s and 1930s, the education press began to play a more prominent role in the homework debate, as progressive education evolved from a movement with broad popular support to one composed increasingly of professional educators.<sup>20</sup> But critics in the popular press remained vocal contributors to the debate on homework, and some of them continued to emphasize the health threat as the most powerful objection to homework.

In the postwar period, the health harms alleged to result from homework were various. The most commonly cited specific ailments attributed to homework were stress (as we would call it today) and eye

injury. In 1929, the Bronx Board of Trade warned of the "eye strain and nervousness" associated with homework ("Bronx Board of Trade Urges Less Homework" 1929). A doctor informed the San Diego school district that the "inadequate sleep" resulting from homework led to "nerve shock." Homework, he concluded, was "distinctly detrimental to at least 80% of the children below senior high school age" (San Diego City Schools Research Department 1936, p. 18). In 1935, a letter to the *New York Times* argued that excessive "home work is directly responsible for more undernourished, nervous, bespectacled, round-shouldered children than you can possibly imagine" (Harvey 1935). One of the most serious charges was leveled by the American Child Health Association, which coupled homework with child labor as the "chief causes of the high death and morbidity rates from tuberculosis and heart disease among adolescents" ("Assail Homework as Health Menace" 1930).

In the tradition of Edward Bok, the typical health objection to homework decried its direct effects on the child's body and mind. By the 1930s, some of homework's critics began to define the health issue more broadly, finding that homework could threaten children's health in another, more indirect way. Children needed plenty of time to play outdoors in the sunshine in order to grow up healthy, they argued. Homework deprived them of this indispensable play. One doctor prescribed "exercise, play, relaxation, sleep" for children; on her "health first" prescription, even college students would avoid studying in the evening (Wightman 1937). A principal reported that after her school abolished homework, more outdoor play turned her pupils into "healthier children" (Johnson 1930). A parent opposed to homework argued that "fresh air and exercise are just as important as school work" ("Do You Believe in Homework?" 1936, p. 58).

The increasing emphasis on play in the antihomework literature was consistent with the general drift of the progressive education movement during the 1920s and 1930s. A concern for educating "the whole child" became the movement's keynote: schools were responsible not only for children's intellectual growth but for nurturing their physical and emotional growth as well. By the 1920s, this trend was fueled not only by the ideas of G. Stanley Hall (whose academic reputation had steadily declined) but also by those of Sigmund Freud, many of whose followers, as Cremin has pointed out, instilled an anti-intellectual bias and a "virulent sentimentalism" into progressive education (Cremin 1961, pp. 210, 184). During this period, perhaps the most enthusiastic champion of the value of play—and correspondingly, the extreme harmfulness of homework—was Jay B. Nash, a physical education professor at New York University (Nash 1931,

1932, 1942). Nash argued that "at the age of ten, the child needs to get six or seven hours of vigorous physical activity daily in order to insure a physical basis upon which life is to be built in his forties and fifties. In the after school hours there should be a program of big muscle activity in running games rather than small muscle activity in more study" (Nash 1930, p. 6).

Nash's ambitious proposal for physical play left no time for homework. And his vision of health encompassed much more than mere bodily preservation. He also hoped that abolishing homework would improve children's emotional well-being. "The absence of strain is represented by the emotion of joy and happiness," said Nash. "Joy is a product of freedom and freedom is diametrically opposed to the theory of home study" (Nash 1930, p. 6; see also Nash 1931, 1932, 1942). Like many other commentators of the 1930s, Nash wanted children to play not only because it would make them strong and healthy, but also because it would make them happy. "Education for leisure is opposed to the theory of home study. If children are to have opportunities to learn the fundamental skills necessary to enjoy leisure, they must have time in childhood in which to participate in such activities. Time should be free for music, for dramatics, for manual activities, for group games, for reading and the other arts. The ability to use leisure time profitably, the ability even to be happy with freedom *must be learned*" (Nash 1930, p. 6). He concluded with a rhetorical flourish fully worthy of his predecessor, Edward Bok: "For the elementary school child and the junior high school child," homework was "legalized criminality" (Nash 1930, p. 6).

Many in the antihomework camp argued that play was a natural and inalienable right of childhood. "Normal children play," said one critic. "They're not supposed to be adults" (Waller 1937, p. 32). In a Mississippi educational journal, another commentator wrote colorfully: "We have but one childhood. Precious period of show forts and swimmin' holes, paper dolls and mud pies! I say, let every child have his childhood" ("A Mother Speaks on Home Study" 1932). Similarly, argued another educator, today's child need not be sacrificed for tomorrow's adult. "'Happy Schooling' should be our slogan" (Carver 1937, p. 71). Angelo Patri, a widely known New York City school principal, argued in 1925 that "school hours are long enough. Study can be confined to them." "To deprive a child of his leisure," said Patri, was "a sin against childhood" (1925, pp. 115, 123-25).

The same critics who regretted the intrusion of homework on play also lamented the loss of other after-school activities, such as music lessons and museum trips. These critics argued that learning involved more than just schoolwork and that homework deprived children of

important nonschool learning activities. The Chicago Principals' Club, voicing its opposition to required elementary school homework, noted that "in many better homes the parent has a program of his own to fill the child's leisure time, such as music lessons, dancing lessons, reading, family life, outdoor recreations, etc." ("Cooperative Report of Studies" 1927). Two years later another critic reported that "again and again parents assert that schoolwork at home is so time-consuming that son or daughter is compelled to give up music lessons or other of the extra-school activities that are, for many persons, an essential part of the foundation for a happy life" (Holmes 1929, p. 5).

The critics of homework worried not only about sacrificing organized cultural activities outside of the home but also about the loss of family interaction inside the home. A parent from Maryland complained that "drilling on multiplication tables" had replaced "our delightful reading aloud at bedtime" (*Do You Believe in Homework?* 1936, p. 15). Sidonie M. Gruenberg, director of the Child Study Association of America, argued that "home study often interferes with real educational opportunities in the home."<sup>21</sup> Writing for the White House Conference on Child Health, she argued that "the child is cut off from contact with grown-up people. He cannot even enjoy his parents. There may be things going on in the home which would enrich his life, but he is still at work" (Gruenberg 1932, p. 87).

Implicit in these comments was an argument that went well beyond the educational value of extracurricular learning activities per se. Just as the advocates of play regarded it as a natural right of childhood, the advocates of extraschool education regarded it as a natural right of parenthood. Homework intruded on parents' rightful sphere of influence. It exceeded the legitimate bounds of school authority. One commentator suggested this theme by comparing homework to a forcible takeover: "intelligent and responsible parents" say that "the cultural or recreational life of the family is seriously restricted or handicapped . . . by the school's invasion of the home hours" ("Home Study?" 1930, p. 69). A San Diego parent complained, "I can't understand why teachers feel now-a-days [*sic*] that they have the right to plan a child's entire day. . . . As a parent I would like a few hours to give my children training which they do not get at school" (San Diego City Schools Research Department 1936, p. 17.)

According to the critics, even parents who did not plan a sophisticated cultural program for their children's after-school hours often wanted their children to be doing chores instead of homework. The Chicago Principals' Club described "home studies and tasks which call for all the time the child can spare from his sleep, such as assisting with house work, care of smaller children, or help in small business



(delicatessen stores, etc.)" ("Cooperative Report of Studies" 1927). A New York educator related "the plaint of many parents that their children have no time for real home duties such as helping with the housework or even running an occasional errand" (Holmes 1929, p. 6). The *New York Times* rejoiced that, with the homework "fetish . . . exorcised, mother can expect a little help occasionally with the dishwashing" (Robbins 1929).

Critics also argued that homework robbed parents of their own rest and relaxation. The "protesting mother" quoted above resented the fact that the burdensome homework requirements imposed on her children meant that she "had to teach school" ("A Mother Speaks on Home Study" 1932). A Texas father agreed that homework asked too much:

Homework is unfair to parents. They have their own work to do, and work long hours. Is it not unfair to have to sacrifice evenings of cozy comfort and happiness to coaching children in school work that could be done more skillfully at school? Many an evening has been ruined at our house because one of us lost patience. I am tired from my work—I've had arithmetic all day and I don't want to eat it for supper and entertain myself with it until bedtime. The lady of the house needs relaxation, too. If she is to put in her time teaching, when is she to function as a parent, to exert her influence as pleasant companion and wise counselor? ("Do You Believe in Homework?" 1936, p. 58)

These critics of homework, then, saw themselves as champions of the family. They portrayed homework as a direct threat posed by the school to family autonomy and parental authority. Not only was the abolition of homework necessary for the well-being of the students, it was also necessary for the preservation of family prerogatives. These critics argued that parents should be allowed to pursue their own agendas for themselves and their children during the hours that their children were not in school. Homework, they suggested, was a brazen attempt by school authorities to deprive parents of control over their children's time.

The talk of rights did not end here. Opponents of homework also liked to compare a child's day at school with Dad's day on the job, in order to appeal to the rights of workers. If fathers could not be required to work overtime at their jobs, then surely requiring overtime schoolwork of children was wrong. An Oklahoma teacher pointed out that "an adult wants to work eight hours a day and be done with it" and asked, "Why should we expect more of a child?" (Smith 1930, p. 491). A Texas educator added that "the school is the workshop for

the pupil, just as an office, store or factory is for a grown-up. When a whistle blows at quitting time, an adult leaves his job to relax for the evening." Children should be permitted to do the same because "the hours spent in school constitute a working day for pupils" (Waller 1937, p. 32). The president of the board of education in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, argued that "school work, study, is labor, and . . . the fatigue of the young student is just as real as that of the man or woman who devotes his days to the earning of a living." He asked, why not "extend the common sense of [the child-labor] movement to the public-school system"? (Bassett 1934, p. 24). These critics emphasized the "work" in homework and thought it should be recognized and regulated as such.

In sum, the protagonists in the homework debates of the 1920s and 1930s raised the philosophical stakes by appealing insistently to the rights of children, the rights of parents, and the autonomy of the family against the intrusions of what might be called an "imperial school." Homework, from this perspective, violated the rights of children by depriving them of play, by threatening their health, and by requiring overtime labor. Homework violated the rights of parents by denying them the ability to direct the after-school education of their children, by denying them their children's help around the house, and by denying them peace and relaxation after a long day of work. All of these alleged rights violations threatened the integrity of family. It was not enough that homework marred the physical health, emotional well-being, and moral fiber of the children laboring under its load. The critics also maintained that homework undermined the family, the building block of society. Then, as now, an appeal to the rights of the family carried great symbolic weight in debates about educational policy.

## V. Progressive Education, Educational Measurements, and the Crusade against Homework, 1925–41

Even as the critics of homework alleged various nonacademic harms to health, character, and family on one front, they opened another attack, striking at the very *raison d'être* of homework. Not only did homework cause serious collateral damage to family and child, they argued, it also failed on its own academic terms. According to its opponents, homework did not improve children's learning. This issue was at the core of the debate over homework, and of a larger struggle over the role of parents in schooling, in the 1920s and 1930s. In order to understand this debate, one must first locate it in the broader

revolution in educational philosophy and educational measurements that took place during the interwar years and that gave substantive new meaning to the well-known rallying cry of progressive education.

### A. From Recitation to Laboratory

In 1928, Vivian Thayer, an education professor at Ohio State University, proclaimed the triumphal beginnings of a new era in classroom practice with the publication of *The Passing of the Recitation*. The centerpiece of the nineteenth-century classroom, as discussed earlier, was the recitation, which required students to memorize large quantities of information for performance in school. Homework was an essential corollary of a pedagogy that centered on the recitation. Despite several exciting pedagogical experiments in elite private schools and a few public school districts (e.g., Denver and Winnetka, Illinois), American classroom practice generally remained very traditional during the early decades of the century, especially in the high schools and in the core elementary school subjects.<sup>22</sup>

Soon after World War I, however, major changes began to occur in the theoretical foundations of American pedagogy, symbolized by the formation in 1919 of the Progressive Education Association. The central place of the recitation came under especially sharp challenge from self-styled progressive educators like Thayer, who viewed it as "out of harmony with the objectives of modern education." In the past, Thayer argued, schooling was "primarily concerned with the acquisition of information," while "we have today an emphasis upon education for character building." Moreover, outdated theory held "that learning is a process in which impressions are written upon a passive mind," whereas modern theory maintained "that learning is an active process" (Thayer 1928, pp. iii–iv). Traditional homework made good sense only if the minds of children were blank slates, just waiting to accept the information that schooling was designed to impart. Now that this entire theory of learning was suspect, the educational rationale for homework was weaker than ever before. "Homework" became something of a dirty word to progressive educators.<sup>23</sup>

If the recitation no longer made pedagogic sense, what should replace it to guide classroom practice? Progressive educators submitted a cornucopia of different plans, but the diversity of names and inventors obscured important commonalities. Perhaps the most important commonality was the assumption, articulated by Thayer, that learning is an active process. And if learning is active, then the way to learn

is not through tedious, solitary memorization at home. Progressive educators frequently spoke of turning the classroom into a "laboratory" centered on "activities" and "projects" whereby subject matter could be learned incidentally. They believed that laboratory methods were useful teaching tools—and not just for teaching science. Active learning meant learning by experimentation, "learning by doing" (Lindsey 1928, p. 88). The notion of the classroom as laboratory thus involved a wholesale rejection of the recitation and traditional subject matter instruction. "The class period is regarded as a laboratory or workshop, and not as a place where lessons are merely 'heard,'" stated one enthusiast (Hall-Quest 1924, p. 12). Another proponent of the laboratory classroom lauded new educational experiments in which "the recitation of the old order, as well as the home work, is practically discarded" (Klinko 1933, p. 5). These progressive educators of the 1920s and 1930s denigrated the recitation as the method of "the didactic pedagogue of forty years ago" (Lindsey 1928, p. 88).<sup>24</sup>

### B. The Indictment of the Home as a Place of Study

A pedagogy that expected children to learn by doing (not by reciting) in the classroom naturally called new attention to the nature of the learning environment. The laboratory classroom had to be a pleasant, well-lit setting complete with reference materials, learning tools, and an expert teacher to guide the students. Remaking the classroom as a model learning environment inevitably highlighted the comparative deficiencies of the home. Carleton Washburne, the school superintendent in Winnetka, Illinois, and one of the nation's best-known progressive educators, put the issue pointedly: "We can insist that schools will be well lighted, school desks and seats of the right size and shape, the school atmosphere, during study periods, quiet enough for effective work." But, Washburne wanted to know, "Can we do likewise for the majority of homes?" (1937, p. 17). By comparison with the ideal laboratory classroom, the home looked inadequate indeed as a place for learning.

At a more mundane level, progressive educators asked how children could learn much of anything in the typical home, given its noise, poor lighting, and commonplace distractions (including the recently perfected and immensely popular radio). The *New York Times* argued that "the homes in which school tasks can be favorably done are relatively few." It described a dedicated student vainly trying to accomplish his home assignment: "Johnny, puzzling over his book amid the confusion of a sitting room that must serve for old and young, is no less



heroic than the boy Lincoln who had only the glow of the fire logs to read by." "Ordinarily," the *Times* concluded, "the child trying to study in such surroundings is wasting his time" (Robbins 1929). Similarly, Carleton Washburne contended that "as conditions are, relatively few homes can set aside a study room, quiet and equipped. A crying baby, a tired father, a noisy radio, a conscientious mother unskilled in teaching and irritated by the distraction of trying, under bad conditions, to help a child with subjects long since forgotten by her, make homework about as inefficient as it can be" (1937, p. 17). Progressive educators in the 1920s and 1930s argued this point with extraordinary regularity.

Critics of homework thus had a new and powerful argument in their arsenal as an indirect result of broader changes underway in pedagogical theory in the interwar period. The facilities of the home could not match those of the laboratory classroom, newly designed to support an active rather than a passive learning process. Denigrating the home as a learning environment became one part of a coordinated attack on the ability of homework to perform its most basic function, namely, to improve academic achievement.

### C. Experts versus Parents

As suggested in Washburne's comments, many progressive educators also worried that confused pupils might ask for help from equally confused parents. The new, active pedagogy not only required carefully designed classrooms; it also required a cadre of expert teachers who were trained in modern, scientifically grounded theories of education and child development (preferably as taught in respected graduate schools of education rather than in old-fashioned normal schools). In its early years, the progressive education movement had included many nonprofessionals as well as teachers. But as professional educators gradually came to dominate the movement during the 1920s and 1930s, the ideology of progressive education shifted to create an increasingly privileged role for teachers (Cremin 1961, pp. 184–85, 250). Progressive educators displayed a powerful faith in educational science and used it to demarcate deep, often unbridgeable gulfs between the roles of teachers and parents, and between school and home, in educating children. "The teacher is the expert," one educator announced confidently (Wade 1929, p. 79).<sup>25</sup> One corollary of these beliefs—shared by most critics of homework in the 1920s and 1930s—was that only expertly trained teachers had the ability to apply scientific principles to education. Parents, most decidedly, did not.

They had no expertise in the science of pedagogy and thus were in no position to guide their children's academic learning at home.

Many progressive educators feared the parental influence that came with homework. If teachers sent schoolwork home, parents might try to help their children. But parents lacked the skills to make such help effective; indeed, their attempt to help could backfire, upsetting the teacher's expertly planned program. Just as the home was a bad place to study, parents were bad teachers. Again, Washburne made the relevant comparison: "We can insist that teachers be skillful and patient. That is part of their profession. We can insist that they have a reasonable mastery of the psychology of learning and know the best methods of teaching. But have we the right, even if we could, to expect most parents to be trained and efficient teachers?" (1937, p. 17).

Washburne and many other progressives believed that, rights aside, most parents were not effective teachers of academic subject matter. "Mental confusion" was said to result from parents' efforts to assist their children with schoolwork. According to the president of the board of education in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, for example, "Parents, as a rule, are not fitted to carry forward the school work. Even those whose education measurably equips them to be helpful usually are rusty in the problems of bygone days, and their willing efforts frequently produce mental confusion" (Bassett 1934, p. 24). Modern theories and methods of instruction, the experts insisted, differed fundamentally from those that the parents had learned decades earlier. One teacher described a typical "egotistical parent who considered the way she was taught to be the one and only way" (Sligh 1933, p. 200). Another educator agreed that "parents make a tragic mistake when they teach specific skills," because methods had changed so much (Schorling 1934, p. 29; Carver 1937, p. 59). This message was hammered so hard by educators that some parents were left intimidated. One mother related her all-too-accurate perception of the experts' view "that teaching methods [are] so radically different from what they were when we went to school, that only confusion can result when a parent tries to co-operate in the education of the modern child" (Conly 1930, p. 22).<sup>26</sup>

Other experts were more blunt in their assessment of parents' capacity to help. One commentator announced baldly that parents "do not as a rule have the inclination or the ability" to teach their children ("Home Study—Ten 'Don'ts' for Teachers" 1929). Another commentator asked about parents, "How far can you trust them?" ("A Mother Speaks" 1932).<sup>27</sup> In the *Catholic School Journal*, a critic asked, "What do parents know about teaching?" (Peccavi 1934, p. 23). Public school authorities in Madison, Wisconsin, knew the answer: not much. They

informed parents that their children were better off without their assistance: "Pupils who have received no home help do better work above the third grade" (*Annual Report of the Public Schools of Madison, Wisconsin, 1931-32* 1932, p. 41). One expert tried to set the record straight by asserting that "it is not the business of the parent to teach" (Rogers 1935, p. 5). Another supplied the rationale for excluding parents: "Modern teaching is too complex for untrained persons to meddle with it" (Montgomery 1940, p. 14). And training parents to help their children with schoolwork was apparently futile. According to one progressive educator, parents were beyond hope, buried "underneath encrusted layers of prejudice and habit" (Yeomans 1926). These educators were horrified at the thought that ignorant parents might have the opportunity to meddle in the schooling of their children. Abolishing homework might reduce the damage that parents could cause.<sup>28</sup>

#### D. Supervised Study

Because the home provided a poor study environment and parents lacked the expertise necessary to help their children, progressive educators proposed an alternative to homework: supervised study. Schools would set aside a designated part of each school day for students to study in the classroom under the careful supervision of a teacher. Unlike parents, teachers were trained to teach children how to study. Learning is "much more of a complicated matter than previously supposed," Thayer argued in critiquing the recitation. In consequence, "unguided learning"—like that attempted by parents and children reviewing school assignments together at home—"results in tremendous waste and inefficiency, if not in the acquisition of positively injurious habits" (Thayer 1928, p. 170). Alfred Lawrence Hall-Quest, one of the most prominent champions of supervised study, explained how it would remedy the evils of the old recitation system.

*The teacher is now to be regarded as a director of study. Conditions and methods of effective work are taught and supervised. The pupil's whole life is brought into relation to his mental task. Instead of being regarded *par excellence* as an undeveloped intellect the learner is to be treated as an unfolding life whose every activity and attitude in some way is related to the studying of the assignment in hand. Physiological, physical, and psychological conditions are given earnest attention. The actual method of attacking the new lesson is watched and checked at the point of wrong departure! The pupil is not allowed to become lost. He is given a map; he is given*

specific directions for using it; and he is, moreover, guided away from treacherous ground. (Hall-Quest 1916, p. 23)

Under the heading "The Laboratory Procedure," two educators from Teachers College, Columbia University, explained how supervised study operated in a progressive classroom. "The classroom is rapidly becoming a workshop where teachers and pupils work through problems together toward common goals both acceptable and desirable. The focal point of activities is the assignment, the teacher expertly exposing and directing pupils to and through the planned activities, the pupils taking hold and becoming initiated in the proposed tasks with as little loss of momentum and as effectively as possible. The teacher always alert to needs quickly diagnoses difficulties, senses obstacles, and provides the necessary guidance and help" (Woodring and Flemming 1935, p. 30).

Supervised study was the silver bullet proposed by virtually every critic of homework in the 1920s and 1930s ("Cooperative Report of Studies" 1927, p. 147; Holmes 1929, p. 7; Robbins 1929; Boettler 1932, p. 179; Orth 1933; Rosenstengel and Turner 1936; Cooke and King 1939).<sup>29</sup> Supervised study could confine children's learning to carefully designed classrooms where they worked under the expert supervision of a professionally trained teacher. Gone were the hazards of unhygienic homes and inexperienced parents. For most antihomework crusaders, supervised study became a mantra. They expected it to solve all the problems of homework at once. They already had two good reasons to believe that homework did not work. First, the home could not provide adequate conditions for study. Second, parents could not provide adequate supervision. Modern pedagogical ideas were helping to stimulate improvements in classroom facilities and a better-trained teaching force. Supervised study promised to make the most of these improvements in the school and at the same time curtail the detrimental effects of the home by reducing its role in schooling.

#### E. Science, Ideology, and Measuring Homework's Effects on Learning

The antihomework crusaders never doubted that their position was firmly grounded in progressive educational theory; after all, the Progressive Education Association itself declared in its statement of principles that "most, if not all, of a child's studying should be done at school" (Cremin 1961, p. 205). Nevertheless, opposition to homework lacked an empirical foundation until the 1930s, when several scholars attempted to prove once and for all that homework was, in fact, educa-



tionally worthless. The interwar period saw one branch of the progressive education movement become obsessed with science and measurement (Cremin 1961, chap. 6). Intelligence testing, which had first been used on a large scale with Army recruits in World War I, rapidly spread to schools around the country, and the concept of an intelligence quotient reducible to a single number gained acceptance among educators nationwide. Finely tuned systems of tracking students by ability followed close on the heels of the IQ tests (Chapman 1988; Brown 1992). In this climate, the antihomework forces recognized that draping their crusade in the robes of science would add to their credibility, especially before skeptical, conservative school boards. In the tradition of Joseph Mayer Rice's long-forgotten study of the value of spelling drill, numerous experiments were conducted in the 1930s to test the educational value of homework and also (sometimes) to evaluate the impact of supervised study on children's learning.

The experimenters almost universally reached conclusions favorable to the antihomework movement. One found that, in four out of five subjects, sixth- and seventh-grade pupils who had supervised study learned more than pupils who had homework ("Cooperative Report of Studies" 1927, pp. 147-49). Another found that homework had little effect on junior high school achievement (Montgomery 1933).<sup>30</sup> Another determined that sixth-graders did better in history with supervised study than with homework (Johnson 1931).<sup>31</sup> Similar conclusions kept rolling in. One experimenter concluded that homework did not help pupils in junior high math classes; one confirmed that supervised study improved achievement more than homework; one declared that the value of homework in grades 5 and 6 was negligible (Teahan 1935; Rosenstengel and Turner 1936; Vincent 1937). In 1937 and 1938, a number of graduate students at education schools around the country confirmed the trend. Conducting their own experiments, they concluded that supervised study was superior to homework for ninth-grade English classes, that homework was generally unhelpful in fifth and sixth grades, and that homework did not improve math achievement in seventh and eighth grades (Davis 1937; King 1938; Burk 1937; Yeksigian 1938).<sup>32</sup> Almost none of the experimenters disagreed with the scientific consensus against homework.<sup>33</sup>

The near-unanimity with which the experimenters rejected homework as a useful academic tool should not, however, give us confidence about the validity of their results. Most of the experiments were riddled with methodological and statistical problems. Some were done on a small scale, with the teacher as experimenter; experimenter bias could have affected the results. Some that included supervised study did not explain how the homework group filled the time that the other group

used in supervised study. Many failed to include tests of statistical significance, and at least one experimenter apparently misunderstood basic statistical concepts (Teahan 1935). In one case the "experts" chose not to provide readers with any data, announcing that "the results are not given here" while assuring us that the experiment demonstrated that "there is nothing to be gained, by way of achievement, in requiring elementary-school pupils to study at home" (Cooke and Brown 1935, p. 410).<sup>34</sup>

A closer look at two of the best-designed and most-cited homework experiments of the period shows how the biases of the experimenters could affect their conclusions. Jacob Carmichael was an educator in El Segundo, California, who conducted a homework experiment for his (unpublished) master's thesis at the University of Southern California (Carmichael 1933). At El Segundo Grammar School, he collected scores on the Stanford Achievement Test of students in grades 5 through 8 for six years. During the first three years, the students had homework. The school then abolished homework; students had none in the last three years of the test. Reporting the results in an article coauthored with U.S.C. professor C. C. Crawford in the *Elementary School Journal*, Carmichael found "no significant difference between the achievement in the three years before and after home study was abolished" (1937, p. 197).

But this did not conclude the experiment. Carmichael followed up by checking the performance of the students after they went on to high school. Indeed, Carmichael was the only experimenter of the period who tried to measure the long-term effects of homework. Students who went on to El Segundo High School during the first three-year period, when they had become "accustomed to home work," averaged a 2.63 GPA in high school. But during the latter three-year period, students "who had not been accustomed to home work entered the high school and earned average marks of 2.22," even though the average grades across the board at the high school had been "nearly constant." This difference in grades was nearly five times the standard error and thus highly statistically significant (Crawford and Carmichael 1937, p. 198).

Carmichael and Crawford concluded that "the slump evidently resulted from differences in attitudes or habits of work." They suggested that "the pupils who had no home study for a period of time apparently had difficulty in getting down to it again when they entered high school. They had probably been spoiled by evening leisure so that they were not so punctual or dependable about getting in assigned papers on time and, in general, probably failed to study as much as those who had been accustomed to evening study" (1937, p. 198-99).

The authors conceded that "if this interpretation is correct, it lends some support" to arguments about the responsibility-building aspects of homework. But immediately after this concession, the authors betrayed their biases. Rather than endorse the reestablishment of homework, they suggested consideration of "possible abandonment of home study in high school as well as in elementary school." Remarkably, despite their own evidence that grade school homework had a strong positive effect on high school achievement, they concluded that "Carmichael's findings leave us somewhat in doubt as to the final answer but with a strong suspicion that pupils do not learn much as a result of home study." They announced that "the much more important question is: How can the school program be revised so that good results can be obtained without resort to home study?" (Crawford and Carmichael 1937, pp. 198–99).<sup>35</sup> From the start, Carmichael and Crawford were clearly convinced that homework was a bad idea. It seems doubtful that any experimental results could have swayed them from this conviction.

The best-known homework experiment of the decade was conducted by Peter J. DiNapoli for a doctoral thesis at Teachers College, Columbia University. Like most Teachers College dissertations of the period, it was published as a book (in 1937) and therefore achieved much wider dissemination than the other homework experiments. DiNapoli studied pupils in fifth and seventh grades in six New York City schools. In three of the schools, teachers were not permitted to assign homework (although homework done by students voluntarily was permitted and even encouraged). In the other three schools, homework was assigned. DiNapoli carefully matched students in pairs using the results of intelligence tests and achievement tests administered at the beginning of a term. At the end of the term, students took the Metropolitan Achievement Tests once again. Although DiNapoli found no statistically significant results among the seventh graders, the fifth graders' overall achievement scores were higher among those who had homework assigned than among those who did not. This result was statistically significant at the 5% level (DiNapoli 1937, p. 41; Goldstein 1960). Nevertheless, DiNapoli concluded that "the results of this experiment reveal the fallacy" of the view "that compulsory homework results in improved academic accomplishment." He finished by proposing "the abolition of compulsory homework in favor of voluntary homework" in the elementary schools of New York City (DiNapoli 1937, pp. 42–43).

We are not the first to point out that DiNapoli and Carmichael ignored their own experimental results in order to sustain their anti-homework beliefs. Nor are we the first to point out the methodological

and statistical flaws in many of the other antihomework experiments of the period.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the few experimenters who supported homework were guilty of some of the same failings as their opponents. But our goal is not to do a case study in the abuse of scientific methods. To us, the homework experiments are interesting mainly for a different reason: they show the pervasive power of the antihomework ideology among progressive educators of the 1930s, including those educators who were most committed to the measurement sciences. Nothing could persuade DiNapoli, Carmichael, and Crawford of homework's merits because, like most education experts during the period, they opposed homework as a matter of faith.

And this faith was self-perpetuating. The homework experiments are interesting also because they were very influential in spreading the antihomework gospel. By the late 1930s, the conclusions of the experimenters were known by educators nationwide. In 1936—even before the publication of DiNapoli's thesis—the San Diego school district polled its junior high school teachers about homework. Fifty-eight percent of them agreed that "experiments indicate that pupils get along as well without it" (San Diego City Schools Research Department 1936, p. 5). Despite the biases of the experimenters and their flawed procedures, the experiments had persuaded many teachers of the ineffectiveness of homework. The success of their campaign is confirmed by the entry on homework in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, published in 1941. The entry, written by the distinguished educational psychologist Henry J. Otto, relied heavily on the authority of DiNapoli. It announced that "the gist of the research evidence is none too favorable to homework." Said Otto:

Researches at the elementary-school level show: (a) there is a very small relationship between the amount of time spent in home study and pupil progress; (b) homework is not significantly related to achievement as measured by teachers' marks or standardized tests; (c) homework at the elementary-school level has a slight positive relationship to success in high school; (d) voluntary homework has about as many values as compulsory homework; (e) the benefits of assigned homework are too small to counterbalance the disadvantages, especially for pupils in poor homes; (f) compulsory homework does not result in sufficiently improved academic accomplishments to justify the retention of the "achievement argument" as the chief justification for home-study assignments.

Otto summed up by saying that "the evidence and opinion of educators are against homework, at least the conventional kind of homework" (1941, pp. 444–45). His review was reprinted verbatim in the



second edition of the *Encyclopedia* published in 1950 and was widely quoted until the end of the 1950s. At an objective level, the efforts of the antihomework crusaders to produce scientific proof of homework's ineffectiveness did not succeed. But the objective weakness of their science went unrecognized by most of their peers; they were resoundingly successful in persuading educators that homework produced no academic benefits. The 1930s experiments reinforced the progressive educators' faith in the laboratory classroom and the professional teacher and reinforced, too, their skepticism about parents' contributions to academic achievement. For several decades the irrelevance of homework and of parental inputs to children's learning served as conventional scientific wisdom in the field of education.

## VI. The Legacy of the Great Homework Wars

The second round of the antihomework crusade, like the first one at the turn of the century, was more than just hot air. As we will detail in a later publication, many schools and school districts across the country passed new regulations partially or completely abolishing homework during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, New York City's public schools banned homework in grades K–3, San Diego's in grades K–8. Chicago abolished homework—in theory, at least—throughout all grades of its public schools (“Home Work Ho” 1937, p. 31). Homework was likewise legislated away in such diverse places as Bangs, Texas (Maberry 1935); Hickory, North Carolina (Carver 1937); in Madison, Wisconsin, in elementary school (*Annual Report of the Public Schools of Madison, Wisconsin, 1931–32* 1932, p. 42); in Kalispell, Montana, in elementary and junior high school (Bristow 1938, p. 389); in Anacostia Junior High School, Washington, D.C. (Bristow 1938, p. 389); and in the University of Chicago High School (Ryan 1932, p. 392), and the high school in Bennington, Vermont (Sylvester 1940, p. 47). Moreover, the legacy of the antihomework crusade extended long past the interwar period. Although the antihomework forces did not always maintain the upper hand, homework remained very controversial among education experts for four decades after DiNapoli's “definitive” study in 1937. Some school districts still had antihomework regulations on the books in the early 1960s (*Homework in the Elementary School* 1961, p. 14); even later, a few educators continued to call for its abolition (Jones and Ross 1964, p. 206).

Not until the 1980s—with rising fears about low standards, Japanese competition, and failing schools—did experts, teachers, and parents of all political stripes unite in support of homework. But the turbulent

political history of homework makes us skeptical about the meaning of the present moment. Although the tendency in the early twentieth century to blame homework for crooked spines, dishonesty, and nervous breakdowns might today be regarded as comical, Americans continue to disagree vehemently on the extent to which schools should attempt to nurture students' physical, emotional, and moral development, as well as their intellectual growth. In the mid-1990s, such fault lines are reflected in bitter controversies about the role of schools in fostering drug education, condom use, and multiculturalism. Americans are still nowhere near consensus on a key underlying policy issue: stated plainly, should the family march to the beat of the school, or the school to the beat of the family? Two years ago, when a maverick school board member in Half Moon Bay, California, proposed abolishing homework, his arguments invoking some of these deep, unresolved questions went unheard, drowned out by a chorus of critics eager to label him a flake. But until those issues are resolved, the consensus in support of homework will remain a fragile one.

## Notes

This work was supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., to the RAND Institute on Education and Training. The authors would like to thank Georges Vernez and Roger Benjamin of RAND for their support of this project and Scarlett Townsend for her able and dedicated research assistance.

1. The widely publicized flap in Half Moon Bay, Calif., in fall 1994 regarding a proposal to abolish homework was an exception that proved the rule. Garrett Redmond, the school board member who authored the proposal, was widely vilified in the national press as just another California kook. This near-universal vilification indicates the depth of the present prohomework consensus. For our view of the Half Moon Bay controversy, see Gill and Schlossman (1995).

2. The two pioneer historical studies of instructional practices in the United States in, respectively, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Finkelstein (1989) and Cuban (1993)—do not examine the role of homework in teachers' pedagogical strategies or children's modes of learning. (Cuban does observe several times, however, that homework was identified closely with the traditional methods of instruction that the progressives attacked.) The same holds for several dozen general histories of American education that we have checked. Historians' inattention to the place of homework in American schooling surely reflects the continuing gulf in educational historiography between studies of the school and studies of the family. Compare Lawrence Cremin's approach to the historical study of “educational configurations” (1977) and Laurence Steinberg et al.'s approach to the study of modern-day linkages between home and school (1996).

3. On the resistance of schools and teachers to attempts to change instructional practice, see Cuban (1993); Tyack and Cuban (1995).

4. We have only just begun to analyze debates over homework across different societies. Clearly, educators in the United States were not alone in questioning the value of homework. A pioneer historical inquiry into the subject in England is Gordon (1980). For an interesting discussion of homework in Canada, see Ziegler (1986).

5. David Cohen has written: "Historians know more about nearly everything else concerning teaching—teachers' schooling, their working conditions and contracts, the curriculum they presumably taught, how teachers were exploited and discriminated against, even the buildings in which they worked—than about teachers' encounters with children over academic material. . . . What students and teachers actually did together remains virgin territory" (Cohen 1989, pp. 398–99).

6. "Day in and day out," writes Wayne Fuller about students in the rural Midwest, "they recalled having to memorize something new" (1982, p. 11). In Cubberley's classic formulation, "It was school-keeping, not teaching, that teachers were engaged in" (1934, p. 390).

7. The most eloquent account of the progressive education movement remains Cremin (1961).

8. Rice's articles in the *Forum* were published as a book (with new material added; Rice 1893). Throughout the book Rice attacked (p. 20) "the antiquated notion that the function of the school consists primarily, if not entirely, in crowding into the memory of the child a certain amount of cut-and-dried facts—that is, that the school exists simply for the purpose of giving the child a certain amount of information." The term "mechanical schooling" appears on p. 24.

9. In a manner suggestive of the controversies stirred by the educational reformers, Gilbert (who was superintendent of schools in St. Paul, Minn.) wrote: "While the advocates of the new education have used skill and tact in displaying its excellencies, the attacks upon the old have been too largely without skill or tact and have been simply condemnation in total. Those who have upheld it or followed it have been merely 'old fogies behind the times.' These charges have resulted in recrimination, and the advocates of the new education have been 'light-minded faddists'" (1895, p. 37). Gilbert was one of the very few school leaders whom Rice singled out for praise (1893, pp. 184–92).

10. Bok, an immigrant, had an awful experience in the public schools of Brooklyn, New York. He left school for good at the age of 13 and, in his words, had been "hustling ever since." See Bok (1920); Steinberg (1979).

11. These clubs provided the institutional foundation on which the National Congress of Mothers (later the PTA) was built. The congress, in other words, was created from the bottom up rather than vice versa. And, appropriately enough, Hall was the keynote speaker at the congress's first convention. See Schlossman (1976).

12. "There is too much given to our children to learn, and a great deal of it is absolutely useless to them either for the present or the future. . . . The crying need of our school system is fewer studies and more time given to those studies which are essential" (Bok 1990a).

13. Testifying to the general interest of Californians in "child study," the National Congress of Mothers soon enrolled more members in California than in any other state. No doubt this was facilitated by the leadership of San Francisco's Phoebe Apperson Hearst, who was active at local, state, and national levels. On the opposition to intellectual precocity among the leaders of the infant school and kindergarten movements, see Beatty (1995, chaps. 2, 4).

14. As the Los Angeles school superintendent observed, "We have all been interested in the subject of child study, and have thus become enabled to know more of the individual needs of the pupils" (*Annual Report of the Board of Education of Los Angeles, 1899–1900* 1900, p. 65). Following the prodding of organized women's groups, state government in California also became involved in promoting elements of the child study agenda. In 1913, the legislature passed a law that made it simple for small numbers of parents in every community to petition the local school board and demand public sponsorship of kindergartens (Raftery 1992, p. 25).

15. Compare the comment of a Kansas City school superintendent in 1892 who, in praising the model elementary school run by Colonel Francis Parker's famous Normal School in Chicago, observed: "It is the kindergarten idea carried up through the grades" (Cuban 1993, p. 41).

16. It remains unclear whether there had earlier been any system-wide homework policy. It also remains unclear whether children in the lower primary grades had actually been assigned much homework in the first place, before the antihomework campaign got underway.

17. If a teacher fell behind in meeting the school's instructional expectations, there was little she could do except speed up the next day. Given the diminished academic demands in the new curriculum, this may not have presented much of a problem.

18. Recounting his experiences as school superintendent in St. Louis, Harris observed: "I have known parents to sit up with a child three or four hours working out his lessons. I used to say to such parents, 'That is a fatal mistake, because the teacher, when the child comes to the class, has to probe an unknown amount of parents' work in the child and does not know how much is the child's work nor how long a lesson she can give the child. If the parent would let the child severely alone the child would get some of the lesson, and the teacher would know how long a lesson to prescribe for the next time.' It is a great mistake. We found that parents helped children on home lessons, and this led to our cutting down the amount of home study" (*Public Schools of the District of Columbia* 1900, p. 114).

19. Of these, nine cities permitted homework beginning in third or fourth grade, 15 in fifth grade, nine in sixth grade, five in seventh grade, one in eighth grade, and one in ninth grade. The survey was conducted by the superintendent of schools in Louisville, Ky.

20. For a discussion of this development in the progressive education movement, see Cremin (1961, pt. 2).

21. On Gruenberg, see Wollons (1983).

22. See Cuban (1993). Note Cuban's comment (p. 135): "Studies of teaching practice between the two wars . . . suggest that Vivian Thayer's title *The Passing of the Recitation* was premature and could instead have been 'The Persistence of the Recitation.'"

23. One looks in vain for discussion of homework in the classic tracts written by such stalwart progressive educators as Thayer, Harold Rugg, Wilford Aiken, William Bagley, Jesse Newlon, Robert Lane, and many others, even when it is evident that students in progressive schools, especially at the high school level, had to study at home as well as at school. See, e.g., among the field reports from the famous eight-year study by the Progressive Education Association (1943, p. 117).

24. It should be noted, however, that the attacks on the recitation method in the 1920s echoed the general critique that had been voiced by the vanguard



of progressive educators in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1895, for example, Gilbert had challenged "the false psychology . . . of the faculties. . . . The acceptance of this psychology led to the long-vaunted formal discipline of the schools by which the faculties were trained through specific exercises as the muscles are trained in a gymnasium, without regard to the material upon which they were exercised or the use that was to be made of them in life." By contrast, the "new education, instead of drilling faculties without regard to the child's need or interests, bases all upon the interest. . . . By doing away with formal discipline it takes a vast step toward true education, seeing that the child has for the main elements of his curriculum something real" (Gilbert 1895, pp. 157-58).

25. In full, Wade (1929, p. 79) declared, "The teacher is the expert who trains the child to study."

26. She was pleasantly surprised to find some teachers who wanted her help with the education of her child.

27. Ironically, it was a parent who asked the question.

28. To be sure, many progressive educators expressed concern about a growing gap between parents and educators on the goals of schooling, but it was clear that remedies would have to be sought on terms dictated by the progressives. See Hill (1938, pp. 154-63).

29. An occasional skeptical progressive educator challenged conventional wisdom on the merits of supervised study. Garry Cleveland Myers (one of the few experts who favored homework) wondered if supervised study could "train for self-reliance," for "independent efforts" (1935, p. 93). After all, "life won't have a study hall" (134, p. 46). Myers argued that "with rare exception supervision only means policing" (1935, p. 92). Thayer, who sympathized with supervised study in theory, agreed that it had failed in practice. He found that "supervised study which was originally designed to provide for individual differences actually perpetuates lock-step methods of procedure," because "the assignment made is common to all pupils" (1928, pp. 178-79). Moreover, supervised study as practiced duplicated the recitation's concern for subject-centered, rather than child-centered, education. A Catholic educator agreed that supervised study had failed to fulfill its promise: "Supervised study, ideally considered, is excellent; in practice it becomes only too often, a period for making up work. Skilled teachers can use it for stimulation and direction; how many do?" (Sister Mary Ita in a discussion of Sauer [1931], p. 516). But these skeptics were few and far between. On the relative place of supervised study in the instructional repertoire of select California teachers, see Bursch (1930, p. 130).

30. As cited in DiNapoli (1937, p. 10).

31. As cited in DiNapoli (1937, p. 10).

32. All are reported in Morgan (1943).

33. A few dissenters bucked the trend and spoke up in favor of homework. One thesis found that homework helped students' achievement in algebra. Another experimenter found that seventh graders did better in both math and English when they had homework. But these voices were lost in an overwhelming tide of contrary opinion. See Spencer (1929), reported in Morgan (1943); and Steiner (1934, pp. 20-24).

34. In another case an investigator (E. R. Breslich, using students at the University of Chicago High School) refused to give the credit to homework when the group of students doing homework outperformed those who had supervised study. The homework and supervised study groups had been re-

versed in a prior phase of the experiment, and the performance of the two groups in that phase had been approximately equal. The experimenter attributed the success of the homework group in the later phase to a positive aftereffect of the students' earlier experience with supervised study. An unbiased interpreter might adopt the simpler explanation that students sometimes learned more with homework (Rogers 1936, pp. 810-11).

35. Their first answer to the question they posed was a "longer school day."

36. See Goldstein (1960) for discussion of these and other homework experiments.

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