Cathy Vatterott

RETHINKING HOMEWORK

Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs

2nd Edition



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Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs



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Preface

Twenty years ago, when I was the totally frustrated parent of a 5th grader with learning disabilities, homework was a daily battle. I had an aching feeling that there was something wrong with homework, so I began looking at the research. My initial interest soon grew into an obsession and a passion to learn everything I could about this complicated issue. Who could have predicted where we are today—that some elementary schools would ban homework, that some schools would no longer count homework in the grade, and that some parents would begin to "just say no"? To quote the Grateful Dead, "What a long strange trip it's been." And what a gratifying one. I am proud to have been part of the movement.

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2009, much has changed, but the controversy surrounding homework has not abated. Research has still been unable to show proof of homework's benefit. Parents and teachers alike still confuse homework load with rigor and compliance with responsibility. More recently, media discussions have focused on elementary schools that are banning homework and parents who are becoming more vocal in their opinions.

Since 2009,

- The economic divide in the United States has widened, leading to increasing awareness of homework challenges for students

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living in poverty, often without Internet access, known as the "homework gap" or "digital divide."

- Research about the learning process has shown the importance of
  - Formative feedback.
  - A growth mindset.
  - Brain research about factors influencing learning.
  - Sleep and downtime.
- Educational trends are changing the role of homework in the teaching and learning process:
  - With the move toward standards-based learning and standards-based grading, homework is increasingly viewed as ungraded formative assessment.
  - Educators have come to appreciate the motivational role of personalized learning, choice, and student self-assessment.
  - The increased use of flipped learning has caused the homework task itself to change.
- There has been an increase in the number of K–12 school policies limiting or eliminating homework at the elementary level.
- There has been an increase in the number of K–12 school policies limiting the percentage homework may count in the grade or prohibiting teachers from counting homework in the grade.
- We have evolved from a time when homework was assigned as tradition, with little thought given to how the task related to the ultimate learning outcome, to a time when its basic value to learning is questioned.
- We have gone from the norm of vague or nonexistent homework policies to the norm of homework policies outlining the purpose and amount of homework and sometimes banning weekend or holiday homework.

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- As our knowledge of the brain has grown, we have come to value the role of feedback and respect the power of student mindset and attitude.
- As the pace of our culture has accelerated at warp speed, we have become increasingly concerned about the role homework plays in the stress levels of K–12 students. We have begun to understand the importance of balancing work, play, downtime, and sleep to ensure the efficient functioning of a learning brain and the mental health of our children.
- These concerns about "academic stress" and work-life balance for students have contributed to increasing parent activism about homework.

We have moved from blind acceptance of homework, to awareness and questioning of the practice, to understanding and advocacy for what is best for our students. May we continue to study, learn, reflect, and improve our practice of homework.

* * *

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The Cult(ure) of Homework

Homework is a long-standing education tradition that, until recently, has seldom been questioned. The concept of homework has become so ingrained in U.S. culture that the word *homework* is part of the common vernacular, as exemplified by statements such as "Do your homework before taking a trip," "It's obvious they didn't do their homework before they presented their proposal," and "The marriage counselor gave us homework to do."

Homework began generations ago, when schooling consisted primarily of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and rote learning dominated. Simple tasks of memorization and practice were easy for children to do at home, and the belief was that such mental exercise disciplined the mind. Homework has generally been viewed as a positive practice and accepted without question as part of the student routine. But over the years, homework in U.S. schools has evolved from the once simple tasks of memorizing math facts or writing spelling words to complex projects.

As the culture has changed, and as schools and families have changed, homework has become problematic for more and more students, parents, and teachers. The Internet and bookstores are crowded with books offering parents advice on how to get children to do homework. Frequently, the advice for parents is to "remain positive," yet only a handful of books suggest that

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parents should have the right to question the amount of homework or the value of the task itself. Teachers, overwhelmed by an already glutted curriculum and pressures related to standardized tests, assign homework in an attempt to develop students' skills and extend learning time. At the same time, they are left frustrated when the students who most need more time to learn seem the least likely to complete homework. Teachers are afraid not to give homework for fear of being perceived as "easy."

Despite there being more diversity among learners in our schools than ever, many teachers continue to assign the same homework to all students in the class and continue to disproportionately fail students from lower-income households for not doing homework, in essence punishing them for lack of an adequate environment in which to do homework. At a time when demand for accountability has reached a new high, research fails to prove that homework is worth all that trouble. (The research on homework is discussed in Chapter 3.)

Although many people remain staunchly in favor of homework, a growing number of teachers and parents alike are beginning to question the practice. These critics are reexamining the beliefs behind the practice, the wisdom of assigning hours of homework, the absurdly heavy backpack, and the failure that can result when some students don't complete homework. There's a growing suspicion that something is wrong with homework.

This more critical view represents a movement away from the pro-homework attitudes that have been consistent for decades (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). As a result, a discussion of homework stirs controversy as people debate both sides of the issue. But the arguments both for and against homework are not new, as indicated by a consistent swing of the pendulum over the last 100 years between pro-homework and anti-homework attitudes.

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A Brief History of Homework

The history of homework and surrounding attitudes is relevant because the roots of homework dogma developed and became entrenched over the last 100 years. Attitudes toward homework have historically reflected societal trends and the prevailing educational philosophy of the time, and each swing of the pendulum is colored by unique historical events and sentiments that drove the movement for or against homework. Yet the historical arguments on both sides are familiar. They bear a striking similarity to the arguments waged in today's debate over homework.

At the end of the 19th century, attendance in grades 1 through 4 was irregular for many students, and most classrooms were multi-age. Teachers rarely gave homework to primary students (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). By the 5th grade, many students left school for work; fewer continued to high school (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). In the lower grades, school focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic; in grammar school (grades 5 through 8) and high school, students studied geography, history, literature, and math. Learning consisted of drill, memorization, and recitation, which required preparation at home:

> At a time when students were required to say their lessons in class in order to demonstrate their academic prowess, they had little alternative but to say those lessons over and over at home the night before. Before a child could continue his or her schooling through grammar school, 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 lessons. (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 174)

The critical role that children played as workers in the household meant that many families could not afford to have their children continue schooling, given the requisite two to three hours of homework each night (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

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Early in the 20th century, an anti-homework movement became the centerpiece of a nationwide trend toward progressive education. Progressive educators questioned many aspects of schooling: "Once the value of drill, memorization, and recitation was opened to debate, the attendant need for homework came under harsh scrutiny as well" (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 42).

As the field of pediatrics grew, more doctors began to speak out about the effect of homework on the health and well-being of children. The benefits of fresh air, sunshine, and exercise for children were widely accepted, and homework had the potential to interfere. One hundred years ago, rather than diagnosing children with attention deficit disorder, pediatricians simply prescribed more outdoor exercise. Homework was blamed for nervous conditions in children, eyestrain, stress, lack of sleep, and other conditions. Homework was viewed as a culprit that robbed children of important opportunities for social interaction. At the same time, labor leaders were protesting working conditions for adults, advocating for a 40-hour workweek. Child labor laws were used as a justification to protect children from excessive homework.

In 1900, the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal,* Edward Bok, began a series of anti-homework articles. He recommended the elimination of homework for all students under the age of 15 and a limit of one hour nightly for older students. His writings were instrumental in the growth of the anti-homework movement of the early 1900s, a harbinger of the important role media would play in future homework debates. By 1930, the anti-homework sentiment had grown so strong that a Society for the Abolition of Homework was formed. Many school districts across the United States voted to abolish homework, especially in the lower grades:

> In the 1930s and 1940s, although few districts abolished homework outright, many abolished it in grades K–6. In grades K–3, condemnation of homework was nearly universal in school district policies as well as professional opinion.

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> And even where homework was not abolished, it was often assigned only in small amounts—in secondary schools as well as elementary schools. (Gill & Schlossman, 2000, p. 32)

After the Soviet Union launched the *Sputnik 1* satellite in 1957, the trend toward less homework was quickly reversed as the United States became obsessed with competing with the Russians. Fearful that children were unprepared to compete in a future that would be increasingly dominated by technology, school officials, teachers, and parents saw homework as a means for accelerating children's acquisition of knowledge:

> The homework problem was reconceived as part of a national crisis: the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter; that is, they were working harder and achieving more in school . . . the new discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator of the dismal state of American schooling. A commitment to heavy homework loads was alleged to reveal seriousness of purpose in education; homework became an instrument of national defense policy. (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 176)

Within a few short years, public opinion had swung back to the pro-homework position. During this period, many schools overturned policies abolishing or limiting homework that had been established between 1900 and 1940. However, homework in the early elementary grades was still rare (Gill & Schlossman, 2004).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, a counterculture emerged that questioned the status quo in literally every aspect of personal and political life. A popular book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969), attacked traditional methods of what was labeled "the educational establishment." Indicative of the times, a new debate emerged over homework and other educational activities. The anti-homework arguments

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were reminiscent of the progressive arguments of the early 20th century—again, homework was seen as a symptom of too much pressure on students to achieve.

Two prominent educational organizations went on record opposing excessive homework. The American Educational Research Association stated,

> Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents. (In Wildman, 1968, p. 204)

The National Education Association issued this statement in 1966:

> It is generally recommended (a) that children in the early elementary school have no homework specifically assigned by the teacher; (b) that limited amounts of homework—not more than an hour a day—be introduced during the upper elementary school and junior high years; (c) that homework be limited to four nights a week; and (d) that in secondary school no more than one and a half hours a night be expected. (In Wildman, 1968, p. 204)

Not surprisingly, by the late 1960s and during the 1970s, parents were arguing that children should be free to play and relax in the evenings, and again the amount of homework decreased (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

But by the 1980s the pendulum would swing again. In 1983, the study *A Nation at Risk* became the "first major report by the government attempting to prove that the purported inadequacies of our schools and our students were responsible for the troubles of the U.S. economy" (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 50). The report claimed that there was a "rising tide of mediocrity" in schools and that a movement for academic excellence was

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needed (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). *A Nation at Risk* planted the seed of the idea that school success was responsible for economic success. It ratcheted up the standards, starting what has been called the "intensification movement"—the idea that education can be improved if only there is more of it, in the form of longer school years, more testing, more homework. *A Nation at Risk* explicitly called for "far more homework" for high school students.

In 1986, the U.S. Department of Education published *What Works,* which also recommended homework as an effective learning strategy. "Whenever you come across a particularly savage attack on the state of public education, it's a safe bet that a call for more homework (and other get-tough messages) will be sounded as well" (Kohn, 2006, p. 120).

The pro-homework trend continued into the 1990s, as the push for higher standards resulted in the conclusion that more homework was a remedy. As noted earlier, this was not the first time homework became the scapegoat for the perceived inadequacies of public education:

> Whenever reformers attempt to improve the academic outcomes of American schooling, more homework seems a first step. The justification for this probably has more to do with philosophy (students should work harder) and with the ease of implementation (increased homework costs no extra money and requires no major program modifications) than with new research findings. (Strother, in Connors, 1991, p. 14)

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, an occasional journal article would question whether more homework was necessarily better, but those voices were few and far between. Most journal articles and popular books about homework took the safe position of being pro-homework and focused on strategies for getting children to complete homework. In 1989,

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Harris Cooper (now considered a leading expert on homework research) published an exhaustive synthesis of research on homework (1989a) that seemed to have little effect on popular practice and received little media attention. In 1994, a board member in the school district of Half Moon Bay, California, made national news by recommending that the district abolish homework. The board member "was widely vilified in the national press as just another California kook" (Gill & Schlossman, 1996, p. 57). The general media reaction was dismissive; the story was treated as cute and quirky, as if the idea of abolishing homework were just plain crazy.

By the late 1990s, however, the tide would turn against homework once more. With increasing frequency, articles critical of traditional homework practices were published in educational journals. In 1998, the American Educational Research Association conducted a symposium on homework practices. In 1998, Harris Cooper's latest research about homework (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998) garnered much more public attention, catapulting the topic of homework into the popular press and landing him on *Oprah* and *Today*. In March 1998, the cover of *Newsweek* featured an article titled "Does Your Child Need a Tutor?" along with another article titled "Homework Doesn't Help" (Begley, 1998). In January 1999, *Time* magazine's cover story, "The Homework That Ate My Family" (Ratnesar, 1999), generated considerable media buzz. It portrayed homework as an intrusion on family tranquility and as just one more stressor in an already overstressed life, especially for two-career families. The article also cited a University of Michigan study showing that homework for 6- to 8-year-olds had increased by more than 50 percent from 1981 to 1997.

As homework increased, especially for the youngest students, and parents began feeling overwhelmed, stories detailing the struggle appeared widely in the popular press. Now the mood was one of concern for overworked students and parents.

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In 2000, Piscataway, New Jersey, received national attention for implementing a homework policy that limited the amount of homework, discouraged weekend homework, and forbade teachers from counting homework in the grade (Kohn, 2006). Unlike the story about Half Moon Bay only six years earlier, *this* story was given serious media coverage, and the school district was deluged by requests from schools seeking a copy of the policy.

Also in 2000, Etta Kralovec and John Buell's book *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* received massive media attention and spawned an ongoing debate between the anti-homework and pro-homework contingents. In 2006, two popular-press books kept the debate going: Alfie Kohn's *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing,* and Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish's *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It.*

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2009, the debate has continued, with a strong anti-homework movement emerging, similar to the anti-homework cycles of the 1930s and 1940s and the late 1960s to early 1970s. Canada and the United Kingdom were two of the earliest countries to sound the alarm: a ban on primary homework was recommended in the United Kingdom in 2009, and in 2010, Toronto's school policy prohibited homework in kindergarten and on weekends and holidays. Around the same time, a smattering of elementary schools in the United States began limiting or eliminating homework. More and more newspaper articles appeared questioning the value of homework: "Do Kids Today Have Too Much Homework?" (Lawrence, 2015), "Homework: Is There Any Point?" (Norton, 2013), "As Students Return to School, Debate About the Amount of Homework Rages" (Hauser, 2016). In 2013, a particularly influential article appeared in *The Atlantic*. Titled "My Daughter's Homework Is Killing Me," the piece chronicled one New York

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dad's experience doing his 8th grade daughter's homework for a week, about three hours of work each night (Greenfeld, 2013).

Internationally, concerns about homework, especially for elementary students, have arisen in many countries, including Ireland, the Philippines, Greece, France, India, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. Even the government of China, a country long revered as the paragon of educational achievement, has warned schools and parents that excessive homework is not in the best interest of their children's health.

In the United States, there has been a move to more precisely examine the practice, to reduce the amount of homework, and to question the validity and quality of the homework tasks we ask students to do. Although the loudest voices are calling for a ban, the more centrist voices are simply asking schools to assign homework more thoughtfully and to consider the broader effects excessive homework has on the well-being of students and their families. The most consistent trend in the United States has been the adoption of policies that either ban elementary school homework or limit it to reading. A small but growing number of U.S. elementary schools are now "homework free" (CBS News, 2016). The trend line is clear: momentum has shifted in the direction of the "less homework" movement.

But trends do not tell the whole story, and not everyone has "joined the church" of less homework. Among those opposed to homework reform, a rather simplistic view has arisen mislabeling today's reform efforts as flat-out anti-homework and claiming that there are only two positions on homework: for or against. Although this is clearly a false dichotomy, attempts by schools to diminish the homework load do often provoke kneejerk opposition and accusations of "dumbing down" our children's education. Those of us in favor of such reform are labeled whiners and slackers. The pro-homework forces continue to tout the virtues of homework, claiming that evidence of the negative effects of excessive homework is anecdotal and not indicative of a general

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problem, as with this headline from the *Dallas Morning News* (Floyd, 2016): "Sorry, Parents, Your Child Probably Doesn't Have Too Much Homework."

Like religion and politics, the arguments surrounding homework stir intense emotions among parents, teachers, and administrators. To fully understand today's debate, we must examine the beliefs about homework that have developed during the last 100 years and the cultural forces that have shaped them.

Five Beliefs That Lay Bare the Culture of Homework

Beliefs about the inherent goodness of homework are so entrenched, so unshakable for many parents and educators, that they seem almost cultlike. For many, these beliefs are unexamined. Kralovec and Buell (2000) said it best: "The belief in the value of homework is akin to faith" (p. 9). The true believers hold homework in such reverence that many educators are afraid to recommend eliminating it completely. Too many people just won't accept the idea. How can anyone be against *work*? It's as if the tradition of homework has been so romanticized as to be accepted as truth. Parenting magazines and newspaper articles accept without question that homework is part of school life and then continue to give advice on how to help kids complete it (Kohn, 2006). Freelance writers have learned that writing that is too anti-homework will probably not be published in the mainstream media.

To understand the *cult*ure of homework and how it developed over the last 100 years, it is necessary to dissect the dogma, which can best be summarized by five largely unexamined beliefs about children and learning. How many of these beliefs are based on fact, and how many are based on faith, tradition, or moral judgments?

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Belief #1: The Role of the School Is to Extend Learning Beyond the Classroom

Many believe that it is not only teachers' inalienable right but also their *obligation* to extend learning beyond the classroom. Inherent in this belief is the assumption that teachers have the *right* to control children's lives outside the school—that we have the right to give homework and that students and parents should comply with our wishes (more about this assumption in Chapter 2). Many teachers claim that homework keeps children out of trouble and is better for them than television or video games. This view is rather dismissive of parents' ability to make good decisions about their children's use of free time. Is it really our job to be the morality police of our students' personal lives?

Perhaps our role in extending learning outside the school is to instill in students the value of learning and the joy of learning and to expose them to the vastness of the universe—how much there is to learn. Perhaps our role is to help students find something in life they feel passionate about and to help them find their purpose in society.

Belief #2: Intellectual Activity Is Intrinsically More Valuable Than Nonintellectual Activity

Many homework advocates believe that intellectual development is more important than social, emotional, or physical development. Intellectual pursuits hold an implied superiority over nonintellectual tasks such as throwing a ball, walking a dog, riding a bike, or just hanging out. This belief presupposes the limited value of leisure tasks. Concurrently, some worry that too much unstructured time might cause children to be less successful, less competitive with others. As with Belief #1, this view shows a distrust of parents to guide children in the productive use of free time and a distrust of children to engage in intellectual pursuits on their own. In reality, physical, emotional, and social

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activities are as necessary as intellectual activity in the development of healthy, well-rounded children.

Belief #3: Homework Teaches Responsibility

One of the most resilient beliefs is that homework promotes responsibility and discipline. Even though there is no research to support this belief, many people continue to tout homework's nonacademic virtues (Kohn, 2006). *Responsibility* is often a code word for *obedience.* When we say we want students to be *responsible,* are we saying we want them to be *obedient*—to do *what* we want them to do *when* we want them to do it, to be mindless drones, blindly obedient to authority? One teacher said she thought not doing homework was a sign of disrespect for the teacher! When we say homework promotes discipline in students, does that mean being self-disciplined enough to do something they hate to do because it's their duty?

Many teachers are fixated on homework as *the way* to teach responsibility, as though we have no other avenues. We tend to neglect all the other ways students *could* be given responsibility in the classroom—involving them in decision making about their learning, teaching them how to self-assess, letting them design learning tasks, or allowing them to help manage classroom and school facilities (Guskey & Anderman, 2008; Vatterott, 2007). Even in the task of homework itself, children are rarely given *responsibility* for choosing how they wish to learn, how they might show what they have learned, or how they might schedule their time for homework. True responsibility cannot be coerced. It must be developed by giving students power and ownership of tasks (Anderson, 2016; Azzam, 2014; Vatterott, 2007). (Chapter 4 presents more about how to do this.)

Another supposed virtue of homework is that it teaches time management. Does time management really mean the ability to delay gratification—to work when we want to play? Homework does not reinforce time management if adults have to coerce

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children into doing it; if children are coerced, they are not in charge of scheduling the time or making decisions about the use of the time.

If we are using homework to teach responsibility, won't 10 minutes of homework work just as well as 60 minutes? If we are using homework to teach time management, don't long-range projects that require scheduled planning do a better job of that than daily assignments?

Belief #4: Lots of Homework Is a Sign of a Rigorous Curriculum

Many people equate lots of homework with a tough school, regardless of the type or length of assignments (Jackson, 2018; Lythcott-Haims, 2015). Parents will often brag, "My child goes to a really good school—he gets lots of homework." If the mind is a muscle to be trained (as was believed in the 19th century), then more work must equal more learning. If some homework is good for children, then more homework must be even better. If 10 math problems for homework is good, then 40 problems must be better. This belief, more than any other, is responsible for the piling on of hours of homework in many schools today, and it is especially entrenched in high-achieving high schools in wealthy communities.

"Heavy workload = rigor" is a false equivalency. We all know that those assignments could be busywork of no educational value (Jackson, 2018). More homework gives the *appearance* of increased rigor, and difficulty is often equated with the *amount* of work assigned, not necessarily with its level of complexity or challenge (Kohn, 2006; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). If it were only that simple. More time does not necessarily equal more learning. The "more is always better" argument ignores the quality of work and the level of learning required. Rigor is challenge—but it is not necessarily the same challenge for each

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student. Given the diverse nature of students, challenging learning experiences will vary for different students.

Belief #5: Good Teachers Give Homework; Good Students Do Their Homework

Probably the most disturbing belief is that homework is inherently good, regardless of the type or length of assignment. Homework advocates have believed it for years, never questioning whether it's true. This certainty is born from the assumptions that homework teaches responsibility and discipline and that "lots of homework" equals "rigor." If *good teachers give homework,* it naturally follows that teachers who don't give homework are too easy. This mindset is so ingrained that teachers apologize to other teachers for not giving homework! Yet we know that some very good teachers don't give a lot of homework or any at all. Instead of being apologetic, teachers who don't give homework should simply explain that they do such a good job of teaching that homework is not necessary.

The danger in believing that *good students do their homework* is the moral judgment that tends to accompany this belief. To children who dutifully complete homework, we often attribute the virtues of being compliant and hardworking. To children who don't complete homework, we often attribute the vices of laziness and noncompliance. But is a lack of virtue the reason many children don't do homework? Therein lies the problem. Students without supportive parents (or with single parents overburdened trying to make ends meet), with parents who don't speak English, or with inadequate home environments for completing homework are less likely to complete homework (Vatterott, 2007). Are these less advantaged students *bad*? Of course not.

Three Philosophies Underlying the Homework Culture

The five beliefs discussed in the preceding section form a dogmatic homework culture. The foundations of that culture are a

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trinity of very old philosophies: our moralistic views of human nature, the Puritan work ethic that is embedded in our culture, and behaviorist practices that still reside in our schools. These three philosophies are so entwined with the five beliefs that it's hard to tell where one idea ends and another begins. An exploration of these philosophies will illuminate the dogma that underlies homework culture.

Moralistic Views: Who We Believe Students Are

Historically, one mission of school has been to instill moral values. Unfortunately, much of traditional schooling operates on the theory that children are basically lazy and irresponsible, that they can't be trusted, that they have to be coerced into learning, and that they must be controlled and taught to be compliant. Therefore, it follows that it is necessary to use homework to teach responsibility.

If students have a natural tendency to do evil, then they cannot be trusted to use time wisely. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, and therefore children should not be idle. This philosophy assumes not only that children don't want to learn but also that learning is inherently distasteful. In other words, we don't *trust* students to be in charge of their own learning; instead, we believe that we must tightly control the task and method.

The Puritan Work Ethic: Who We Want Students to Be

No one would dispute that we want to encourage students to work hard. After all, hard work built America, right? The Puritans believed hard work was an honor to God that would lead to a prosperous reward. That work ethic brings to mind the stereotypical stern schoolmarm, rapping a ruler against the desk and saying "Get busy!" The tenets of the Puritan work ethic most evident in homework culture are the following:

- Hard work is good for you regardless of the pointlessness of the task.

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- Hard works builds character.
- Hard work is painful; suffering is virtuous.

Here we see the origin of Belief #4, that more work equals rigor, and Belief #5, that "good" students do their homework and "good" teachers make students work hard. Unfortunately, when it comes to learning, the bleaker side of the Puritan work ethic has also taken hold. Kohn (2004) called it "the cult of rigor and the loss of joy": "If children seem to be happy in school, then not much of value could be going on there" (p. 36). And Raebeck (1992) noted that "there is a prevalent myth that if a teaching/learning experience is too enjoyable it is somehow academically suspect. If it is 'rigorous,' or better yet painful, then it must have merit" (p. 13).

The work ethic is obvious in views that homework is a way to train students how to work—that homework trains students how to study, how to work diligently and persistently, and how to delay gratification:

> As students get older, they will be called upon to delay gratification perhaps more than they would wish to. This is part of the learning process, and it is to be expected. Indeed, all manner of adult work demands persistence in the face of boredom. (Collins & Bempechat, 2017, p. 44)

Along similar lines, homework is viewed as practice for being a worker:

> Homework is *work,* not play. . . . It is assigned by a teacher for students to complete on the teacher's schedule, with the teacher's requirements in mind. So it helps to have the right attitude. Homework means business, and the student should expect to buckle down. As in the workplace, careless efforts and a laissez-faire attitude are likely to make the wrong impression . . . homework is, in part, an exchange of performance for grades. (Corno & Xu, 2004, p. 228)

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The premise of Corno and Xu's article is that "homework is the quintessential job of childhood"—as though children need a job. Which raises a question: Is our job as educators to produce learners or workers?

Behaviorism: How We Think We Can Control Students

No philosophy is more firmly rooted in education than behaviorism. The idea that behavior can be controlled by rewards and punishment is so embedded in the day-to-day practices of school, one rarely even notices it (Kohn, 1999). Discipline, grades, attendance policies, honor rolls, and even the way teachers use praise and disapproval—all reflect this philosophy that behavior can be controlled by external stimuli. So it's no surprise that teachers believe rewards and punishments are the way to *make* students do homework. When punishments don't work, teachers often increase the punishment, as if more of the same will accomplish the goal.

If we believe that good students do their homework and lazy students don't, then it becomes morally defensible to give failing grades for incomplete homework, thereby punishing the vice of laziness and rewarding the virtue of hard work. Behaviorism is most evident in the use of late policies and zeros for uncompleted homework (more about that in Chapter 4).

Homework culture is so firmly entrenched in these moralistic, puritanistic, and behavioristic philosophies that traditional homework practices may be accepted without question by both teachers and parents, as if a sort of brainwashing has occurred. To use a 1970s metaphor, "if you drank the Kool-Aid," you may not realize how the cult(ure) affects your attitudes about homework.

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Forces Driving the Current Pro-Homework/Anti-Homework Debate

Homework beliefs and their historical influences affect the debate today in insidious ways. Contemporary arguments are strongly reminiscent of the earlier arguments for and against homework, yet something is different. This time around we face new and unique challenges.

The Common Core

Education's increasing focus on college and career readiness and the adoption of the Common Core State Standards by many states have upped the game. The Common Core standards require much more of students in terms of higher-level skills, including the ability to analyze, synthesize, and apply knowledge (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). Even states that chose not to adopt the Common Core have revised their state standards to raise the bar in a similar fashion (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, relaxed No Child Left Behind's requirements for proficiency and removed many sanctions and penalties, standardized testing is still required, and it is unlikely that accountability will ease up. In fact, most states now include accountability for student test scores in their teacher evaluation systems. Teachers are expected to demonstrate students' academic growth and proficiency via some form of standardized testing (Porter, 2015).

As a result, the pressure to meet standards has not abated, and homework continues to be seen as a tool for meeting those standards. The repercussions of this continued pressure are visible even at the kindergarten and 1st grade levels. A University

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of Virginia study (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016) titled *Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?* compared kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms between 1998 and 2010 and found that kindergarten today has become more like the 1st grade of the late 1990s: the focus on academics has increased, while art, music, and playtime have decreased, and most teachers now believe students should learn to read in kindergarten.

Many parents complain that homework is now routinely assigned in kindergarten and 1st grade. According to one study, kindergartners average 25 minutes of homework a night (Pressman et al., 2015). YouTube hosts a now-famous 911 call from a 4-year-old preschooler who needed help with his "take-away" math homework.

Media and Technology

As Thomas Friedman famously said, "The world is flat." Media and technology have broadened the homework debate to be more inclusive than in the past; more people are participating in the conversation. The Internet has given the public more information, served as a forum for many pro-homework and anti-homework blogs, and given us a window into similar debates in other countries. Today the homework debate is played out on social media and through parenting websites, as well as on radio and television and in the print media. Online parenting groups, discussion forums, and websites such as www.stophomework.com have united parents and given them strategies for protesting homework policies in their children's schools. Technology has reduced parents' isolation, enabling them to vent their once-private homework struggles publicly with the click of a mouse.

Just as the *Ladies' Home Journal* writings sparked a movement 100 years ago, during the last two decades the media has become a friend of homework reform. Since the release of Cooper's 1998 and 2006 comprehensive studies, major news magazines and talk shows have conducted a national dialogue about homework

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and brought increased attention to the homework reform movement. With a seemingly endless supply of television talk shows, quasi-news shows (such as *Dateline*), and round-the-clock cable news coverage, issues affecting families—including homework—have received more coverage in recent years. In addition, the availability of online media allows us to access that homework story on *Today* or that homework article in the *New York Times* whenever and wherever we want. The Internet has enabled parents to become consumers of research not only on homework but also on childhood stress, sleep, anxiety, and depression.

Media and technology have helped keep the homework debate alive as well as foster the growth of the anti-homework movement during the last few years. Given the self-feeding nature of the media, it takes only one story to reignite the debate. In the fall of 2016, a Facebook post by a Texas elementary teacher sharing her no-homework policy flooded social media and news media alike and stoked the flames of the anti-homework fire (see Figure 1.1). When parents in Spain had their children stage a "homework strike," refusing to do weekend homework, it was the strike heard around the world. Whatever the story about homework, it will show up on all the major TV networks, on CNN, on Twitter and Facebook, and in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—especially at the start of the school year.

But the media industry has also been an enemy of the homework reform movement. Every year, around back-to-school time, we are buried with books, magazine articles, and television segments that reinforce a blind acceptance of homework as a good thing, endorsing the importance of homework and offering parents the same stale tips for getting children to do homework "without tears." Throughout the school year, stories appear frequently about how to get your son or daughter into the Ivy League, how to ace the SATs, or how to help your child write a killer college essay.

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FIGURE 1.1
Mrs. Young's Facebook Post

"New Homework Policy"

Dear Parents:

After much research this summer, I am trying something new. Homework will only consist of work that your student did not finish during the school day. There will be no formally assigned homework this year.

Research has been unable to prove that homework improves student performance. Rather, I ask that you spend your evening doing things that are proven to correlate with student success. Eat dinner as a family, read together, play outside, and get your child to bed early.

Thanks,
Mrs. Brandy Young

Source: Printed with permission from Brandy Young.

The Mass Hysteria of "Achievement Culture"

To make matters worse, a mass hysteria has arisen among parents—especially high-income parents—about their children's ability to compete and to be successful. This "achievement culture" has become ingrained in wealthy communities throughout the United States. The American Academy of Pediatrics first labeled the trend "the professionalization of parenthood" in 2007:

> Parents receive messages from a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages. . . . They hear other parents in the neighborhood talk about their overburdened schedules and recognize it is the culture and even expectation of parents. (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185)

This mass hysteria is driven by anxiety (Abeles, 2015; Lahey, 2015; Lythcott-Haims, 2015): *It's a dog-eat-dog world, and the competition is tough. If you're not careful, you won't survive. It's a high-stakes game, and your child's future is on the line*. For many

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parents, the mantra has become "do whatever it takes" to get their child accepted at the best college—all of this with a tacit acceptance of the premise that admission into Harvard equals a high-paying career, which equals happiness. As one high school student put it,

> People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades, which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them happiness, so they think. (Pope, 2001, p. 4)

And as the superintendent in one wealthy district sardonically stated, "Our parents believe there are three career paths for their children: doctor, lawyer, and unsuccessful."

There seems to be little discussion that, in fact, this could be a faulty hypothesis. Only recently have some experts advised parents to question whether the Ivy League is right for *their* child. Three faulty assumptions actually feed this trend: (1) the Ivy League is the only route to success; (2) advanced placement (AP) classes are essential to get there; and (3) excessive homework is an inevitable part of AP or honors classes.

AP Haley

Talking with other parents at a neighborhood get-together, Haley's mom is worried. Even though Haley is a good student—taking three AP classes, active in cheerleading and other activities—her mom is worried that she is not in the top 10 percent of her class. "She's only in the top 15 percent—she can't get into the University of Texas unless she's in the top 10 percent." Her mom wishes kids today weren't so competitive and claims her daughter *wants* to take three AP classes. She claims *she's* not pushing her daughter and doesn't even realize how clearly her anxiety about the future is communicated and how readily her daughter picks it up. Mom goes on to remind the others, "Look at the jobs John's kids got when they graduated from Peabody and Georgetown—all the money they are making!"

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The stress is cultural—absorbed by parents and then fed to their children, creating a hypercompetitive attitude for both:

> Parents receive the message that if their children are not well prepared, well balanced, and high achieving, they will not get a desired spot in higher education. Even parents who wish to take a lower-key approach to child rearing fear slowing down when they perceive everyone else is on the fast track. (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185)

This trend has led many parents to have a somewhat contradictory attitude toward homework. They complain about the stress homework brings to children, the battles over the dinner table, and the disruption to family life, yet at the same time they are worried about their child's ability to compete for entry into the best colleges. Although it has never been proven by research, parents assume an automatic relationship between homework and future success. They have bought into the cult of beliefs about homework and accepted a connection between hours of homework and acceptance to an elite college. Maria, a mother whose son attends a competitive college prep high school, has tears in her eyes as she describes her son going to bed at 5:00 in the evening, exhausted from his workload. But like many other parents, she is resigned to the fact that if it takes hours of homework to guarantee her son's admission to college, so be it. She and her son are victims of the "extreme expectations of an achievement culture gone crazy" (Abeles, 2015, p. 23).

One result of the mass hysteria has been a virtual explosion of the tutoring industry, now a $7 billion business in the United States alone (Boorstin, 2014). Some parents use tutoring to give their college-bound children a leg up. But more often, for parents who can afford it, the answer to the stressful and time-consuming job of supervising homework has been to "subcontract" the job to a tutor or, for the very wealthy, a "homework therapist" who will provide both academic help and emotional support to soothe

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student anxiety—at rates ranging from $200 to $600 a session (Spencer, 2018).

One of the potential negative effects of the tutoring craze has been the possibility that mass tutoring may "raise the bar" for homework assignments. After all, if most students are getting adult help with homework, it gives teachers the misperception that the students know more than they really do. It makes it appear that students are ready for more challenging assignments.

The candy factory episode of the classic *I Love Lucy* sitcom comes to mind. Lucy and Ethel are hired to work on an assembly line wrapping chocolates that pass by them on a conveyor belt. Struggling to keep up with the pace, they begin taking chocolates off the conveyor belt and stuffing them into their mouths and their hats. When the supervisor comes to check on their progress, they appear to be keeping up, so she yells to the back, "Speed it up!" Mass tutoring has the same potential to affect the difficulty of homework assignments in wealthy communities, thereby widening the gap between high-income students and disadvantaged students whose families can't afford tutors. (The gap between wealthy and disadvantaged students is discussed further in Chapter 2.)

The Balance Movement

While some parents are mired in the mass hysteria, a backlash is occurring among other parents who have become disenchanted with the hypercompetitiveness of the achievement culture. Fueled by access to research and driven by the emotional and personal experiences of their children, these parents are realizing that the push for the Ivy League has gotten out of hand and that college may not be a guaranteed ticket to success (or worth the crippling debt). The achievement culture they have bought into for so long suddenly feels wrong. They are reaching out through social media and discovering they aren't alone. They have come to realize the "cult" for the folly it is.

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These parents are backing up and slowing down, seeking a balance in their children's lives. Although some are recommending that homework be abolished, many more are suggesting that excessive homework is interfering with family life and not worth the loss of a carefree childhood. The movement is less an anti-homework movement than an anti–excessive homework movement, based on the idea that children should not have longer than an eight-hour workday (Vatterott, 2003). As a reaction against the mass hysteria movement, these parents have decided they are unwilling to mortgage their son's or daughter's childhood for the nebulous promise of future success. More than 30 years ago, David Elkind warned about *The Hurried Child* (1981, 2006)—a trend to push children too hard, to overstructure their time, and to burden them with too many adult responsibilities. In 2000, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (Rosenfeld & Wise) addressed similar concerns and implored parents to "ease up on the intensity" of their children's frenetic lives.

Today's balance movement echoes that advice, and it is continuing to gain support among teachers, other professionals, and the general public. The early signs of the current movement were evident around 2006, when two books landed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list: *The Overachievers: The Secret Life of Driven Kids* (Robbins, 2006) and *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (Levine, 2008). The movement was given a powerful jolt in 2009, when Vicki Abeles, a Wall Street lawyer-turned-filmmaker, released her documentary *Race to Nowhere,* which shined a spotlight on the academic stress of middle school and high school students in one affluent California community. The film was an indictment of the pressure-cooker environment that overwhelmed, overscheduled, sleep-deprived students lived in—and it named homework as a major contributor to their stress.

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Race to Nowhere was distributed for free community and school screenings, and, judging by its popularity, hit a huge nerve. By 2015, more than a million people had seen the film at 7,000-plus screenings in all 50 U.S. states and more than 40 countries (Abeles, 2015). After each screening, local educators or medical professionals would facilitate audience discussions, encouraging viewers to engage with the film not as consumers but as activists and stakeholders. Those discussions proved to be an important catalyst in a nationwide grassroots movement for education reform (www.racetonowhere.com).

With the help of *Race to Nowhere*, what started as a fringe movement of a few concerned parents grew into a full-blown culture war with homework at the epicenter. Today, an increasing number of parents are demanding that schools reel in the homework load, and some parents are beginning to "just say no." One parent simply returned their child's incomplete homework with "No thank you" written on the top! (More about parent activism in Chapter 2.)

Parents who feel strongly about the need for balance worry about both the immediate and the long-term effects of excessive homework on the overall physical and psychological health of their children. The broader medical community agrees with them. As in previous periods of anti-homework sentiment, today's pediatricians are concerned about childhood issues of stress; sleep, health, and work-life balance; and loss of leisure time.

Stress. We continue to learn about the connection of stress and sleep in adults to just about everything, including physical health, psychological well-being, mental productivity, and creativity. Stress affects sleep, sleep affects stress, and exercise and downtime are needed to *de*-stress (Huffington, 2014). All these aspects of the work-life balance are interdependent, affecting one another as part of overall health for both adults and children.

Medical professionals now see the parallel between the role stress plays in adult productivity and the role it plays in student

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performance. As recent research with children confirms the benefits of sleep (National Sleep Foundation, 2014) and exercise (Tomporowski, Davis, Miller, & Naglieri, 2008), it also shows the detriment of stress to children's health as well as to the brain's ability to learn.

The stress levels of school-age children today are off the charts. Teens actually report higher levels of stress during the school year than do their adult counterparts. Eighty-three percent of teens named school as a major stressor (Abeles, 2015; American Psychological Association, 2014). In another study, 56 percent of high school students considered homework a primary source of stress (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013).

The cover story of *Time* magazine's November 7, 2016, issue (Schrobsdorff, 2016) revealed an epidemic of anxiety and depression among adolescents, especially the most advantaged students—those who appear to have everything. Although homework is clearly not the only factor, the role it plays in such stress has come under the spotlight. In a study of more than 5,000 students in 13 high-achieving public and private middle and high schools,

> More than 70 percent of the high school students reported that they felt often or always stressed by their schoolwork, and many admitted to taking illegal stimulants to stay awake to study and complete the lengthy homework assignments each night. Very few found the homework to be useful or meaningful—which only added to their frustration with the heavy workload. (Pope, 2010, p. 4)

But it's not just teens. The alarming rise of stress is also affecting the youngest of our students. Pediatricians and counselors throughout the United States are now reporting that it is commonplace to see elementary students for stress-related symptoms, such as stomachaches and headaches, related to their anxiety over homework. One pediatrician said, "Kids are coming here with migraine headaches, ulcers. I'm talking about

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five-, six-, and seven-year-olds. We've never seen that before" (Abeles, 2015, p. 22).

It seems ludicrous that some adults are recommending yoga, meditation, and deep breathing for children as cures for stress. Those remedies are treating the symptom, not the problem. Children should not be this stressed about school in the first place! Still, homework is increasingly being acknowledged as a major culprit of students' stress. Stanford University now sponsors a program called Challenge Success (formerly called Stressed Out Students or S.O.S.) that works with school teams composed of the principal, students, parents, counselors, and teachers or other adults (www.challengesuccess.org) to implement school-level strategies known to improve students' mental and physical health and engagement in school. Such strategies may include homework-free holiday breaks, bans on weekend homework, flexible deadlines, study periods during the day, and shared calendars for teachers and coaches (Abeles, 2015).

Sleep, health, and work-life balance. One of the greatest concerns of pediatricians is the prevalence of sleep deprivation among school-age children. The National Sleep Foundation (2014) recommends that, for teens, nine hours of sleep is optimal, eight is borderline, and less than that is insufficient. Yet according to Eaton and colleagues (2010), the vast majority of teens get at least two hours less sleep each night than they should. As with stress, students' sleep patterns often mirror those of adults.

Only recently has research exposed the extent to which both children and adults are sleep-deprived and documented this serious issue's effects on health, mood, and intellectual functioning (Abeles, 2015). In one study, groups of 4th graders and 6th graders went to bed one hour earlier or stayed up one hour later for three nights. When their performance was tested, the short answer was "that a slightly sleepy sixth-grader will perform in class like a mere fourth-grader" (Sadeh, in Abeles, 2015, p. 25). Although sleep is influenced by many factors, such as the use of

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technology, caffeine, and stress, homework still makes the list as a prominent sleep thief.

Many children also sacrifice exercise and fresh air to toil over hours of homework. Recent alarming news about the level of childhood obesity and the connection between sleep deprivation and obesity (Dovey, 2018) makes a strong case for reducing homework to allow for more exercise and sleep. The now-common axioms "Sitting is the new smoking" and "Exercise is the new medicine" are sage advice for both children and adults. One child advocacy expert (Louv, 2005, 2009–2010) has actually compiled research showing that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual development. He warns that today's overworked and overscheduled children can suffer from what he calls *nature deficit disorder,* resulting in obesity, depression, and attention deficit disorder.

Loss of leisure time. Parents often remark that, because of excessive homework, children are "losing their childhood" and "don't have time to be kids." They point to the need for fresh air, unstructured playtime, family time, and downtime.

Research on the "power of play" shows that play not only enhances social and emotional development but also has a positive effect on academic performance (Elkind, 2007). An American Academy of Pediatrics report (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012) echoed the importance of undirected playtime for children and addressed parents' tendency to overschedule and "build résumés" for children and the negative ramifications of such actions. The report also recommended that pediatricians encourage active play and discourage overuse of passive entertainment for children, such as television and computer games. Some parents have already heeded this advice. With children's ability to be plugged in and stimulated 24/7, some parents are now beginning to limit screen time and force kids to take "media fasts." Many families are demanding no weekend or holiday

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homework and are prioritizing togetherness through family meals and activities like game night.

Love of learning. In addition to homework's negative effects on students' overall wellness, parents are also concerned about homework's long-term effect on children's love of learning. Of all the parental complaints about homework, this is perhaps the most poignant one: the fear that children will lose the joy of learning.

In educational circles, discussion almost exclusively focuses on short-term achievement or passing the test, not on what the practice of homework can do to a child's long-term learning, attitude about learning, or attitudes about the intellectual life. But parents are worried about the potential of excessive homework to dampen their child's natural curiosity, passion, and love of learning. Their concern, as stated by Alfie Kohn, is that homework may be "the single most reliable extinguisher of the flame of curiosity" (2006, p. 17). Have we lost the idea that the essence of schooling should be to nurture curiosity and the excitement of learning new things? (Vatterott, 2017).

A child's wonder is a tonic for the overworked, stressed-out adult. Maybe parents miss that joy of learning they no longer see in their children's eyes; maybe they need that in their lives. This is what parents are most saddened by. This is the loss they grieve the most.

Summing Up

Historically, the homework debate has continued to repeat itself. But the flawed belief that homework is grounded on has yet to be adequately challenged. What complicates today's debate is the diversity of attitudes about the value of homework. The mass hysteria and balance movements illustrate the breadth of those attitudes. As a country, the United States is so diverse economically, culturally, and in parenting styles, it is not surprising that

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not all would agree on a practice that bridges both school and family life. This diversity of attitudes requires not only a critical examination of homework practices but also a rethinking of the school-family relationship. This changing dynamic between parents and schools is discussed in Chapter 2.

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She first became interested in homework in the late 1990s as the frustrated parent of a 5th grader with learning disabilities. Since then, she has presented her homework research to more than 12,000 educators and parents in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Dr. Vatterott is considered an international expert on the topic of K–12 homework and is often interviewed by media such as the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, *Time.com*, *USA Today*, BBC World News Service, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Guardian*, as well as by writers from parenting magazines and educational organizations. She also serves on the advisory board for *Parents* magazine.

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Some of her presentation materials and unpublished writings about homework can be found at her website, www.homeworklady.com. She can be reached through her website or at Vatterott@umsl.edu.

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At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses).

Print Products

Fast and Effective Assessment: How to Reduce Your Workload and Improve Student Learning by Glen Pearsall (#118002)

Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (#112060)

Grading Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn by Myron Dueck (#114003)

Rethinking Grading: Meaningful Assessment for Standards-Based Learning by Cathy Vatterott (#115001)

Solving the Homework Problem by Flipping the Learning by Jonathan Bergmann (#117012)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at www.ascd.org/el.

PD Online

Grading Smarter, Not Harder—PD Online Course (#PD16OC005M)

ASCD myTeachSource®

Download resources from a professional learning platform with hundreds of research-based best practices and tools for your classroom at http://myteachsource.ascd.org/.

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