

THE CONVERSATION

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Should Australian schools ban homework?

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School students everywhere could look forward to no more homework. Homework image from www.shutterstock.com

The recent decision by French President Francois Hollande to abolish homework from French schools has reignited the long running debate about homework.

This debate has been around for more than a century and remains a contentious issue for parents, students and education researchers alike.

A lengthy debate

Last month's promised ban came as part of Hollande's wider reforms to education, and followed widespread teacher and parent agitation for a short-term ban on homework in France earlier in the year.

At that time, the president of a French teachers' organisation stated that homework reinforces socioeconomic and educational inequalities, saying: "Not all families have the time or necessary knowledge to help their offspring."

On the other side of the debate, the president of another French parents' association spoke in support of homework and stated: "Of course, it has to be reasonable, but going back over a lesson is the best way of learning things."

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Homework, broadly defined as tasks given to students during non-school hours, has long been the subject of both pro- and anti-homework campaigns, some of which have resulted in court action and the abolition of homework for students in some school grades.

Abolishing homework

The recent French announcement has led to calls for the abolition of homework in some German and American schools. So should homework be abolished in Australia?

The answer to this question requires a closer look at what homework is supposed to do, and whether it achieves these goals for students of all backgrounds.

The most comprehensive list of reasons for setting homework has been compiled by American researcher **Joyce Epstein**. These include the practice of already learnt skills, preparation for the next lesson, parent-child communication about school activities, the requirements of school or education department policies, and the enhancement of the reputation of the school or teacher.

But most empirical research into homework focuses on three main issues: does homework enhance student learning and achievement outcomes? Does homework help students to develop the skills of independent, self-directed learning? Does homework involve parents in the educational activities of their children in ways that are beneficial?

The conclusions

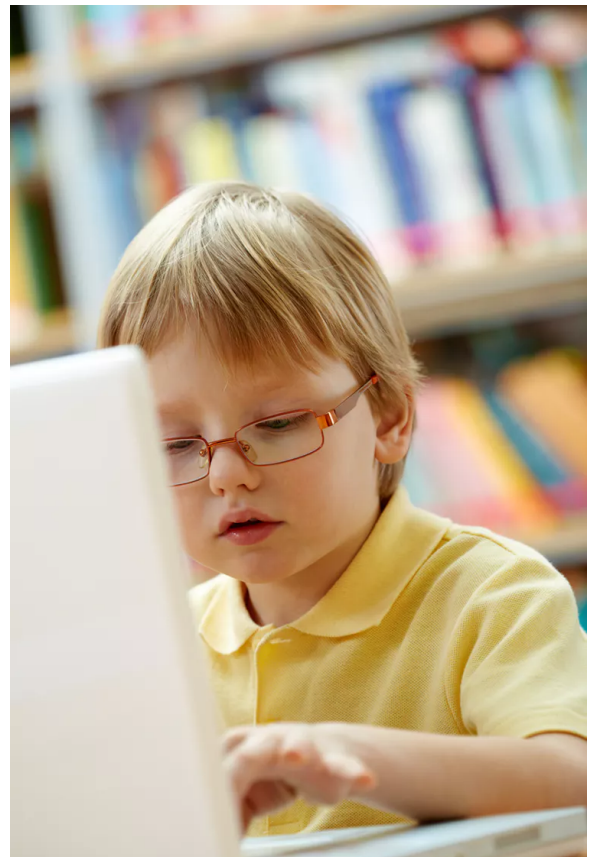
In our new book **Reforming Homework: Practices, Learning and Policy**, we have reviewed and evaluated the research evidence on each of the three issues.

While this research is complex and there are many caveats, the following broad conclusions can be drawn. In terms of academic achievement, homework has no benefit for children in the early years of primary school, negligible benefits for children in the later years of primary school, weak benefits for junior high school students and reasonable benefits for senior high school students.

Sound research has demonstrated that spending more time on homework is associated with lower student achievement; this finding is complemented by research showing that in countries with high homework demands, student performance on international tests of achievement is poor.

Self-directed learning skills are associated with doing homework but the research indicates that the development of these skills occurs when parents are able to assist upper primary and junior secondary school students with their homework.

Parental involvement in their children's homework activities can be both beneficial and detrimental. It can be detrimental when parents are over-controlling or interfering, but can be beneficial to student



Homework image from www.shutterstock.com

motivation when parents provide autonomy and a supporting learning environments for their children.

An Australian ban?

In our book we have argued that rather than abolition, homework needs to be reformed. Generally speaking, homework needs to be better planned by teachers and needs to be of a higher quality.

But it won't be easy – homework needs to be challenging for students but not too challenging, it needs to be interesting and motivating, and students also need adequate feedback.

So the way forward is to start a conversation between teachers, parents and students about the sort of homework students need. The routine of completing homework (if done well) can help with self-management, planning and organising skills, but these skills take a long time to learn.

Homework setting and practice will have to change so that students are learning about self-management and self-regulation. The sort of homework tasks that promote learning these skills will not focus on drill and practice but require homework tasks where students make some decisions and choices and also exercise some autonomy.

At the same time, guidance for students who do not have family support will require planning (and provision) to complete these sorts of more complex homework tasks. The book explores the equity implications of homework and how providing guidance and support for students should be explicitly planned as part of a homework curriculum.

Less homework, better homework

Overall, there should be less homework, especially homework that emphasises drill and practice. Homework should also be there as a bridge between the community and the school. In particular, homework needs to be planned around the community's and family's fund of knowledge – which may be different from what the curriculum is based on.

In essence, homework *can* help children but perhaps not in the ways we think. And much of it depends on what you want homework to achieve and how parents and teachers see it.

One of the authors of this article has a six year-old daughter in her first year of school. When he asks his daughter to collect a reader from her school bag, bring it to the place she has chosen for the shared reading and decides who reads first and when, this may not seem like homework.

But in fact focusing on her choice and autonomy will help develop independent learning skills, skills that will hopefully last her lifetime. Understanding homework as a path to independent learning needs to be the first step.

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