

SHOULD WE PUT A STOP to homework?

It's a common complaint from parents and children alike: there's far too much homework. Does it still have a place? And if we ditched it, would our kids be adequately prepared for matric? We explore this contentious issue.

By **Marli Meyer**

THE SUN VALLEY STORY

In 2014, Gavin Keller – principal of Sun Valley Primary and CEO of The Sun Valley Group of Schools – and his team decided to rethink the way they were educating learners. With high drop-out rates, high anxiety levels and children getting too little sleep, change was necessary. So in 2015, the Sun Valley Group of Schools implemented a no-homework policy for their primary school and up to Grade 9 in their high school, assigning learners 20 minutes' reading time a day instead. They've since seen improved academic results, increased motivation and a significant increase in reading. 'It was more than just homework – that was just one part of the

restructuring,' Keller says. Was the school working towards a 21st century environment? The answer was a resounding "no". 'Twenty-first century children have been brought up in a digital, very dynamic world, but school wasn't tapping in to that. When we started assessing it, what became very clear was that school is a high-stress, anxiety-based environment and children have no time to be innovative and creative. They need nine hours of sleep and their school day is six-and-a-half hours long, so there's no time to play – and play drives creativity.'

Keller's team looked at countries where the school system was working well. 'Finland is tops academically, at the moment – and they have the least homework,' he says. 'Their school day is between three-and-a-half to five hours with no homework right up to matric. Research shows that if the brain is under stress, it shuts down. The brain can take only so much data and then it needs time – through play, rest and exercise – to process it. We redesigned our school to accommodate that. If you create an anxiety-ridden learning space, you reduce performance. We made the school hours as dynamic as possible for a 21st-century, digital brain that loves movement, dance, rhythm and rhyme. The school day ends at 14:15, we get the kids onto the sports fields, they go home and play with their friends,



When learners start their school career at Sun Valley, they're each given a red ball and asked to envision their 'dreams' in the tactile form of the ball. Here principal Keller shows them how to reach for the stars!

What it's like for a teacher...

DENVER SKIPPERS,
GRADE 7 TEACHER AT
SUN VALLEY PRIMARY

'The children are happier and seem to have better relationships with their families. Parents at the report interview evenings seem less stressed. It's very important that the entire staff buys into the no-homework policy. Various structures need to be in place – like ensuring that everyone in the grade is doing the same thing, that the parents are aware of the new structures and that we allow for constructive criticism.'

have family time around the supper table and read in bed. Once we got the classroom teaching right, we could do away with homework.'

The school trialled high-pressure teaching for six months. 'We implemented weekly testing and called it Wednesday Shine,' Keller says. Then we did six months with no testing, just an assessment week at year-end, and no homework. Results improved in the latter six months.'

But to completely overhaul the system meant teachers, parents and kids needed to be on board. 'When I sold it to the kids, I said I'd take homework away if they'd commit to 20 minutes of reading a day. There was 100 percent buy-in and there's been 100 percent more reading than 20 minutes. Our biggest concern was what the parents would say. From the school governors all the way down, our policy is that the parents aren't our clients – the children are our clients and the parents are their sponsors. At the end of last term, the kids presented their results to their parents, reflecting on their abilities and goals. Through this they learnt presentation skills, time management and accountability.'

WHAT ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL – AND MATRIC?

'At Sun Valley we don't give the children any homework up to Grade 9. From Grade 10 they have "study time" instead,' Keller explains. 'The school is open until 4pm so learners can get help. In Grade 9, the General Education Training System (GETC) ends. There's enough time within the school day to happily meet its requirements. Grade 10, 11 and 12 are about survival skills rather than life skills. The current curriculum for those grades is excessive and repetitive, and is about teaching learners how to write that matric paper so they can get into tertiary institutions.'

WHAT ABOUT COVERING THE SYLLABUS IN LESS TIME? IT'S ALREADY A CHALLENGE.

'The national syllabus, CAPS (Curriculum and Policy Statement), is a guide to what has to be taught. The argument for homework is that teachers can't get through the curriculum in school hours. But it's just a guideline, not a directive. We teach skills and concepts, not content – Google gives you all the answers anyway. I want children to learn where to find information, how to analyse critically, select, summarise, put it in their own words and form an opinion. Good curriculum management is about taking the national curriculum statement and asking: "How can I deliver it effectively?"'

WHAT ABOUT LESS PRIVILEGED SCHOOLS?

'All schools can ask: "Are we effective in a 21st-century environment? Are we producing children who will be effective at work? What is the workplace asking for?" The workplace wants people who can solve problems, make decisions, stay cool under pressure, collaborate and facilitate change. If you can do these five things, you can face the world. CAPS doesn't prepare you for that.'

WON'T KIDS GET UP TO NO GOOD IF THERE'S NO HOMEWORK?

'I don't think finding work to keep people busy is the answer. We need to create environments in our communities where children are excited to go home because there's a soccer game, basketball down the road, cricket against a cardboard box with neighbouring friends, netball, hockey, chess – we've got to get kids playing. "Schoolwork and homework don't fulfil that purpose. Families don't play any longer because the kids are always doing assignments at night. We wait until holiday time to spend quality family time together, but we should be doing that every day and the school should model that.'

'We've taken flack from parents who enjoy helping their children with homework, though – they feel they no longer have input in their child's performance. We've had to teach them that that doesn't develop a mindset of growth – one in which the child is capable of doing what needs to be done in a fixed period of time, with confidence.'

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WHAT THE REST OF THE WORLD IS DOING

▪ **In Finland**, children have shorter school hours than most schools in the world and the least homework of any industrialised nation. There are no gifted programmes,

What it's like for parents...

JACQUI CUNNINGHAM, whose son Ethan is in Grade 7 at Sun Valley Primary

'The change has been wonderful! It's relieved pressure at home; there's more time to connect as a family in the evening. With sport, the school day ends between 5 and 6pm these days – for an active, sporty family, this has been a huge blessing. My child loves school. He can't wait to get to school, as he knows that while the morning is hard work, the afternoon is free from homework worry. He's learnt to manage his time far better and has grown much more confident. Chatting around the dinner table is as much a part of your child's education as schoolwork is.'



almost no private schools and no high-stakes national standardised tests.

▪ **Hong Kong, Japan, Macao and Singapore** had the highest maths scores worldwide in 2012. Educators saw an increase of 17 points or more for every extra hour of homework given.

▪ **A typical 15-year-old in the United States** does six hours of homework a week. The National Education Association, the largest labour union in America, suggests an increase of 10 minutes of homework a night with each grade. So a Grade 1 learner will have 10 minutes of homework, while a Grade 3 learner will have 30 minutes. Homework should not exceed two hours a night for high school learners.

▪ **In South Korea**, it's estimated that 15-year-olds spend about three hours on homework a week, and an additional 1.4 hours with a personal tutor and 3.6 hours in after-school lessons.

▪ **Students in Shanghai** are said to receive the most amount of homework, with 14 hours a week on average.

▪ **Cheltenham Ladies' College, one of the United Kingdom's top schools**, is reviewing its homework policy over the next five years to address and prevent student depression.

What other high schools had to say

Dr Jorrie Jordaan – headmaster at Hoërskool Linden, JHB

'It would be a great if all the work could be done at school, but there's just not enough time to get through the syllabus. For some subjects, no homework could work, but for others it is beneficial. Some techniques in accounting, engineering and design can only be learnt through homework. These subjects require practice. In Grades 8 and 9 it would be great to get everything done at school – but in the higher grades they'll struggle to master these techniques because they're learnt by repetition. I'd accept children from a no-homework primary school, but we would train them to do homework.'

Rajen Pillay, head of academics at Parktown Boys' High School, JHB

'I'm not in favour of this policy. Subjects like maths and accounting require constant practice and application. I agree, though, that there needs to be a reduction in the volume and an increase in the relevance of work assigned.'

'I'd accept learners from no-homework schools, as I think the need for homework is greater at high school. Though I did notice the benefits of constant practice in number and letter formation as well as simple maths sums in my own son's development at primary school.'

Expert opinion

Nikki Bush, creative parenting expert and author of *Tech-Savvy Parenting*, weighs in.



Q: Is a no-homework policy the answer for stressed-out kids?

A: While it would be lovely to have less or no homework, there isn't time in a lesson for enough repetition. A seasoned teacher would tell you that the first five minutes of a lesson are spent getting out books and settling the children. Then they lose the last five minutes packing up. That leaves 20 minutes out of 30 to teach a concept and get the children to put it into practice. Children master concepts through repetition, so additional practice is vital. It's the same with learn-

ing for tests. Children need to revise. Having said that, they need to revise using study skills that suit their own learning profile. Much of the misery around studying is caused by children studying in ways that are difficult for them and that don't produce results. The day your child understands how their unique brain works best is the day you start seeing a confident learner who keeps improving. They experience more enjoyment and less stress when it comes to homework and learning.

Q: Do you think primary school children should be given homework?

A: I don't have a problem with homework per se, but with the volume. Teachers need to communicate with each another. When every teacher gives the class a project that's due for completion in the same week, parents and children are put under undue stress and pressure. The upside of projects is that children learn how to research on their own, and how to plan and complete a task within an allotted time frame. In primary school, formal reading homework is stopped way to soon – some time around Grade 4. Children who aren't natural readers haven't yet created enough of a reading habit. In an era of information overload, reading and comprehension skills are essential for children to be able to cope with any subject. Even if there were a no-homework policy, the formal reading component should be kept up.

Q: What about high school?

A: With the introduction of technology, blended learning and flipped classroom initiatives provide alternative, more creative ways of tackling homework in high school – which I love. The flipped classroom means lesson preparation is done at home by watching an online video that introduces a concept. Then the practice and repetition is done in the classroom where learners are able to ask questions. The nature of homework is changing and it suits this generation – providing they have internet access. The upside is that 'homework' takes less time, is more media-based and if a child doesn't understand the concept, they can watch again until they 'get it' – in their own time. So slower learners and quick learners benefit without feeling embarrassed in front of the class.

Q: How can the amount of homework be better managed?

A: Parents need to help their children to manage their time. Create study breaks so children can have some fun – a quick card game with you or a swim. Have dinner together. At 17, my son told us the one thing that got him through matric was knowing we would spend time together each night. Online learning resources are great for practising subjects like maths and science. ♣

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: KRISTEN BIRCH; PHOTOGRAPHS: LIZA VAN DEVENTER, GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES, JACQUI WHYTE