Introduction

Homework as an Issue in American Politics

When Piscataway, New Jersey, introduced a policy limiting the amount of homework in its public schools, the *New York Times* treated the event as a major news story.[1] A front-page article detailed the school's policy, the rationale for that policy, and the reactions of parents and children. Other major media quickly followed the *Times*'s lead. For the first time in a generation, homework–both its amount and type–had become a subject of national debate. I was fortunate enough to be part of the debate. A colleague and I had recently published a book advocating limitations on and alternatives to homework.[2] We were pleasantly surprised at the amount of attention our book received, but the opportunity to participate in this debate did more than flatter my ego. It gave me new insights into why homework reform is vital both for its own sake and for its connections to other related family and workplace issues. These insights have suggested some means and strategies for achieving homework and

school reform in ways that build on and assist related struggles to enhance the quality of family life.

Our first book on homework grew out of research we had undertaken in rural Maine. In a study of high-school dropouts, we learned, much to our surprise, that homework had played a major role in their decisions to leave school. Their stories prompted us not only to begin wider conversations with middle-class families about homework but also to explore both the history of and scholarly rationales for homework. In the course of our study, we learned that homework has not always played so prominent a role even in very successful public schools, that struggles over homework have been part of larger battles over how modern societies conceptualize and control time, and that there are constructive school reforms that might reduce the need for and burden of homework.

We suspected that our book would be controversial, but we were unprepared for the depth of the media reaction. For many in the media our whole message was translated into a campaign to ban homework. CNN invited us to appear in a debate, and prefaced the debate with an instant on-air poll: Should homework be banned? "Our" side received 38 percent of the viewer vote, but we were a bit taken aback that the whole message had been reduced to a campaign to ban homework without any discussion of the various alternatives our book had suggested. It became clear to us that there was a need for further work on this topic, work that would not only explore more fully the evidence against homework but also look at the reasons that homework had become such an emotionally intense political issue. Building on such a foundation, school reformers might address homework more effectively and build alliances around other reforms that are

so necessary if schools and the broader quality of life are to be improved.

Our experience convinces us that the debate over homework is instructive for several reasons. Questioning the amount of homework currently assigned brings out strong reactions in many citizens, reactions more intense than debates about many pedagogical techniques. Disputes over how to teach math or reading have filtered down to the general public in recent years, but, aside from occasional grumbling about the new math or "whole language" approaches to reading, few parents seem prepared to mount the barricades over these. Homework, however, stirs juices. Virtually everyone in this society has a homework story. Parents have done homework and moaned over or gloried in it as children themselves. Most compare the amount and kind of homework their children are assigned with their own. Some parents react in shock and disgust at the thought of limiting the hours of homework their children currently do; for others, discussion about limiting homework or even eliminating it are long overdue.

Second, debates about homework seldom stop simply at the school door or the kitchen table. Many defenders of homework see the practice as intimately linked to key values of the society and argue at least implicitly that how we treat homework signals how seriously we take central moral values. Homework, after all, is work that a student does at home. Both work and the young have central places in our culture. Hard work was once seen as proof that one benefited from God's grace. Later it came to be seen as a way to that grace–or, at least, to worldly rewards. The young are seen as future bearers of our culture. Homework brings together central moral concerns about both work and the

young. It is thus not surprising that homework has become a metaphor that extends well beyond schools. Preparation of any sort for an athletic event, a public meeting, even a party at one's home is often referred to as "doing my homework."

Even for homework's opponents, the topic goes far beyond schooling. The language employed is that of the sanctity and importance of personal freedom, family, religion, and leisure, the very goals some see as sustained primarily by work itself. Homework as an issue thus becomes a proxy for large debates about the future of our society.

Third, although homework in my estimation is hardly a class-neutral tool, debate about the topic, as with many other social issues, does not break down along neat class lines. As I was reminded often, some poor minority communities in inner cities beg teachers and school boards to assign more homework. Their view is that homework is their children's ticket out of the ghetto. Yet I have also interviewed and spoken with many other families in poor communities for whom homework was the single largest factor driving them from the public schools.

Middle-class professional families are similarly divided. Some worry that homework detracts from the already limited time their children and they have to engage one another, and they insist that it must be curbed. Others view homework as both necessary and salutary. Many of homework's defenders like to point out that, while the time elementary-school children spend on homework has increased, the time those same children spend watching television has increased even more. They go on to imply that homework is not only the best antidote to television but also the key to our children's success in the global economy.

For others, homework almost becomes what one critic has called the pedagogical equivalent of the Lexus. Schools where homework assignments are rigorous and long are not merely a tool to master the global economy but a badge of educational and social excellence.

Nor were children a monolith on the subject of homework. I have had many adults, especially those hostile to homework reform, chortle and remark, "Boy, children must sure love your message." Such a rejoinder itself reflects a subtle cynicism about the goals and motivations of our children. Some children have ardently defended homework. One fifth-grader wrote to the *New York Times* in opposition to Piscataway's homework policy:

> I am a fifth grade student in Dutchess County, New York. Regarding your October 10 front-page article about the school board that limited homework. . . . I think that having regular homework until 10:45 p.m. and then having to practice an instrument is terrible. But I also think the school went a little too far when it prohibited teachers from grading homework. What is the point of homework if it isn't corrected? At my public school in Red Hook, the Homework policy is: third grade, 30 minutes, fourth grade, 40 minutes, fifth grade, 50 minutes; and so on. That is a better policy because it is just enough to reinforce the concepts learned in school, but not so much that it makes us have to choose between getting a good night's sleep and practicing our instruments, in my case the trumpet.[3]

But a Canadian youngster, writing to CBC radio about homework, commented:

> Homework is one thing the average student dislikes a lot. The average student spends about eighteen and a half days a year

> doing homework. Instead of doing homework you could be doing other things that are just as educational but much more interesting. Building models helps you learn to use your hands and mind together. . . . Building toys such as Legos and K'nex helps you learn how to design and make your own creation. Drawing will help you when you have to make a sketch. . . . Tobogganing teaches you . . . about friction. . . .[4]

One network-news producer nicely captured many of the conflicts implicit in this middle-class dialogue in a conversation with me: "Why should I worry if high school children are doing sixty hours of academic work a week? I hardly know anyone in my business doing fewer than that. But perhaps if there is something wrong with what we are doing to ourselves, there's a problem with the demands we force upon our children."

I remain convinced that homework as currently constituted is a largely ineffective and overly burdensome practice. It not only creates especially serious barriers for poor families but also unnecessarily limits other forms of personal development and leisure time that are essential even to education and working life themselves. Homework is also a pivotal issue in the United States today because the families asked to monitor and assist in homework are increasingly burdened by the demands of their own jobs. Homework is closely connected to and rationalized by all the demands on family time, and the time has come to examine those demands.

Thus, building an effective case against homework involves more than posing dueling academic studies. Though these studies, many even by professed proponents of homework, have yielded confused and conflicting findings, homework cannot be refuted with some statistical smoking gun. Once we move beyond the controlled trials and the statisti-

cal evidence, developments in current learning theory and classroom practice can tell us about how children learn. On that basis we can explore just why homework is unlikely to work as advertised. But just as importantly, we can then build constructive alternatives to homework on this foundation. Chapter 1, "Revisiting the Evidence," strives to broaden the academic debate about the efficacy of homework by examining not only the many trials regarding homework's efficacy but also related work in learning theory and neurophysiology.

These first skirmishes in the homework wars also teach another lesson. Homework cannot be dissociated from our larger cultural dreams and anxieties about work itself. An exploration of the history of homework must place that history in the large context of the history of work itself. As Chapter 2 suggests, homework is part of a larger story about the cultural and political battles over the control of time itself.

That history clearly shows the connections of homework to the emergence of our modern global capitalism. Today's debates are framed by constant rhetoric about success in the global economy. Whatever homework's history or its failings and costs, it is likely to be retained as a practice as long as most of us are convinced that it is the only way to convey life long skills or character lessons essential to our survival. But if homework hardly assures success in the global economy, and if work without end is not the only way to live a constructive, civilized life, then homework reform should hardly be anathema. Indeed, educational reforms that both free family time and foster more adequate and equal education would not only improve our quality of life. They could also facilitate needed inquiry into the reasons for the loss of free time in many areas of American life. Chapter 3 places homework reform in the context of emerging debates about global

capitalism, working hours, and the quality of family life. In the process, it helps shed new light on debates in each area.

Homework reform poses challenges both to current educational practice and to prevalent notions of personal development. Homework reform is unlikely to take root until educators can not only understand its limits but also have clearer notions of how schools and classrooms can be organized without extensive reliance on homework as we know it. As I suggest in Chapter 4, U.S. public schools are not the disaster they are often portrayed as. Nor can the problems from which they do suffer be alleviated by adding more homework.

Finally, no assessment of this issue is complete without assessing the issue of character. Schools that foster student development by means other than homework do not undermine the kind of character development necessary to sustain a functioning democracy. The debate on homework can be more fruitful for all partisans if all can stake out more fully the political, educational, and moral ideals implicated in the debate.

I take a position on this pivotal issue in the concluding chapter.

1

Revisiting the Evidence

FOR A PRACTICE as solidly entrenched as homework, the scholarly case on its behalf is surprisingly weak and even contradictory. Much of the popular media's support for homework is based on the assumption that the practice has been tested and found essential to academic success. Yet scholarly studies of homework's ability to deliver in even such short-term and narrow areas as test scores and grades yield at best uneven results. In addition, homework's advocates often fail to assess not only the long-term effects of the practice but also the implications modern learning theory has in the debate.

The controversy over homework starts with a large number of academic studies that have sought to establish or refute the notion that homework improves academic performance. My colleague and I pointed out in previous work on this topic that many studies purporting to establish the efficacy of homework demonstrate at best a correlation between hours of homework and academic performance. That is, they show that those students who do homework receive better grades or higher test scores, but they do not establish that homework causes improved performance.

Some defenders of homework have acknowledged this limitation to many earlier studies but have then gone on to suggest that we are "desperate" to find alternative explanations for why students in the studies who did more homework also received better grades. They argue that common sense tells us that homework is a major cause of academic success.

Yet the case against homework hardly stops with the problem of assuming that, merely because student A does more homework than student B and receives a better grade, homework was the cause. Homework defenders fail to acknowledge that many other studies of homework show no correlation–or even indicate an inverse relationship–between homework and students' performance.

Over the years, homework has been subjected to a series of controlled trials. These trials vary considerably in their attempts to control for such confounding variables as the education and wealth of the parents. Bringing together all such trials into the kind of meta-analysis often attempted with respect to drugs is a difficult task, but one respected investigator has done it. Harris Cooper reports: "The conclusions of past reviewers of homework research show extraordinary variability. . . . Even in regard to specific areas of application such as within different subject areas, grades or student ability levels, the reviews often directly contradict one another." Cooper, who is a strong advocate of homework, also points out that "increasing the amount of homework for middle school students may be efficacious up to a certain point, but after that point more time spent on assignments is of no value. There is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary school students."[1]

Even more telling, homework advocates now also concede that their research is culturally relative. Thus, Cooper's

own meta-analysis of homework studies leaves out all studies conducted before 1962. He makes the point that "educational, familial, and social patterns of behavior have changed enough in the past quarter century that data from earlier studies is likely to have questionable relevance to decisions made about homework today."[2]

Here Cooper is acknowledging a fundamental dilemma of the social sciences. The research is conducted on subjects who are not uniform across time and space. They develop ideas and expectations of their own and can be influenced in a variety of ways even by research agendas themselves. Homework may indeed "work" on one set of students but fail to work on another because of the varying sets of expectations and experiences brought to that homework.

This comment is not meant to suggest that "wishing makes it so," but it does imply that all research about homework needs to be set in terms of the assumptions and ideals all actors bring to it. Thus, any politics of homework needs to consider the place of homework in the larger culture.

In this context, Cooper correctly assumes major cultural differences between 1962 and his 1989 study. Nevertheless, his point needs to be pushed further. Should one assume that in 2001 we can speak of a uniform U.S. culture? Perhaps one difference between today and 1962 is that our culture is both more diverse and subject to more rapid change. Perhaps the very idea of the need for one mandated statewide, or even district-wide, homework policy needs to be questioned, especially if some parents and children are both skeptical of its positive effects and bitter about the demands it places on limited family time while others regard homework as the anchor and symbol of morality itself.

It is also interesting that almost all of the tests of homework measure its success in terms of its ability either to

improve grades in the current course or to increase scores on standardized tests taken shortly after a homework regime has been instituted. Such procedures simply assume that better grades or test scores are a good predictor of a student's ability to retain and use bodies of knowledge at later points in his or her life. Yet grades are at best one of many indicators of a student's ability to use and retain knowledge. In addition, for some of the homework studies, the researcher was also the teacher in the course under study. That the researcher's biases may have entered into how experimental and research groups were taught is a possibility that is inadequately considered in many of these studies. As for the use of standardized tests as a measure of success, even for such staples of standardized testing as the SATs, long-term predictability has not been achieved. Scores on these tests serve only as a marker for grades in the first year of college.[3]

Although I have qualms about using one standardized test as a measure of academic excellence, even if one accepts that gauge, one cannot conclude that homework is the primary agent producing educational excellence. In the broadest measure, the *Third International Math and Science Study* in 1995, there was no demonstrable link between homework and achievement. In fact, Japanese eighth-graders received less homework and outperformed their U.S. counterparts.[4]

Homework defenders' use of the common-sense argument itself merits closer attention. Does "time on task" always improve performance? I find it interesting that, just as the debate about homework has been heating up, the popular press has also run stories about increasing public and government interest in the phenomenon of medical errors. Careful studies of hospital records now indicate that the

number of accidental and preventable deaths in hospitals is far greater than once imagined. Research on the causes of these deaths is at an early stage, but the "common sense" of many scholars is that fatigue on the part of medical personnel is a major cause of the problem. Important information from patients is not absorbed or is imperfectly understood by tired physicians, and nurses charged with the task of overseeing patient care are often at the end of very long working days. A study conducted by the *American Journal of Public Health* in 1992 found that nurses in Massachusetts who work variable schedules (including mandated overtime shifts) were twice as likely to report an accident or error and two-and-one-half times as likely to report near-miss accidents. It concluded that these conditions were associated with "frequent lapses of attention and increased reaction time, leading to increased error rates on performance of tasks."[5]

Some, of course, will argue that this example is irrelevant. Nurses are asked to work fifteen-hour shifts,and emergency-room residents notoriously work shifts as long as eighty hours per week. A third-grader may work thirty-one or thirty-two hours in school and then be asked, under current National Education Association guidelines, to do another two and a half hours of homework per week. What's the big deal?

Modern physicians are trained from medical school for the rigors of long hours, but many clearly reach a saturation point beyond which absorbing new information becomes virtually impossible. Young children reach a saturation point far more quickly than adults. Beyond the hours spent in school itself, the young child faces an average commuting time of about three hours a week, time spent in getting ready

for school, and meal times. In today's households, even most young children have some household chores, as well. With these demands on young children, fatigue and an inability to sustain concentration is likely to be a substantial factor in learning. Such fatigue may well mean not merely that a law of diminishing returns is soon encountered. Misinformation may be absorbed, and confusion and frustration can affect long-term interest in the subject matter.

Systematic studies of homework's long-term effects are especially inadequate. Even Cooper points out that "only a few studies looked at homework's effect on attitudes toward school (with generally negligible results). No studies looked at non-academic outcomes like study habits, cheating, or participation in community activities."[6]

Direct evidence for these scores may be lacking. The long-standing discussion of the predictive role of another staple of U.S. education, the SAT, however, has yielded other questions. Anecdotally, many school administrators note that some of their greatest success stories come not from those who spent the many hours studying to get high SAT scores but from those who have enjoyed a wealth of life experience, including participation in community-service activities. The very absence of studies assessing homework's impact on love of life-long learning or on community involvement says something about how a prevailing cultural mindset has guided research and discussions of this topic.

Current discussions of homework also raise the issue of its class biases. Defenders of homework argue that parents in many poor communities want their children to be assigned substantial homework so they can develop self-esteem and the skills needed to escape their economic plight. I will assess the historical reasons for these requests and my concerns

about them more fully in subsequent chapters, but once again all claims that homework critiques involve a war against the poor systematically disregard important evidence.

Our own work began with an ethnographic study of high-school dropouts in rural Maine. In the course of our work we asked each of the students whether they could identify a point in their educational careers at which they knew they were not going to make it through school. To our surprise, every student included as one primary reason for dropping out the inability to complete homework assignments. Nor were their stories of the dog-ate-my-homework sort. Students identified a range of factors, including absence of secure and quiet spaces in which to do the work, economic responsibilities for other siblings, lack of parental help, and lack of academic resources. In many instances, the adults who worked with these teenagers on a regular basis confirmed the reports that they provided.

That homework may be something less than a panacea for the poor is suggested in other ways, as well. One of the most startling features of the current scene is the suggestion by some urban school principals that teachers assign "parent-neutral" homework. Parent-neutral homework is the kind of work that teachers can assign with assurance that any child can do equally well, regardless of the formal knowledge or involvement of the parent.

At this point I am not aware of a literature delineating parent-neutral homework and showing its clear efficacy. One would wonder, for instance, whether diluting homework so much that any child can do it without assistance from an adult results in exercises that really benefit the child.Articulated concerns about parent-neutral homework, along with the proliferation of after-school programs aimed at helping

children with homework, do suggest that current homework practices are failing to achieve their stated ends.

Recognizing gaps in the homework research, the more thoughtful homework advocates have two fall-back positions. They simply assert its positive effects on character or they redefine homework. Thus, Cooper fully concedes that "teachers should not assign homework to young children with the expectation that it will noticeably enhance achievement. Instead, teachers might assign short and simple homework to younger students, *hoping* it will foster positive, long term educational behaviors and attitudes."[7] Yet as we have noticed, Cooper himself concedes that the research on homework's effects on long-term attitudes is not there. He is expressing a hope without even asking whether means other than homework might better instill time-management and character skills than giving students assignments that admittedly do not improve their performance.

Homework advocates such as Cooper also argue that research demonstrates that homework's positive effects are enhanced when parents are at least available to encourage or monitor its completion. They also argue that, for older children, homework may appropriately involve more complex assignments. Yet many homework advocates also now acknowledge that for some parents, even those with the best intentions, it is hard to be available to monitor homework and even more difficult to provide assistance on complex tasks. They then fall back on a major reconceptualization of homework. Yes, some say, current homework creates problems for some children, but the best approach is to individualize homework. Thus, Cooper now suggests that teachers consider each child's personal and family situation and calibrate the kinds and amount of homework accordingly.[8] Even

if teachers in most large classrooms were in a position to pursue this strategy, it raises important concerns about the further class stratification of American education. What if those children who already benefit from formally educated parents and ample facilities are then given the complex assignments while others are given only very simple ones? What does this practice do to the educational development and self-esteem of those assigned simple rote work? If independent and self-directed work is best calibrated to the individual student, why does it not make more sense to have teachers or other well-trained adults more actively involved with all individual students?

Even in pedagogical terms, the debate over homework has been cast in too narrow terms. Beyond dueling trials on the efficacy of homework, learning theory now has implications for this debate. Let me start with a homely example of very basic learning theory recently cited by a leading educator, Susan Ohanian.

For most of the past generation, pediatricians and other child-care "experts" have suggested that most infants have an appropriate age for weaning and another appropriate age for toilet training. Ohanian points to work in current pediatric literature, and to that of the child-care expert T. Berry Brazelton, rejecting such invariant notions of learning development. "Brazelton observes that some children are ready to use the potty at age two; others are ready at age four," Ohanian says. "And guess what? Those who wait until four soon become just as adept in the bathroom as those precocious early pottyers. Brazelton says that children who are allowed to learn potty use at their own pace gain a sense of accomplishment that's lost when pushy parents resort to threats and bribes."[9]

This insight about early-childhood development has important analogues for learning theory in the later years. Building on the foundation laid by Jean Piaget, educators now recognize that cognitive structures develop and change over the course of an individual child's maturation. The level of this development determines the child's problem-solving abilities. Thus, in the name of learning new things, educators must scaffold new learning onto existing mental frameworks.

Piaget suggests that requiring every child in a given grade to perform uniform tasks–demanded by many homework assignments–before some are developmentally ready is counterproductive. For a teacher, understanding a student's level of development is crucial, as is spotting where, when, and why mistakes are made in learning something new. This opportunity can be lost if a teacher cannot give the individual attention a student may need–or seek. Homework, which diminishes the interaction between teachers and students, goes home with the child, who may struggle with an assignment he or she never quite grasped in the classroom, compounding frustration and often dragging a parent into the quagmire.

Piaget recognized, of course, that not only cognitive development goes through stages. Moral development does so, as well. Though the work of Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan differs in important ways, all share a sense that one cannot simply attribute to children the capacity for the kinds of moral reasoning one finds in adults. This recognition that moral reasoning goes through stages has implications for the homework debate.

Criminologists have recently become interested in a phenomenon practiced increasingly widely in our criminal-justice system: trying juvenile offenders in adult courts and

subjecting them to the norms and expectations of adult jurisprudence. Defenders of this "tough on youth crime" stance have argued that the young, just like the rest of us, can and must learn to calculate future consequences and delay gratification.

Yet a range of neuropsychological and psychological studies now indicate that in children and young teenagers the messages that are part of such consequentialist reasoning are processed through the amygdala, the prefrontal source of "gut level" pain that provides a context for the more "cerebral" core of the brain. This research has helped explain a phenomenon parents and educators have long noticed in most youngsters and early teenagers–a sense of immortality and an inability to acknowledge distant risks.[10] Such psychological and neurological work would lead one to question the ability of stiff homework assignments for the young to convey the kinds of moral discipline and time-management skills they are supposed to enhance, especially as the rewards connected with homework will be experienced, if at all, only far down the road.

Even Piaget's conception of individualized learning is inadequate in some eyes today. Not only do students progress at different ages, they do not all go through one invariant set of stages. Just as we now recognize that not all students are naturally and appropriately right-handed and should not be made to write in this fashion, we know that distinctive learning styles are developed and may well persist over a whole lifetime. In such a context, the imperative to gear independent projects to the particular limits of the individual child becomes even stronger. Let us consider some scenarios, all drawn from "real-life" teaching situations, that illustrate the limits of homework as a central educational strategy.

Consider a third-grade child having difficulty learning to read. In many schools today, the assumption is that the child needs both to be read to by a parent and to practice reading drills at home to supplement what is happening in the classroom. Unfortunately, under such a scenario the child may often go home to a family in which parents themselves have trouble reading. Or the parent may read but fail to understand the drills or be unable to assist the child in a way he or she can understand. Often exhausted by a school day in which failure has already been frequent, the child now engages in difficult and complicated drills that frustrate both parent and child.

A teenager goes home with the assignment to complete twenty long-division problems. She struggles with the subtraction and multiplication skills necessary to the process and turns in a paper with many wrong answers.

Another teenager is asked to write an essay on the origins and significance of the Electoral College. The essay defines the Electoral College, then meanders into a discussion of the difference between an electoral majority and a popular majority.

In all of these cases, unsatisfactory work is presented in class to the teacher on the following day. But what does the teacher learn from this? In the case of the third-grader, should she or he infer that the child is lazy or that the parent does not care or is illiterate? What we are increasingly learning is that reading recovery with children who, for whatever reason, have experienced difficulty in the early stages of reading is a specialty, and one that requires attentiveness to the individual needs and motivations of the child.

Many children in underfunded schools have difficulty not primarily because of parental motivation or background but because classes are large, children's difficulties not identi-