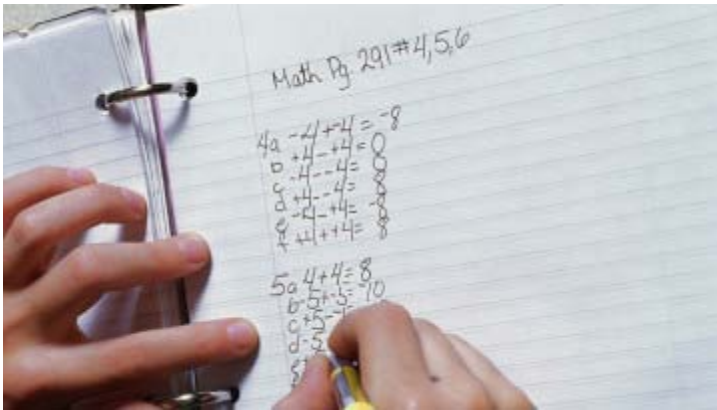


How one family won the battle to ban homework



File photo of child doing math homework. ©PHOTODISC

Faced with frenzied nights and kids overloaded with work, the Milleys decided to take matters into their own hands

Erin Anderssen

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Shelli and Tom Milley were exhausted by the weepy weeknight struggles over math problems and writing assignments with their three school-aged children. They were fed up with rushing home from soccer practice or speed skating only to stand over their kids tossing out answers so they could finish and get to bed.

And don't even get them started on the playground that their daughter, Brittany, had to build in Grade 3 from recycled materials, complete with moving parts. Or the time their eldest son, Jay, was told to cut pictures of \$1-million worth of consumer goods from a catalogue.

So last week, after two years of trying to change the homework policy at the children's school, the two Calgary lawyers finally negotiated a unique legal contract: their kids will never have to do homework again.

"We have struggled constantly as a family with excessive amounts of homework," said Ms. Milley, who left her practice to stay home with her children. "We just blindly accepted the way it was."

But after many long stressful nights of getting 18-year-old Jay through his high school homework, they weren't prepared to repeat history with Spencer, 11, and Brittany, 10. Being lawyers, she and her husband decided to make it official.

The "differentiated homework plan" spells out the responsibilities of the students: to get their work done in class, to come to school prepared, and prep for quizzes. But their teachers will have to mark them based on what they do in class, and cannot send work home that factors into their grades.

Milleys' Differentiated Homework Plan

For the Milleys, this means a school year that would make many homework-stricken parents envious: they are free to hang out as family without long division and English comprehension questions hanging over their heads.

"It was a constant homework battle every night," Ms. Milley recalled. "It's hard to get a weeping child to take in math problems. They are tired. They shouldn't be working a second shift."

It's not as if, the couple pointed out, they don't value education. They know firsthand the work involved in earning university degrees. But they wanted the academic work done at home to be on their terms, based on where they knew their children needed help. Brittany, for instance, was struggling with spelling, but "we never had any time to focus on that because she had so much homework," Ms. Milley said.

And there were plenty of frustrating nights, she said, when her kids were so tired, "we'd stand over them, saying, 'write this, write that.'" If that's what families are doing, she asked, "how do the teachers even know whose work they are marking?"

Two years ago, Ms. Milley began collecting studies on homework, most of which suggest that, particularly for younger grades, there is no clear link between work at home and school performance. Working with the staff at St. Brigid Elementary Junior High School, she formed a homework committee, although no firm changes resulted. This fall, the couple began negotiating the legal document that decided the matter.

"We think it's a parent's right to choose what's in our children's best interests," said Ms. Milley. "But we're thankful the school did the right thing."

Prompted by issues raised by parents, the Calgary Catholic School District is officially reviewing its homework policy to create more concrete guidelines for schools. Other parents and teachers have worked out homework deals, although more informally. "We know it's not one size fits all," said Tania Younker, a district spokesperson.

The contract the Milleys and their children signed doesn't go just one way. While preventing teachers from giving penalties when homework isn't done, it also puts clear expectations on the students and their parents – to practice a musical instrument, for instance, and read daily, two activities more clearly linked to academic success, Ms. Milley suggested, than racing through leftover schoolwork. And the parents agreed to make sure their children have "opportunities" to review class work and study for tests. (Although that may as well be homework, Ms. Milley observed wryly, noting that, by her count, Spencer, has had roughly 28 quizzes and tests in about 38 class days of Grade 7.) The bottom line: the Milley kids won't be doing any school-assigned work at home any time soon, although Jay, now in first year university, must resign himself to being a trailblazer for his younger siblings.

"Why were we putting our family through that stress," wondered Ms. Milley. "If we don't want it all, we shouldn't have to have it."

Parenting

More homework rebels speak out

A Calgary couple who fought their children's school to stop homework is just the tip of the iceberg. Parents across the country are weighing growing evidence that homework may hinder more than help

Erin Anderssen

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Pile it on at university, she says. Assign a chunk of it each night to high-school students. But when Amanda Cockshutt's middle child, Malcolm, was asked by his Grade 7 English teacher to write five pages a week on his feelings about a book, the biochemistry professor told the school bluntly: "He is not doing that."

After raising three children through mounds of homework, and working to change the homework policy at their school, Dr. Cockshutt, who teaches at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., and runs her own biotech company, isn't shy about saying no to it.

She has refused to help her children log the books they read, saying the practice "just drives me bananas. We can fudge the log as easily as we can read or not read the book." When she was told she would have to teach her son cursive writing because there was no time at school, she never opened the book. And for one full year, while she continued to help her children when they needed it, she stopped signing their agendas – which, in some classes, earned them a "pin of shame" on the blackboard.

"I was doing 10 and 11 signatures a night to get my kids through homework," she says. "I used to joke that I could get a divorce with fewer signatures than I could get the kids homework done."

But after watching Malcolm in tears over his English homework, his parents took a stand: "We just went in and said, 'No, we're not doing it.' It was just too much work." The teacher tried to justify the assignment, but the clincher for her, she says, was that other than a cheering word of praise, the teacher wasn't even correcting the mistakes.

Weary of the nightly homework battle, Dr. Cockshutt falls among a group of parents refusing to push the work on their children, picking the subjects that earn their weeknight attentions or, in some cases, passing on homework entirely.

This month, a Calgary couple took the controversial step of negotiating a legal contract with their children's school that prevents teachers from giving them homework – adding fuel to the homework debate constantly playing out in schools and families across the country.

There's growing evidence that homework may hinder rather than help academic performance especially in early grades, and school boards have been revisiting their approach to it. But parents remain conflicted about how much their kids should do and how hard to push them – trying to balance a desire to see their child succeed against homework hostilities at the kitchen table.

While a survey by the Canadian Council on Learning found that the majority of parents felt that homework enhanced learning, more than 60 per cent said it was a source of stress in their homes. Many parents also quietly admit to offering more than just moral support – in a U.S. survey released last year, 43 per cent of parents (dads more often than moms) admitted that they had done their children's homework.

It never even gets that far for Shirley Munk. “I refuse to monitor, remind about, and schedule time for any homework for my elementary school child,” the Halifax health care worker says. Her daughter, who attends Grade 3 at a private school, makes good grades and talks about what she learns in school. Ms. Munk meets regularly with her teachers. But homework, spelling words included, “is not a part of our family life,” she says. “I don't see why 6 1/2 hours of formal schooling isn't enough for an eight-year-old.”

It's same view that led Tom and Shelli Milley to formalize a contract with the Calgary Catholic school that their 11-year-old son Spencer and 10-year-old daughter Brittany attend. Mr. Milley, a corporate lawyer, says he certainly expects their three kids (18-year-old Jay is in first-year university) to take school seriously – the younger kids have been told that fooling around in class would be a breach of the contract and result in homework. But the Milleys would rather see their children reading books for pleasure than skimming texts to cover answers in yet another reading comprehension assignment. “We're not slaves to a system that sends home five sheets of spelling and says it has to be done for tomorrow,” Mr. Milley says. “It's a hideously pathetic way to learn.”

There were several times during his son's early years when Frank Bruni, an executive recruiter in Toronto, simply closed the books and declared homework over. “I always sent a note so the teacher's argument was with me and not my son. And it always went unanswered.” Mr. Bruni was one of the leaders behind the Toronto District School Board's homework policy change, which came into effect in fall, 2008. It includes a holiday ban on homework, restricting the kind of homework assigned in early grades and the hours spent on it for older students.

A school-wide solution – or a compromise with teachers – is the better option for all parties, students included, says Lee Bartel, a researcher at the University of Toronto who recently completed a major study on homework. But he also says parents need to take a hard stand once problems arise. “They really need to be more vocal.”

More teachers flexing around homework



Cinders McLeod/The Globe and Mail

As parents become more vocal about homework, educators say a new approach is emerging. Say hello to longer deadlines and assignments tailored to each student

Erin Anderssen

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For elementary-school teacher Sally Frazer, this is the perfect homework assignment: sending her science pupils outside with their parents to watch the lunar eclipse.

"It's the teachable moments that count," says the Grade 4 teacher at Fairview Elementary School in Red Deer, Alta., "[and] the time when you can engage the parents."

For teachers like Ms. Frazer, homemade castles and sheets of math questions are old school. Too many parents had a hand in the projects. And too many kids were left stewing over a blur of numbers.

As busy parents have become more vocal about homework, educators say that a new approach is taking over in schools – one that allows for longer deadlines and assignments tailored to needs of the students. A school in High Prairie, for instance, permits families to "limit or eliminate" homework – and students "are not to be penalized in any fashion for this parental choice."

And, while some parents simply refuse to make their child finish that "famous Canadian" biography at home, teachers say they also get their fair share of moms and dads grumbling because there's not enough homework.

"I tell them that they are free to give them more," says Cathy Reimer, an award-winning Grade 3 teacher at Aldershot Elementary School in Kentville, N.S., when she hears this complaint. "But I am not going to give them more."

In her class, homework is always based on what her students learned in class, and designed for each student. For English homework, for instance, Ms. Reimer, goes through each child's writing, finds the words they are consistently spelling wrong and uses that list to design a unique assignment, such as using the words in a story. Her students' parents have her home number so they can call if a problem arises at the kitchen table.

"Nobody gets the same homework," says Ms. Reimer, who has a class of 23 students, and recalls her own school struggles with her two now-adult children. (The most memorable: In Grade 8, her son was asked to write a paper comparing cats to dogs for March Break. Furious because it had nothing to do with what he was learning in class, she wrote it for him – that one time, she adds.)

“When I had children, it certainly taught me about homework, because I understand what it means to have unrealistic expectations. And that there's a lot more going on in a children's life than homework.”

In fact, the research suggests that teachers with children are more flexible about homework. After all, they are facing it themselves each night. And educators agree with parents that one of the homework issues is that even within schools, teachers may have widely varied views on how much work is going home – which is why many schools and boards have developed homework guidelines. But they also say parents need to understand that the curriculum is jammed with subjects that must be covered, and, sometimes, students don't use their time as wisely in school as they could.

Sheri Birch, a Grade 7 teacher at Steele Street Public School in Barrie, Ont., says the homework she sends home is limited to work that didn't get finished in class. “They've made the choice to take the work home with them,” she says. In that case, she expects it back the next day. But she never gives homework on Fridays and tells parents to close the books if the work is taking longer than 45 minutes.

“Homework has its place,” she says, pointing out that even Grade 1 students bringing a short book home to read and discuss with their parents are learning responsibility. “But I don't think it should be assigned on a daily basis.” And not, she says, pages and pages.

Educators understand more today about the different ways students learn, points out Don Lauzon, the principal at Calgary's Good Shepherd School, and that has slowly extended into homework. He applauds the recent decision by a local school to sign a contract with a family restricting homework to what the parents deemed necessary as evidence of this new approach. “For some families there may not be a need for that kind of [traditional] homework,” he says, suggesting that reading books and talking about school on the car ride to hockey or ballet also counts as learning.

The way Robyn Ladner sees it, she'd rather her students read a good book, hang out with their families and get to bed at a decent hour than plod through homework each night. The students in her Grade 6 class at Silver Star Elementary School in Vernon, B.C., rarely get homework, unless it's something they didn't finish in class.

“I believe families are busy, most of my students are involved in extracurricular activities and I value that as much as their time in school.”

What's more, she points out, the students who actually do the homework are often the ones who need it the least. “I need to know what my kids are doing right in front of me.”

Bottom line, says Susan Roy, a veteran teacher at Nelson Mandela Public School in Toronto, parents need to speak openly with teachers about what is happening in the classroom and what they can do at home to support it.

“My jury is still out on homework,” she says, and over two decades of teaching she has come to give less and less of it. But at the mention of those cardboard castles that so many parents end up cursing over late into the night before they are due, she literally groans. “I quit giving projects early on in my career,” she says.

But she's no pushover: Her students still go home, once in a while, with a few worksheets of old-fashioned English grammar.
