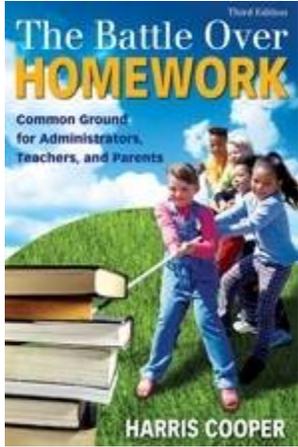


**December, 2006 interview with Dr. Harris Cooper,
author of The Battle over Homework**



Nancy: Hello, I'm Nancy Sellers. Scott Adams and I welcome you to the December executive briefing. This month, we begin by asking what is one of the most contentious subjects in education today. What is one thing that the majority of students resent, the researchers are ambivalent about, and definitely is the source of more parent child confrontations every day. Yet, is a cherished tradition and a foundation of education. What is this one tradition that is under unprecedented attack recently with books saying that it is worthless, unnecessary and lacking any evidence that it helps student learning?

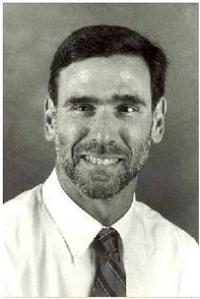
Scott: if you said, "homework", you have done your homework. Two new books, one titled The Case Against Homework by Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, and the second book is by Alfie Kohn, titled the Homework Myth lay out a case for ending homework. Both books now have parent discussion and teacher discussion groups buzzing. We have all accepted the standard rationale and theory for homework – intellectually, it reinforces the academic lessons taught a couple of hours before, and prepares the student for new activities. Emotionally, the physical act of doing homework teaches a sense of discipline, organization, important study habits and instills a work ethic that should pay significant dividends down the road, especially in college.

Nancy: Does the intent match the reality? Does it ever? Or as our opening quote says, homework can be a good thing or it can be a bad thing. Well, Alfie Kohn, who has been interviewed several times here, believes it is a bad thing, almost always. He is famous for contradicting just about everything we do in education. He doesn't believe in grades, doesn't believe in external motivation or rewards, doesn't believe in standardized tests and now doesn't believe in homework. In his newest book, Alfie does make some good points, at least some points that should generate some discussion in your leaning communities this month. His book contends that there is no evidence whatsoever to show that elementary school students benefit from doing homework - and only a slight correlation between time spent in homework and classroom achievement.

Scott: Here is what else we know - based on a poll conducted earlier this year by America online and the Associated press, most parents say their children get the right amount of homework – and most teachers agree. Only 19% of the parents in this poll said their children get too much homework. The parents polled indicated that their children spend an average of 90 minutes a night on homework. And 64% of parents say they have little trouble finding time to help with homework.

Yet, we know from other studies that parental involvement in homework drops dramatically in middle and high school. And we also know that teachers don't share the parent's perception that the parents are there to help with their children's homework. Almost nine out of ten teachers in this poll said that parents don't set aside enough time to help. And there is a serious gap between how much time parents think children spend doing homework and what the students self-report. To find out more about this emerging and controversial issue, we contacted Dr. Harris Cooper, the author of the Corwin best seller, the Battle Over Homework – Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents – third edition. Dr. Harris may be the most recognized authority on homework in the country. He is currently a professor in the Department of Psychology at Duke University, where Nancy reached him for this telephone interview. Here is her interview:

Nancy: Thank you, Dr. Cooper, for taking some time with us today. The first question I want to ask is, "What is the general history of homework?" Have students always been assigned homework? And are they getting more or less homework now compared to other generations?

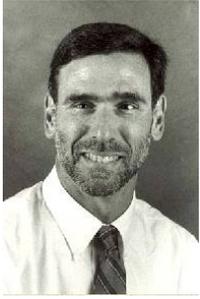


Dr. Cooper: The best we can tell, students have been assigned homework since the beginning of, form of schooling. Obviously, there weren't any scientific surveys until the beginning of the 20th century. But we all have heard of the reports of even children in colonial times bringing homework to do. Sometimes it was Bible reading, sometimes it was reading primers but kids have been taking work home from school for further study. So, we have had formal education in the United States.

In terms of are they getting more or less today, we don't have a lot of good information about that, but couple of years ago, a couple of historians did look back at national surveys and they did find surveys that went back into the 1950s. And essentially, what they say is that the amount of homework that kids have been bringing home really hasn't changed all that much over the last 50 or 60 years. There may have been a slight uptake, a slight increase in the amount that children in the earliest grades K through 2 have been bringing home in the last decade.

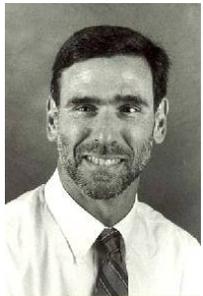
Nancy: How much homework are we talking about? How much homework does a typical student do grade wise? And does the amount of homework that they get depend on different regions; do students get

more in the south or in the northeast or private versus public schools? I mean is there any statistics that show that some students get more than others.



Dr. Cooper: There is some statistics, particularly a study that's an actual longitudinal study conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, did follow-up study in 2003. And they break their data out by age level. And what they found is that when they asked kids how much study do you do at home, which maybe slightly a little bit different from homework, but it's as close as they get, what they find is that 6 to 8 year olds, and that would be 1st to 3rd grade, do about a half an hour on average. 9 to 11 year olds - 40 minutes, 12 to 14 year olds, say about 50 minutes, and 15 to 17 year olds say about that same amount. They don't break their data out by other variables other than boys and girls. And what they do discover, actually, is that girls do a little bit more, report doing a little bit more homework than boys do. They haven't broken it out, I don't believe by the type of school or region of the country.

Nancy: What is the quality of homework that is assigned by teachers today? Is it, as some people and our critics say, just busy work or is the homework being assigned today a logical extension of the school day? And what is a good homework assignment compared to say a bad homework assignment?

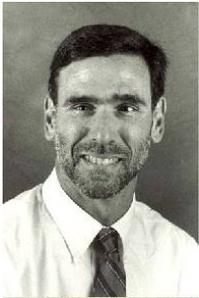


Dr. Cooper: That's a good question, Nancy, but actually but it's also a very difficult one to answer. There are no studies about what makes for a good quality or how good is the quality of homework that's going home. And part of this because the answer is going to really depend greatly on what the goals of the assignment are. So, a high quality homework assignment that deals with learning vocabulary or spelling words or math facts is really going to be pretty much a practice kind of assignment. But, other assignments that deal with extending the child's knowledge from what's been taught in class to other areas that they might be interested in or run into in the life outside of class is going to look very different.

So, the quality of homework assignment really requires first an answer to the question, "What is the goal of the assignment?" And there can be very different goals. It's also the case I think and I can say this - even though

there is no research that I am aware - that the quality of homework assignments varies. Some are easy to understand what they are attempting to accomplish and others seem as if they are simply being given by teachers in order to fulfill mandates and look more like busy work than anything else. I don't think it's the case that any particular student always gets high or low quality assignments nor that any teacher always gives high and low quality assignments. So, the best answer to that question is the quality varies and even the definition of what "quality" is, is going to be a function of what the goals of the assignment are.

Nancy: Dr. Cooper, looking at the international picture, how does the amount and type of homework our students receive compare to other nations and how do others school systems in other nations handle homework or supplemental learning?



Dr. Cooper: Well, I have never been a big fan of cross-national comparisons. I think you can find comparisons which would show that kids in the United States do more homework than many countries and probably a few that would do less homework than. The problem of the international comparisons though they can be an interesting source of ideas for what makes for good homework and amounts of homework is that every homework assignment in a different country is really given in a very different context. So, for example, there are very different lengths of school days and school years in different countries and we might expect that countries that have longer school days are going to rely less on homework than we do. It's also a case that what kids do after school without homework differs from country-to-country.

So that there are countries where children actually go from their regular public school or school day to private lessons and tutors and many families employ that kind of activity for their children after school. In those kinds of cultures, in those kinds of countries, there is going to be less reliance on homework. So, homework fits into the entire network and cluster of activities that different countries and different families have in different cultures and you have to be cautious about how you interpret the cross-cultural comparisons.

Nancy: Harris, we earlier mentioned one poll that says the majority of parents think their child is getting the right amount of homework. In the first chapter of your book The Battle over Homework, one of the first things you talk about is the public's attitude towards homework. Do you agree with this other poll's conclusions? Has it changed significantly? And why do you think now are all the concerns and flurry of the new books that are anti-homework?



Dr. Cooper: That's a very good question also, and it's very interesting. If you look at media attempts, what you would discover is that public attitudes towards homework appear to go through waves of support and lack of support and the way we reach a peak for each of those in about a 15 to 20 year cycle. So, at the moment it appears as if we are in an anti-homework decade. But, if we look 20 years back, many people will remember report that came out in the mid 1980s called *A Nation at Risk*, when there was a great concern about our economic competitiveness, especially relative to Japanese and East Asia. And *Nation at Risk* had a very catchy tagline that was called the "rising tide of mediocrity." And one of the recommendations in combating that mediocrity was increases in homework. If you go back 20 years from then to the late 1960s, you discover a backlash against homework much like the one we seem to be seeing at the moment.

And people were saying that homework was a sign of too much stress on kids. If you go back 15 to 20 years from there and we are actually in the Eisenhower years, the launch of Sputnik, the concern was about remaining competitive with our ideological adversaries and the importance of increasing or accelerating the pace of knowledge in children's learning, so that we could remain technologically competitive. And I could continue to go back.

The interesting thing is and important context for recent state of books that are anti-homework is to look at a survey that was actually done at the beginning of this year for the Associated Press. And they asked parents how much homework does your child bring home each night? Is it about the right amount, too much or too little? And about 57% of parents said that their child was assigned about the right amount of homework, 19% said it was too

much and 23% said it was “too little.” So, why it might be that there appears to be a running battle in the media over too much homework, in fact, more representative survey of parent attitude suggest that the educators are satisfying the majority of parents and for every person screaming “too much”, there is a person screaming “too little”.

When I talk to educators about this, I actually point that, with a half a smile on my face, that with something as complicated and as influenced by family attitudes and lifestyles as homework is, if you are satisfying more than 50% of parents and have an equal number of parents shouting in each direction, you are probably doing as best as you can expect.

Nancy: Well, this might be for some people the most important question of my interview. What do we know about the effectiveness of homework? What positive changes or increases in student achievement have been documented and what are the pros and cons of assigning homework?



Dr. Cooper: Well, the question about what does the research say about homework, Nancy, is one that I wish I had a better answer for. There is a lot of homework research and it varies in its quality. So, it's important to talk about different types of approaches to research and what each type of approach says. So, the homework question is really best answered by comparing students who are assigned homework with students who are assigned no homework. And there are a group of about six studies that have done that and also try to make the kids into two groups as comparable as possible.

In the best of all worlds, what they do is randomly assign the kids to one condition or the other by flipping a coin. Sometimes, they can't do that. So, what they do is they match the kids based on perhaps pretest scores in the subject of interest and they throw out kids from the study, obviously they don't really throw them out but they throw them out of the study. They don't use them in the study if they don't have a good match. So, they know

before homework is assigned or not assigned that children in the two groups are relatively equal to one another on average in their past performance.

And what those studies say is that homework can improve children's scores on class tests or the unit tests that come at the end of a topic. And these studies have been done in the second grade using math skills, in the third and fourth grade using English skills and vocabulary, fifth grade social studies and in the high school, it's been done with American history and Shakespeare. So we do know that when kids are assigned homework and compared to relatively similar kids not assigned homework, across the globe they do do better on the unit test that come at the end of a topic area.

The problem they face is that those unit tests are not the typical gages of achievement that people will look at and it would be great if we had broader measures in these better-controlled studies but that would require much longer period of time in which some kids are doing homework and other kids are not doing homework and it might create a burden or a disadvantage for the kids not doing homework or a waste of time for the kids doing homework if there is no effect. So these studies tend to be short.

There is another group of studies that typically use national databases like The National Education Longitudinal Study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress and even though they can't assign kids to do homework and no homework, they have to ask them how much homework they do. They do try and make the kids similar to one another through statistical means. And those studies also show a positive relationship between how much homework kids do and how well they are doing in school, but now it's measured by cumulative grades at the end of semesters and standardized achievement tests. Then, there is a third group of studies and many of the opponents of homework are actually going on to this result without examining those two earlier results that are actually the better studies.

And these are studies that simply correlate homework and achievement with no attempt to contrast or distinguish differences. And 77% of those cases in the recent study that we did, out of 35 of those studies, they did find a positive link between homework and achievement. But the interesting thing is that for children in the earliest grades, there is functionally no correlation. For kids in the middle school grades, there is a correlation and in high school, it's a pretty strong correlation. Now remember these are the weakest kind of studies but they do sort of suggest to us that there may be a difference in the effectiveness of homework that's meant to improve achievement based upon children's grade levels or their ages.

Nancy: We also talk about, when we talk about assigning homework and things like that, what role, I think research that says homework can actually build character or self discipline or create organizational skills, what about the emotional intelligence skills? What is the connecting the dots between assigning homework and what we call the emotional intelligence skill?



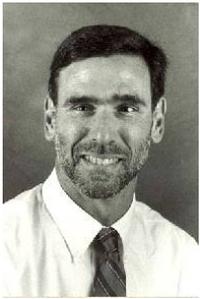
Dr. Cooper: I really know of no studies that have looked at outcomes of homework other than achievement except for a few studies that relate to attitude towards school and behavior problems. Problem with these is that like I mentioned with the Achievement Studies they are of straight co relational kind. So, you really can't tell whether or not its homework that's causing attitudes or attitudes that's causing amount of time on homework. What they do show is that there is a positive relationship.

The one area that is really ripe for a good research and better research is the area of building those kinds of character traits, study habits, ability to be autonomous learner. When we have surveyed teachers, one of the things that we do discover especially again in the earlier grades and this may relate to why there is no correlation in those earlier grades but remember that the other kinds of studies that I mentioned that are actually the better designed studies do show a relationship between homework and achievement in the earliest grades.

But they just simply suggest that this lack of correlation might be because teachers recognize that you can't overburden young children with homework and expect it to have a strong impact on their academic achievement.

And what they are doing is they are using assignments in the earlier grades to help build study skills and time management skills and get parents involved in their children's education. So, while we don't have a lot of studies showing us that it has a great deal of effect, there is some hint in the research literature that this is, in fact, one of the objectives that teachers use for homework especially when kids are younger.

Nancy: One of the concerns that we hear is that homework may increase the gap between high achievers those who have come from families with tremendous intellectual literary resources but it may increase the gap between high achievers from middle and upper class families and striding students from poverty. Do you have any thoughts about that?



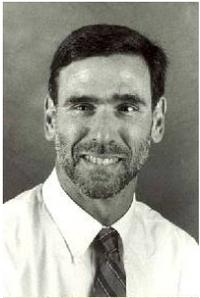
Dr. Cooper: I do have some thoughts on that, Nancy, but I don't have a lot of research to tell you. I think it is, I hear that myself so it is something that ought to be studied and examined. And it makes a lot of sense because if two kids being on the same assignment to very different homes are going to have different resources and different abilities because of the environment that they step into in order to help them get that done. I don't like to make the strict generalization that it's

going to be directly and incontrovertibly related to economic resources, because I think there are lot of parents of limited means, many of whom I have met with and spoken with in homework workshops, who are very devoted and dedicated to their children's education. They understand its value especially for improving their lot in life who place an enormous emphasis on education in their families.

The other part of that argument that's important to keep in mind is that it makes the assumption that the same homework assignment is going home to kids in very different homes. And that would imply that educators are not sensitive to the issue themselves. I think that we ought to be more concerned about the issues of inequities in education in a much broader context than simply homework, because there are enormous number of educational resources that vary by school districts and schools, even within the same district that serve different neighborhoods.

So having said that I would say, "Yes it ought to be a source of concern but it also highlights for us that larger concern about inequities in educational opportunities that run across the gamut."

Nancy: That is a very good answer Dr. Cooper - and I got to agree with you. I think that there is more important issues that are just simply a symptom rather than the cause. I know what your answer was previously but let's talk a little bit more about what are your thoughts based on the research, based on your research what does a good homework assignment look like? What would it be? What are the essential qualities or characteristics of a good homework assignment according to the research that you have done?



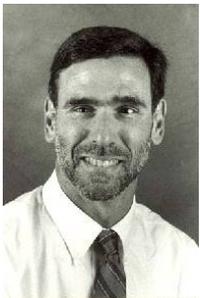
Dr. Cooper: Well a good homework assignment is going to be a function of what the goal of the assignment is. So if the goal of an assignment is to help children practice skills that are learned through repetition and that's going to be spell words, math facts, vocabulary, sign language, the kind of assignment that's going to help kids do that and this is where our strongest evidence lies in terms of research is going to be the kind of assignment that involves rehearsal at home. Lots of times this is done in the earliest grades, it helps teachers get parents involved because they are the ones who say to spell the word and the child spells it and then the parent says whether or not they have gotten it right or wrong or they have on flashcards their vocabulary.

So, if that's the goal, then that's a good homework assignment. There are other homework assignments that are meant to show kids that the things that they are learning in school have applications to things they enjoy doing outside of school. I will give you my two favorite examples with regard to learning math and in particular percentages - which I think happens in 3rd or 4th grade if I have got that right - involving children's after school sports activities. If your kids are members of a Little League or Soccer Teams, they can calculate what their batting average is or what their team's winning percentage is. They can go to the grocery store with their parents and help with the household budget. With regards to reading, high interest reading is very important for kids. Think about teachers - they ought to think about kinds of things that kids will pick up on their own to read.

One of my favorite questions to ask educators is, "What was the first thing you read when simply because you wanted to know what it said?" And while I don't ever get a majority of answers to that, the answer I get most often is the answer that I would have given what it is at the back of a cereal box. So, create a homework assignment that involves getting kids to read things they enjoy to read and also demonstrates to them that actually reading brings them enjoyment. It would be just to ask a group of second or third graders, "What's on back of your favorite cereal box?" Write a paragraph on what it says, bring it in and tomorrow we will talk about what it says."

So, again, the important point is that it's the goal of the assignment that dictates what makes a good assignment. And teacher should never use homework to simply accomplish one goal, especially if it's the "rote" kind of thing. If kids are being on memorization every evening, it's going to wear them out. Good homework assignments have varying goals. Some really has rehearsal stuff and some of them are real high interest stuff, but they are mixed together across different nights throughout the week.

Nancy: You mentioned parents and I know you devote almost a complete chapter in your book The Battle Over Homework about engaging parents. Harris what does the research say about engaging parents and what do they say about homework assignments that their kids are getting?



Dr. Cooper: Getting parents involved, Nancy, you see is a difficult thing for educators. They know it's an important and good thing to do but doing too little of it or too much of it can be a bad thing. Getting parents involved is very important because we know that what the parent's attitude is towards homework is what a kid's attitude towards homework is going to be and towards school in general. We have actually shown in our research that there is a correlation in the earlier grades and there is even a correlation in lower grades, in high school there is a relationship between what parents think about homework and what their kids think about it.

So, getting parents to be positive about homework and to express that positivity is very important. But getting things overly involved can have some negative effects. Parents can have too high expectations for what their children can and cannot do in school and therefore they can place undue pressure for them to achieve beyond their abilities because they don't have realistic expectations for their kids. They can also try to teach kids things in different ways from the way they are being taught in school. We refer to that as instructional interference and that, especially for young children, can confuse them. If the way they do long division, we know there is more than one-way to do long division. We know there is more than one way to tie your shoes.

I tried to teach my daughter when she was in preschool how to tie her shoes a different way from the way she was being taught in preschool and, thank goodness, she wasn't hopelessly confused but we did actually run out and get her shoes with Velcro the next day so we could avoid the problem. But, any of those things can lead to kids getting confused and that makes it important for educators to when they involve parents to make sure that they know what it is and how it is they ought to be teaching or mentoring their children.

Nancy: Dr. Cooper, some of the research we have read in preparation for this interview recommends that each district have a good written homework policy, with the administrators periodically checking that students in one class don't regularly get much more or less homework that students in other the same grade with different teachers. What does a good school district homework policy look like? Based on the most current research today, one of the things I have heard is that teachers should follow the 10-minute rule, meaning for whatever grade you are in you should have 10 minutes of homework. So a second grader should have 20 minutes or something like that. Do you agree?



Dr. Cooper: The NEA, the Teachers Organizations, and the National PTA have a guideline for parents, that's called *Helping your Child Get the Most Out of Homework* and it's available through the NEA website on the Internet. And it essentially follows what educators refer to as the "10-minute rule." So, it will say that effective homework assignments for kids in K through 2nd Grade should be 10 to 20 minutes, older kids in grades 3 to 6 should get 30 to 60 minutes and when kids are in Junior High

School and Senior High, the amount of homework is going to vary a little bit. If you look at district policies on the Internet as well, you will also discover that they roughly follow the 10-minute rule.

And our examination of research in when its optimum for kids and when it becomes too much and becomes counterproductive is consistent with that 10-minute rule. So school district policies that highlight this notion that there is an expectation about how much homework kid should be doing and that it is a function of their grade level is a good place for a homework policy to start. It's very important, also, to remember that these guidelines are very general and some districts may bump it up a little bit because they serve families that are very academically oriented and also the same homework assignment that goes on to different families is going to take kids different amounts of time to do.

And it's important for school districts and schools who are developing policies to take those things into account and make sure that parents are aware that, on average, your kid is going to be doing about 30 minutes a night if they are in the 3rd grade. But some assignments maybe longer and some maybe shorter and your child may have some difficulties and it may take your child a bit longer to accomplish the task.

Nancy: Harris I want to thank you for your time. I just want to ask one more question. You can feel free to wax eloquently on this one. But what is the most important conclusion you would want the school administrators who are hearing the CD and streaming audio on the Internet, what is the most important conclusion you would like to leave this interview with based on your research and the summary of your latest book called The Battle Over Homework?



Dr. Cooper: I think the most important lesson that we can learn both from the research and from the experience of teachers and families is that homework can be a good thing or homework can be

a bad thing. We know something about its relationship to achievement and that all kids should be doing homework, but the amount and type they do should vary with the function of their grade level.

And, as they grow older we can expect that their cognitive capacities will grow and they can benefit more from homework. But we also have to make sure that we don't overdo it, based on terms of the amount that we give, and in the older grades how much we expect it to accomplish for young children, because it won't accomplish much in terms of the academic achievement, it's not going to boost their achieving test scores greatly. But, it can help them learn things. It can help their parents get involved. My feeling is that homework policies really should subscribe amounts of homework that are consistent with the research evidence, but that also give individual schools and teachers flexibility to take into account the needs and circumstances of the students and families. And that also in general, all educators should avoid the extremes, don't give up on homework but don't expect it to do miraculous things and pile too much of it on kids.

Nancy – thank you, Dr. Cooper, Scott, the final word?

Scott: Nancy, we are posting many more links and resources on the main interview section of the web site. Thanks to Corwin Press and Rob Clouse, we will have an excerpt of Dr. Cooper's newest book – the Battle Over Homework, and information on purchasing it. Dr. Cooper is right – homework can be a good thing or it can be a bad thing. When it is a good thing, there are two main points to consider – quantity and quality. It is better to give too little, rather than too much, since the feedback is that too much homework creates frustration, anger, and parent fights to get it done. It is not worth it, especially in the primary grades where there is little evidence that it helps the student do better the next day in school.

Not only should you as an administrator be aware of the amount of homework assigned, but the type. Is the homework being assigned just mindless drill and repetition? A great homework assignment is meaningful and relevant – a great homework assignment, particularly in the early grades, also involves the parents as resource people. Another point to ask is if your teachers use homework as part of the discipline process. Or do they use “no homework” as a reward? How do your teachers handle late homework assignments? Is there some consensus and uniformity in how late and incomplete assignments are graded in different classes?

Another point that can change good homework into bad homework is how quickly teachers return the homework assignments to the students with meaningful and helpful comments. Or how well the teachers involve the parents as partners. Do the parents sign an agreement promising they will supervise their child's work? Do your teachers supply the parents with study guides or the parent homework booklet from the National PTA? Do they contact parents in a timely basis if a student is not doing homework or turns in unacceptable work? And so on. How effectively teacher uses homework is a reflection of how effective that teacher is. And knowing how your teachers assign homework is part of your homework assignment.