

Parents and the Politics of Homework: Some Historical Perspectives

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Homework has been a topic of considerable controversy in 20th century American education, largely because it is a linchpin in the relationship between home and school. This essay examines parent opinions on homework between 1900 and 1960 in order to integrate parents' elusive voices into the history of American education, and to shed new light on modern-day controversies regarding the school-family interface. The underlying question we explore is whether, in educational policymaking, the family ought to march to the beat of the school, or the school ought to march to the beat of the family? We conclude that if parents want homework, and if homework keeps parents in touch with the program of the school, then it is the abolition of homework – not its presence – that most threatens parents' interests.

Public schools have a tremendous amount of discretion over how much parental involvement they will permit. Some will include parents in defining and carrying out their educational mission, and others will not. Some will encourage the active participation of parents in the education of their children, and others will not.

One facet of schooling that has often been a bone of contention between parents and schools is homework. Historically, homework has been one of the most contentious topics in American education. Between the 1890s and the 1950s, the vast majority of educational commentary on homework attacked its central place in schooling. Local school boards across the nation regularly debated the merits of homework, always with an eye toward curtailing it. Many individual schools and school districts placed sharp limits

on how much homework teachers could assign, and some cities, large and small, even abolished homework (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

Since the Reagan era, however, a virtual national consensus has reigned on homework: the more, the better.¹ Homework is offered as a solution to myriad problems of school, home, and society. Its proponents advocate it not only as a means to improve students' academic achievement but also to raise the productivity of the labor force, to make American students competitive with their counterparts in Europe and Asia, to keep children busy and out of trouble, and to integrate the home into the educational enterprise.²

The century-long debate over homework in the United States has provided an outlet for the elusive voice of parents in American education. Despite a few pioneering contributions (Clifford, 1978; Cutler, 2000; Kaestle, 1978; Reese, 1986; Schlossman, 1976), the voices of parents have been virtually absent from the historiography of American schooling. Homework offers a unique point of entry for understanding not only the inner lives of schools but of families as well. Granted, it is difficult to assess "parent opinion" systematically on any educational topic, past or present. But by examining parents' views on homework, we believe it is possible to shed new historical light on themes of broad significance about parent-state authority conflicts over schooling and, more generally, about parent-state authority conflicts over the upbringing of children.

To structure our inquiry, we posit two fundamentally different models of how parents think about homework: "school imperialism," on the one hand, versus parent-school communication and collaboration, on the other.

PART I. FAMILIES AND HOMEWORK: SCHOOL IMPERIALISM VERSUS COMMUNICATION/COLLABORATION

Homework is not just a means to spur students' academic achievement and raise their test scores and grades. It is also a linchpin in the relationship between home and school. Homework may provide the single best opportunity for parents to view (though not necessarily to comprehend) the content of their children's academic training. The relationship that homework creates between home and school inevitably has strong symbolic overtones for parents and teachers alike, which explains why homework was so controversial during most of the 20th century.

Structurally, homework might have one of two fundamentally opposite effects on the home. On the one hand, homework might be viewed as an intrusion by the school into hours reserved for the family—a direct threat to parents' authority to manage their children's time outside of school. According to this model, homework is an exercise of what might be

termed "school imperialism" at the expense of parents.³ It interferes, for example, with chores, with music and dancing lessons, and with the social intercourse that parents and children may expect from each other in the evening.

Alternately, parents might perceive homework very differently: not as an intrusion or a threat to their authority but, rather, as the primary means by which schools communicate and collaborate with parents on academic matters and engage them in the educational process.⁴ According to this model, homework is a link from school to home that keeps parents informed about what the school is teaching, gives them a chance to participate in their children's schooling, and helps to keep the schools accountable to parents. Not to assign homework is to exclude parents from playing an active role in their children's academic development.⁵

These two radically different views of homework—as a wedge to expand the influence of the school at the expense of parents or as a bridge to join schools and parents in the education of children—naturally create tensions in any community where they coexist in fairly equal balance. If different parents have diametrically opposed views of homework, then educators cannot avoid developing homework policies and practices that will offend some parents. If the school assigns little or no homework, it will offend parents who want to monitor and participate actively in their children's schooling. If the school requires large amounts of homework, it will offend parents who have other plans for their children's after-school hours.

To assess the relative virtues of the school imperialism versus the communication/collaboration models of homework, we review various types of historical evidence regarding what parents thought about homework between 1900 and 1960. During this time period, disagreements about homework were far more heated than they would become later in the century. Homework was also central to public debate about the virtues or defects of the reigning educational philosophy of the time, "progressive" education.⁶

PART II. HOMEWORK AS SCHOOL IMPERIALISM

THE LEGAL CASES

In 1887, in DeWitt County, Texas, a 13-year-old pupil challenged the authority of his public school teacher to assign him homework (*Balding v. State*, 1887). On two consecutive days, the boy refused to do his homework assignments, despite his teacher's warning that he would be whipped if he continued to disobey. After the second refusal, the teacher decided to carry out the threatened punishment. But after "one blow with a switch," the unrepentant pupil "drew a butcher knife, and stabbed the teacher under

the shoulder blade, and in the thigh." While considering the validity of the pupil's conviction for aggravated assault, the Texas appellate court discussed the teacher's authority to require homework. The court concluded that the teacher's authority over his charges was not "limited to the time when the pupils are at the school-room." Indeed, "Such authority extends...to the prescribing and enforcement of reasonable rules and requirements, even while the pupils are at their homes" (p. 580).

A quarter century later, a Mississippi court limited the reach of the school's authority into the home (*Hobbs v. Germany*, 1909). The public school of Bogue Chitto required its students to study at home each evening between 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. One evening in October 1908, Henry Germany, a 16-year-old pupil in the Bogue Chitto school, went to church with his father during the designated study hours. His teachers sought to punish him for this violation of school rules. The Mississippi Supreme Court declared that the rule "invades the home and wrests from the parent his right to control his child around his own hearthstone." The school thereby exceeded the bounds of its legitimate authority. "In the home the parental authority is and should be supreme" (p. 517).

Although their legal conclusions differ, both cases illustrate the posture of families who challenge the right of schools to issue homework. These families' reasoning exemplifies the model of homework as school imperialism. From this perspective, homework is an attempt by the school to extend its influence over a progressively larger part of the student's day. As the school's authority grows, the parents' authority must wane. The most skeptical interpretation of homework sees it as simply one step in a process by which the state tries to wrest control of education, and of children's lives generally, from parents. Compulsory education took 6 hours of a child's day out of the control of parents, and homework takes away more time. Some parents might want these hours for their own educational agendas or for religious purposes (as in the case of Henry Germany). Other parents might want their children to make an economic contribution to the family by doing chores around the house or farm, or by holding down a wage-earning job.

Although the two cases described previously remained legal oddities, the school imperialism argument to which they gave voice was championed by leading educational experts advocating the abolition of homework throughout much of the first half of the 20th century.

THE ANTI-HOMEWORK CRUSADE

In 1901, the state of California passed a law abolishing homework in Grades 1 to 8 (*Political Code of the State of California*, 1901). This was the most dramatic public success of a crusade against homework that gathered steam rapidly around the turn of the century and continued to captivate educators

and parents until well into mid-century. Individual school districts around the nation, from Washington, D.C., to Bangs, Texas, to Madison, Wisconsin, followed California's example and abolished homework (Gill & Schlossman, 1996).

The anti-homework crusade formed an integral part of the broader reform movement known as progressive education. In *The Transformation of the School*, the historian Lawrence Cremin (1961) chronicled the progressive education movement from its inception in 1892–1893 with the publication of a muckraking expose of American public schools by Joseph Mayer Rice, until its slow death 60 years later. Although historians have not explicitly recognized the anti-homework crusade as a goal of the progressive education movement, the educators on the front lines of the war against homework universally saw themselves as carrying the "progressive" banner. Indeed, Rice himself was one of the earliest pedagogues to challenge homework. In 1897, he published an article entitled "The Futility of the Spelling Grind" based on a set of experiments he had conducted on schoolchildren (Rice, 1897). Surely to the great disappointment of educators committed to the traditional 19th century routine of drill, memorization, and recitation, Rice found that requiring children to spend long hours at home memorizing spelling lists did not make them better spellers.

Rice's challenge to homework rested solely on the grounds that it was ineffective as a tool for academic achievement. He did not address whether homework represented a significant challenge to parental authority. Other crusaders, however, found the pernicious effects of homework on the family compelling. Between the turn of the century and the First World War, the loudest voice in the anti-homework crusade was that of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. In editorials, contributions from educators, and letters from parents, the *Journal* consistently advocated the complete abolition of homework for all children below the age of 15.

The *Journal* saw itself as an advocate for the family. According to the *Journal*, homework interfered with "the ordinary interests of the home." It forced families to play a nightly "comedy of fathers and mothers teaching the children their lessons, with the teachers playing the detective the next morning to see how well the parents have done the work of instruction." The contributors to the *Journal* claimed that homework bred bad character traits. One educator declared that "the principal contribution of home lessons to [students'] education is the training it affords a majority of them in the evasion of duties, and in disobedience to authority." Another contributor (Bok, 1913) explicitly put forth the parental rights argument. He asserted:

The parents who own the children and who pay the wages to the managers do not want home work.... Now for the teachers, who are

public servants, to continue to thrust upon parents, who support them, this unpopular, unwarranted and doubtful usage is a piece of academic impertinence dating back to the Middle Ages, when the teachers and the priests were the only people who could speak with authority on matters of education. Those days have passed.

The *Ladies' Home Journal* was hardly alone in lamenting the ill effects of homework on the home, and in rising to the defense of parental rights. In 1899 the Los Angeles school board adopted a new regulation forbidding homework before seventh grade. The president of the school board argued that the new policy would "leave more fully to parents the direction of the time of the child except during school hours" (*Annual Report*, 1899-1900). A New Jersey educator agreed that homework cut into the time available to parents to spend with their children, leading to "children's rampant disrespect for parents and elders, who cannot understand or know their offspring because of a lack of association" (Wiener, 1912). Anti-homework experts lamented the loss of educational activities outside of school, such as "voluntary reading and music practice" (Bok, 1913; Burnham, 1912), and more generally, "such moral, cultural, and religious influences that would do much to educate him in the highest sense" (Wiener, 1912). One educator claimed, "The present undercurrent of immorality in the lives of boys and girls is, in part, due to this loss of parental association and the lack of the moral influence of the family. Home study is a frequent excuse for the children to remain away from church on Sunday" (Wiener, 1912).

For the contributors to the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the most important argument against homework was its ill effect on the health of children. Edward Bok, the editor of the *Journal*, declared that thousands of children had withdrawn from school because "their nervous systems were wrecked" by homework. Although this argument appealed to the interests of children rather than the authority of parents, it fit the broader theme of homework as a threat to the family, and permitted the anti-homework commentators to maintain their role as guardians of the family. In Bok's view, homework was causing children to be "permanently crippled" (Bok, 1900). And the *Journal* found some parents sympathetic to its health concerns. Parents told woeful tales of homework causing their children to have "repeated headaches," to be "nervously exhausted," "broken beyond repair," "their little brains hopelessly hurt." Beyond the typical tales of nervous breakdown, a few parents lamented that homework had driven their children to their graves ("Dedicated to the American Parent," 1902).

Serious concern over the alleged health consequences of homework was not limited to popular periodicals like *Ladies' Home Journal*. In *Pedagogical Seminary*, a journal edited by the famed child psychologist G. Stanley Hall, one expert noted "the opinion of hygienists" that homework "leads to

over-pressure" (Burnham, 1905). In Brooklyn, a doctor declared, "I have met many cases of lateral curvature of the spine that were attributable to carrying heavy books." In Philadelphia, a nerve specialist announced to teachers that most of the ailments of adult women resulted from too much schoolwork when they were children ("Question of Homework for Children," 1913). In San Jose, California, the county medical society appointed a committee of three respected local doctors to determine whether an excessive amount of schoolwork was damaging the health of children in the San Jose public schools (*Annual Report, 1898-1899*, 1900). The school superintendent in Washington, D.C. argued that reducing homework would result in "a saving in student lives" (Board of Education, District of Columbia, 1916). In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, one opponent of homework implored readers to "Go into any high school classroom. The wan, anemic, careworn faces are appalling. Most of them are pale and pinched." Indeed, "The manner in which we force 'young America' to study is nothing more nor less than mental abortion" ("Question of Homework for Children," 1913).

By the 1920s and 1930s, the rhetoric of the anti-homework educational reformers was less focused on physical health concerns, but the basic arguments were similar. Those who opposed homework continued to portray themselves as champions of the family. Reformers recounted parental complaints "that their children have no time for real home duties...to say nothing of limited time for wholesome play and exercise in the open air." Parents allegedly regretted "that schoolwork at home is so time-consuming that son or daughter is compelled to give up music lessons or other of the extra-school activities that are, for many persons, an essential part of the foundation for a happy life" (Holmes, 1929). Experts repeated the health argument in various forms. For example, they claimed that homework "fosters mediocrity and often causes worry, fear, and melancholy" (Owen, 1930), and that "there is no justification for enfeebling the youth of to-day by painful night study, undirected effort, and consequent lack of opportunity for proper physical development" (Bassett, 1934).

"PROGRESSIVE" PARENTS: HOMEWORK AS A THREAT TO FAMILY

The crusade against homework may have been led by "progressive" experts and opinion leaders such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, but it could count a considerable number of vocal parents in support. Some parents agreed with the experts that homework did more harm than good. A mother lamented that, in fourth grade, her "little daughter went to bed night after night in tears because she could not complete her home work" (*New York Times*, 1926). Another grumbled, "carrying a heavy load of books" was "not a good thing for fast-growing children." Long homework

assignments had forced her children to give up music lessons and to lose playtime. Moreover, excessive homework caused her children to see schoolwork as "drudgery" ("Do You Believe in Homework? Replies For and Against," 1936). Another parent seconded that opinion, arguing that homework "is unfair to all children because the growing child needs the afternoon for play, the evening for relaxation, and the night for sleep." And he added that "homework is unfair to parents," who, after a long day of work, should not have "to sacrifice evenings of cozy comfort and happiness to coaching children in school work that could be more skillfully done at school." One parent regretted the imposition of homework on other spheres of life, asking schools to "let the home, church, and just living have some leeway during these impressionable years" ("Do You Believe in Homework? Replies For and Against," 1936).

These parents resented homework's intrusion on their families much as did the parents in Texas and Mississippi whose concerns about homework (as described earlier) prompted legal action in 1887 and 1908. They questioned homework because it threatened the health of their children, because it had little educational value, or because they had other plans for their children's time. But whatever their reason for opposing homework, their opposition brought them into conflict with the public schools that continued to issue homework. For these parents, homework was a challenge to their authority that amounted to school imperialism. The apparent threat to family life and parental authority implicit in homework made it easy for anti-homework pedagogues to cast themselves in the role of protectors of family integrity and autonomy.

We question the legitimacy of the anti-homework crusaders' assumption of that role. Although the statements quoted in the pages above demonstrate that some parents during the first half of the 20th century sympathized with the objectives of the "progressive" education experts in their desire to be liberated from the burden of homework, we do not believe that such parents were typical. As we show in the next section, the bulk of the historical evidence suggests that most parents did not regard homework as a threat to their authority; indeed, most parents wanted homework to keep them in touch with their children's schooling.

In the remainder of this essay, we will elaborate a paradox in the anti-homework position. We argue that if parents want homework, and if homework keeps parents in touch with the program of the school, then it is the abolition of homework—not its presence—that most threatens parents' interests. Abolishing or severely limiting homework significantly reduces the potential influence of parents in their children's education.

This suggests a different application of the school imperialism model. Contrary to their claim of protecting family authority in educational affairs, we believe that it was the anti-homework experts in the first half of the 20th

century—and their more avid followers today—who best exemplify the goal of school imperialism. It is they who elevate to new heights the exclusive authority of the school/teacher to educate, and it is they who seek to undermine linkages by which schools and parents can mutually and knowledgeably share responsibility for children's education.

III. HOMEWORK AS COMMUNICATION/COLLABORATION

REINTERPRETING COMPULSORY EDUCATION

We begin our analysis of parents' views on homework by first discussing their response to the introduction of compulsory school legislation in the 19th century. Contrary to the view of a previous generation of educational historians, more recent scholars have shown that parental resistance to compulsory education was limited, even among groups from whom the most resistance might have been expected—groups that had traditionally viewed children as important productive economic assets. Early compulsory education laws were rarely enforced, because enforcement was rarely necessary. Compulsory education laws typically ratified a status quo in which most parents had already chosen to send their children to school (Fishlow, 1966; Landes & Solmon, 1972; Tyack, 1976; Zelizer, 1985).

By the time compulsory education statutes were passed, traditional parental attitudes toward children had changed dramatically. Parents had begun to recognize childhood as a special time, as a period of tender years, when children should not be treated like adults. School assumed a new importance and a new association with childhood. Parents of all social classes, in both Europe and the United States, had largely accepted this new attitude toward children by the late 19th century (Aries, 1962; Demos, 1986; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Parents rarely thought of children—primarily, at least—as economic assets. In the context of this change in attitudes, compulsory education was not threatening to most parents.

Indeed, Philippe Aries (1962) argues that the growth of formal schooling actually increased parents' contact with their children. Prior to the popularization of formal schooling for children, it was common for youngsters to spend a significant part of their formative years living and working with other families as servants or apprentices. This was standard practice in colonial America as well as in Europe. Formal schooling took the place of these outside work arrangements and kept children at home longer. Aries plausibly suggests that parents liked school for this very reason.

Many parents, then, looked on school with favor. First, they recognized that formal schooling for their children was a newly important path to

success in the adult world. Second, they preferred formal schooling to the old system of sending children out as servants. In consequence, compulsory education statutes, far from posing a challenge to parental authority, instead aided the realization of parents' own desires for their children. If compulsory education can be understood as consistent with parental preferences, then, we suggest, homework should be understood in much the same way from the parents' viewpoint: as a reinforcement of, rather than a challenge to, parental authority.

PARENT OPINIONS ON HOMEWORK

In the earliest part of the century, it is hard to find direct evidence of parent opinion on homework (apart from letters—allegedly from parents—printed in partisan publications like the *Ladies' Home Journal*). But indirect evidence can be found in the experience of some educators who tried to abolish homework in their schools. In 1913, one principal who had abolished homework admitted that he "incurred considerable opposition on the part of parents, who were so indoctrinated with the idea of home study in their own school days that they protested vigorously against its prohibition" (quoted in Bok, 1913). A fellow anti-homework warrior described the problem more succinctly: "I had to fight the parents: they felt that the pupils were not learning unless they carried home an armful of books every night" (Bok, 1913). A principal in Brooklyn agreed that the opponents of homework "will have to convert the parents" to their view ("Question of Homework for Children," 1913). After the Washington, D.C. schools abolished homework below sixth grade, parents made "many urgent requests" for homework (*Report of Board of Education, 1900-01, 1902*). In Lynn, Massachusetts, the superintendent likewise reported that parental protests against homework were exceedingly rare, and that many parents asked for homework for their children (*Annual Report of the School Committee, 1899-1900, 1900*). One commentator who doubted the value of homework conceded that "the chief objection against abandoning home study comes from parents," who "still believe that the pupil must be kept busy by long home work" (Hall-Quest, 1916). For those who wanted to abolish homework, then, parents were often obstacles rather than allies.

This indirect evidence of parental support for homework from the earliest part of the century is supported by direct evidence from later decades. Across the nation, in the period between the world wars, most parents—certainly not all—supported homework. They typically did not endorse large quantities of homework, but they wanted their children to spend some time daily studying at home on school assignments. In the early 1930s in western Pennsylvania, parents of children in grades one to eight found homework desirable by a margin of 78% to 22%. They expected

homework to begin as early as first grade, if only with 15 minutes a day, and to increase to an hour a day in the late elementary grades and junior high school (Smith, 1933).⁷A few years later in San Diego (San Diego City Schools, 1936), parents of junior high school children considered half an hour of homework per day "desirable."⁸ Meanwhile in Wisconsin, parents in one school reported the average homework load to be about 5 hours per week, and they agreed overwhelmingly that this was not enough. Four hundred three parents wanted more homework, and only 144 wanted less ("Do You Believe in Homework? Replies For and Against," 1936). When the Washington, D.C. school district considered abolishing homework (again) in 1926, it surveyed "citizens' associations, parent-teacher associations, and other civic groups." The members of these groups opposed the abolition of homework in Grades 1 to 6 by a margin of 5 to 1. These groups supported homework in junior and senior high schools in even greater majorities (*Report of Board of Education, 1900-01, 1902*). In a 1929 survey of parents in a New York City elementary school, less than 10% opposed homework (*New York Times, 1929*).

After World War II, parent opinion continued to run solidly on the side of homework. In 1950, 85% of parents of children in Pittsburgh public schools favored homework (Pittsburgh Schools, 1950). In 1953, most parents disagreed with the no-homework policy of Denver's elementary schools (McNiff & Sweet, 1957). In 1961, 88% of parents of children in Sacramento elementary schools favored homework, in opposition to the existing no-homework policy (Sacramento Board of Education, 1961). A nationwide Gallup poll in 1955 found that four times as many people favored more homework for high school students as those who wanted less (Bard, 1958). The crusade against homework had only limited success in changing school policy, and had unequivocally failed to change parent opinion.

An evocative and revealing expression of pro-homework sentiment by a parent, early in the 20th century, came from E. C. Brooks (Brooks, 1916), an education professor as well as a parent. Brooks was initially sympathetic to the conventional "progressive" education wisdom of his time regarding homework. When the teachers of his children told him that they would no longer have homework, he was "pleased ... very much." After all, "the teacher was the properly qualified person to supervise the children's study." "Moreover," Brooks remembered, "it was argued that the methods of teaching have so changed in these latter days that parents are unable to instruct the children in a way that will not conflict with the school methods." The teacher was the expert, whereas the parent was incompetent and should not meddle in his children's academic training. Brooks was a true believer. "Home study and home preparation should, therefore, give way to school study and school preparation."

This argument, as we saw earlier, was typical of the "progressive" anti-homework experts through the middle of the century. But Brooks was atypical: He changed his view 180 degrees when he saw the results in the form of his children's report cards. "Then home study and parental supervision were again inaugurated in my household regardless of the improvement in school methods." Brooks came to the belief that "Parental supervision of the activities of the child is an instinct." He also noticed that "children who received close attention from their parents tended to progress faster than those who came from homes where the attention was wanting."

Foreshadowing the conventional wisdom of the 1990s, Brooks argued that the anti-homework experts had it exactly backward: Rather than impeding learning, parents who were actively involved in their children's education fostered their academic progress. He concluded:

The school has tried to take over the whole task of educating the child, and this is both an impossible and an undesirable task as the schools are now organized. Many functions of the home, instead of being carried over to the school, should be restored to the home, and it is one of the functions of the school to restore them to the home and then aid the home in keeping them (Brooks, 1916).

Brooks understood the paradox that is central to our main argument: abolishing homework would expand the school's educational influence at the expense of the parents'. Abolishing homework was a tactic by which schools could seek to monopolize the education of children.

HOMEWORK AS A BOOST FOR PARENTAL AUTHORITY

Despite the denunciation of homework by educational experts throughout the first half of the 20th century, most parents continued strongly to support it: before World War I, during the interwar years, and following World War II. Excepting a few dissenting educators who bucked the anti-homework conventional wisdom, the views of experts on homework did not finally catch up to parent opinion until the mid-1950s and 1960s. For decades before that, parents around the country defied the "progressive" educators in their support for homework.

Why did parents like homework? We have seen one reason suggested above in Brooks' comments and in the recounts of local school battles fought by anti-homework crusaders: parents believed, despite contrary empirical findings presented by the experts, that children who did homework learned more. In 1936, one parent cited the educational value of homework and pleaded, "Let us not make silly weaklings of our

children" by abolishing it. Apart from its direct academic benefits, many parents also believed that homework fostered good character traits. Thus, one parent announced, "Homework is designed to develop responsibility and self-direction in children!" ("Do You Believe in Homework? Replies For and Against," 1936). An educator who favored homework supported this parental position, arguing that "What youth needs training in today is not more loafing, but in habits of more regular hard work—and for their best physical, mental and moral health, and happiness in the long run" (Myers, 1934).

And some parents appreciated homework simply because it kept their children home at night. In 1935, one pedagogue argued:

A moderate amount of "home work" is good for the great majority of high school boys and girls, if it serves no other purpose than to keep them off the streets, out of degrading movies, dance halls, night clubs, and the like, and to reduce the number of "necking" parties in parked cars along country roads. (Lyon, 1935).

Just as the growing prevalence of schooling in the 19th century paradoxically may have given parents more contact with children, so homework probably had a similar effect. Even if homework was designed for a different purpose, parents appropriated it for their own purposes. This should not surprise us. Steven Schlossman and Mary Odem found that some parents used the juvenile court to buttress their own authority against rebellious children (Odem, 1995; Schlossman, 1977). Linda Gordon likewise found that mothers used child-saving agencies to protect themselves against abusive husbands (Gordon, 1988). Clients frequently make use of social institutions for purposes of their own, purposes never intended by the designers of the institutions.

Parents used homework, then, as a tool to reinforce their own authority over their children—to keep them off the streets and at home. Parents also used homework as a tool to maintain some involvement in their children's education—and thus to reinforce their authority against that of the school. In 1936, one parent pointed out a use of homework that was rarely, if ever, recognized by the educational experts:

Homework is a wonderful connecting link between the parents and the child's school life; in fact, in some families it proves practically the only mutual school interest between the parents and the child. Not every parent has the time, or the inclination, to participate in the activities of the Parent-Teacher Associations and other school organizations, but every parent, regardless of the limited time available for such purposes, can spend a few minutes each day with

the child in discussing or assisting with a small amount of homework ("Do You Believe in Homework? Replies For and Against," 1936).

In our judgment, this "connecting link" argument was, and is, probably the single most important function of homework. Parents have few means by which to monitor the school and the progress of their children in the school. Homework gives parents direct knowledge (albeit inevitably incomplete) about the school's educational agenda and methods. It tells them what the school is doing and lets them—to the extent of their ability, inclination, and availability—oversee and participate in the education process by assisting their children with schoolwork. Homework also enables parents to make a preliminary judgment regarding their children's academic progress, and to engage the teacher in order to refine that preliminary judgment and help guide the child's future intellectual development. Homework, in short, is a rare and valuable mechanism of school accountability to parents.

In the first half of the 20th century, "progressive" educators appeared not to have understood and, certainly, not to have valued all this, but parents did. During the interwar period, the only notable public recognition of homework as a vital academic communication link came, not surprisingly, from the PTA. It declared that the number one advantage of homework was that it "keeps the parents in touch with the school program" (National Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1934). Some teachers, too, recognized homework's value for keeping parents informed. In western Pennsylvania, many teachers believed that homework had "a favorable effect upon the home." The most commonly cited favorable effect was that homework gave "parents some knowledge of what their children are doing in school" (Smith, 1933). Parents liked homework because it let them know what the school was teaching their children.

Twenty-five years later, some experts in education clearly began to get the message. A 1960 commentator echoed the point that the parent had made in 1936: Homework "serves as a means of communication between school and family" (Cline, 1960). Another expert reported the comments of a mother who believed that homework demonstrated the teacher's trust in parents: "It gives you a good feeling to know that the teacher thinks you've got enough sense to be of some help" (Boutwell, 1960).

The timing of educational experts' growing recognition of homework as communication was not accidental. The entire "progressive" education movement came under withering fire during the 1950s, as critics challenged the academic standards of most American classrooms. In 1955, the Progressive Education Association, which exerted enormous influence on educational reform ideas during the 1920s and 1930s, succumbed to this critical onslaught and went out of business. And the

reaction against "progressive" education that built steam in the early 1950s came to a head after the launch of Sputnik in 1957. A national cry went up for tougher academic standards and heavier student workloads. Gradually—though not for long—homework returned to favor, even among those who still considered themselves educational "progressives" (Gill & Schlossman, 2000).

In the year of *Sputnik*, the *NEA Journal* published an article entitled "What Parents Think About Homework" by Grace Langdon and Irving Stout (Langdon & Stout, 1957). The authors quoted several parents who regarded homework as communication. One mother offered, "I wish my kids had more homework; then maybe I'd know what the school was trying to teach them." Another said, "I like my children to bring work home at least once a week so I can check their lessons and see what they are doing." A father pointed out that "About the only time we ever see the teacher is when the school has open house. Homework is our only way of keeping up with what goes on."

Langdon and Stout not only acknowledged the importance of homework as communication, they also recognized that "a large majority" of parents wanted to collaborate with their children in doing the homework. Many schools, they argued, had followed the advice of "progressive" experts and operated with a "hands-off policy that says to parents by implication, "Times have changed, and you do not know how to do things as we do them. If you try to help, you will only interfere." One mother told the authors, "You can't imagine what a dumb bunny I felt like when Ted said the teacher didn't want us to help him with his subtraction because it would only mix him up." Ted's father described their frustration: "There we sat, not daring to do anything, while he worked and cried. What do you suppose he thought of us—not even knowing how to subtract!"

Langdon and Stout sympathetically reported the repeated question of parents: "Why don't the teachers tell us how they want the homework done in order that we can help?" The authors conceded the risk that different methods by teachers and parents might confuse children, but still they felt "the need of something better than the curt hands-off approach in dealing with the problem." Because "Homework is one message from the school that is heard and felt in every home," Langdon and Stout argued that schools should "develop a type of homework that says clearly and understandably to parents, "This is what we are trying to help your child to learn, and we hope you'll lend a hand" (Langdon & Stout, 1957). This was the communication/collaboration model of homework, pure and simple.

SCHOOL IMPERIALISM REVISITED

The complaints of these parents suggest the need for a radical reformulation of the claim by "progressive" educators that homework was a form of

school imperialism. These parents wanted homework precisely because they desired to remain active participants in their children's education throughout their schooling. Homework gave them a chance to find out what the school was teaching and to help their children learn. Without homework, parents were left out of the academic learning loop.

And their complaints suggest that, unfortunately, this was exactly what some educational experts and practitioners wanted. Ted's teacher was not unusual in making parents feel like "dumb bunnies" by telling them not to help their children. Even E. C. Brooks, an education professor, was asked (40 years earlier) not to meddle in his children's schoolwork. Many of the anti-homework crusaders simply did not trust parents as educators. As we saw earlier, educational reformers regularly expressed frustration that parents resisted (not always successfully) their efforts to abolish homework. These commentators made scant effort to hide their annoyance at the ignorance of parents who did not pay proper heed to expert voices. Indeed, the *Ladies' Home Journal* suggested that parents were the real problem. "Methods of instruction have so changed in the past generation," argued the *Journal* in 1900, "that the assistance of parents in the lessons of their children as often confuses as it helps them." Parental help with schoolwork not only was doomed to fail academically, but also might undermine the child's self-reliance, according to the *Journal*. "It is ... a grave question whether a lesson learned by a child with the assistance of a parent does not engender the habit of a dependence upon others" (Bok, 1900).

The *Ladies' Home Journal's* mistrust of the parental role in education was shared by many anti-homework crusaders throughout the twentieth century. One reason experts objected to homework was that they doubted that children could find in the home a place and time for study with good lighting and no distractions. Thus, one opponent of homework declared that "The environment of the average home is not such that a pupil could study satisfactorily, even if he wanted to do so" (Carver, 1937). And whenever the experts questioned the home study environment—as they did frequently—they implicitly questioned the ability and willingness of parents to support the homework enterprise. They also did not trust the parents to let the children do the homework themselves. Echoing the *Ladies' Home Journal's* concern about "dependent" children, one principal opposed to homework claimed that parents "coddled" their children by helping them (Bok, 1913). A teacher reinforced the *Journal's* claim that parental help confused children, by pointing out in 1912 that the abolition of homework eliminated the problem of lessons "solved with the blundering, injudicious assistance of the parent" ("Newark Central High School Experimenting with Plan to do Away with Homework by Dividing Periods so that First Half will be Devoted to New Studies and Second Half to Teacher Supervised Home Study," 1912).

These attitudes were as common in the interwar and post-War II years as they were in 1900, when Edward Bok and the *Ladies' Home Journal* launched the national anti-homework crusade. One educator of the 1930s lamented that "parents make a tragic mistake when they teach specific skills" (Schorling, 1934). A Mississippi superintendent agreed, arguing, "The child will become easily confused by having one type of instruction at home and another type in school" (Carver, 1937). And the Chicago school superintendent believed that many parents simply lacked the capacity to supervise homework correctly (*Literary Digest*, 1937). Even the National Congress of Parents and Teachers agreed that "Parents are seldom trained to supervise home study" (National Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1934). As late as 1960, pedagogues repeated the same arguments made in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in the early years of the century. "In the teaching of arithmetic," one commentator announced to parents, "the techniques, terminology, and concepts have so altered since your day that you may be merely confusing Johnny" (Downes, 1960). Parents were no more helpful with spelling. "Apparently most parents consider themselves, simply by virtue of being adults, expert spelling teachers. But the truth is they make so many educational blunders in this seemingly simple area that they are often doing more harm than good."

THE IMPERIAL SCHOOL AND PROGRESSIVISM

Experts' distrust of parents as educators followed logically from their faith in scientifically grounded pedagogical expertise. The progressive education movement shared with the broader progressive political movement a belief that the world's problems could be solved through the expert application of scientific knowledge. If the proper use of science could make the economy run smoothly and end political strife, it could certainly improve schooling as well, they believed.⁹

But few parents had access to the new scientific knowledge necessary to give their children the best possible education. Parents were not experts. The appropriate agents of scientific ("progressive") education would be a new cadre of teachers trained in the methods of project-based teaching and instilled with the wisdom of the new fields of child development, mental health, and intelligence and personality testing. Education, the anti-homework crusaders believed, should be entrusted entirely to expertly trained teachers who would apply their specialized pedagogical knowledge in specially designed school learning environments. The home could not duplicate the unique learning environment of the "progressive" classroom, and parents could not duplicate the expert knowledge of the teacher. According to this view, true educational reform was a school-centered, teacher-controlled affair.

These views implied that the best place for parents was out of the way, at least in matters academic. And many "progressive" educators, in fact, put considerable effort into getting parents out of the way. Occasionally before World War II and increasingly afterward, educational commentators began to acknowledge these longstanding anti-parent attitudes, lamenting the distance that schools tried to create between themselves and parents. Ernest G. Osborne of Teachers College was disturbed that the head of "a private 'progressive' school" had concluded "that parents were 'impossible,' that they disrupted the whole school program, and were far better off some other place." He criticized another school where, under an onslaught of "progressive" propaganda from the school, parents had resigned themselves to leaving their children's education completely in the hands of "expert" teachers (Osborne, 1935). Another educator noted that "It has been said that the respect of the parents for the school varies directly as the square of the distance which the parent is kept away from the school." He admitted:

If you do not allow the parent to know much about what is going on in the school, you are much safer and fool him into thinking it is pretty good work. If, however, you treat the parent with the same progressive attitude and ideas and technique which you have found to work with the children, I have found that the reverse is true, that the more you can get him into the school and into the spirit of the school, the greater is his respect for the school, if the school deserves respect (Smith, 1929).

One principal at a public school with an ambitious "progressive" agenda challenged a mother rather pointedly, asking her "Why do you come to the school with educational suggestions? We do not come into your home and tell you what you should give your child for breakfast" ("In the Sacred Name of Education," 1933). Another principal declared matter of factly that "Modern teaching is too complex for untrained persons to meddle with it" (Montgomery, 1940).

This brand of arrogance was not unusual among educational reformers in the first half of the century, and it added fuel to the anti-homework fire. For "progressive" educators tended to view homework as a huge pedagogical risk. First, it took part of the educational process out of what they perceived as the carefully controlled, laboratory-like environment of the classroom. Second, it opened up the possibility that "untrained persons"—the parents—might "meddle" with the teacher's scientifically designed education program. Especially during the 1930s, as the anti-homework crusaders reiterated with a vengeance the educational worthlessness of homework, they expressed concerns about parents' negative

impact on the educational process. In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, the school district advised parents that "pupils who have received no home help do better work above the third grade" (*Annual Report, 1931-32, 1932*). In the pages above we have seen other cases where experts found the inadequacy of parents to be an argument in favor of abolishing homework. These educators saw parents as, if not the enemy, at least an obstacle to "progressive" education.¹⁰

The anti-homework "progressives" thus had two complementary reasons to remove parents from the loop entirely by abolishing homework. The first was the direct educational benefit. Parents did not provide adequate physical study areas for their children, so children should study only in the school. Parents interrupted their children's home study, so children should study only in quiet classrooms. Parents hindered learning by trying to help their children with homework, so children should study only under the watchful eye of the teacher. In short, the problem was that parents inevitably maintained substantial educational authority over their children while they were at home. "Progressive" educators consequently proposed as much as possible to bypass parents altogether in educational affairs. They could achieve this end—run around parents—very effectively by abolishing homework.

The second, and related, benefit to abolishing homework was political. Parents often resisted the broader "progressive" agenda of educational reformers, both as it affected what went on in the classroom as well as with regard to homework. And homework kept them specifically informed about the school's educational agenda. It gave them insight into the school's methods and message; it was bound to reflect something about classroom practices. Abolishing homework would cut off parents' best source of information about the school. Possible parental resistance to the aims of "progressive" education could be nipped in the bud if parents knew next to nothing about what their children were doing every day in their "progressive" classrooms.¹¹

At the risk of oversimplification, we have now turned the "school imperialism" claims of the anti-homework crusaders' on their head. We do not deny that many critics of conventional homework assignments were motivated by credible fears for children's health and doubts about the connection between homework and academic achievement. But even these well-intentioned pedagogues must have known that most parents disagreed with their views. Paradoxically, the educators who might most appropriately be accused of empire building were not those who compelled students to do homework, but rather those who wished to abolish it. For the most part, teachers who assigned homework were only doing what parents wanted. Admittedly, some parents objected to homework. But these parents were rare exceptions, like members of the Amish community or small groups of

avant-garde parents who jumped on the anti-homework bandwagon early in the century, inspired by the "get out of nature's way" wing of the child study movement (Cremin, 1961; Schlossman, 1973). Most parents throughout the 20th century expected and welcomed homework because it kept them involved in the day-to-day experiences of their children's schooling, and because it permitted them to keep tabs on the school, the teachers, and their children's progress. Many of the pedagogues who advocated the abolition of homework chafed under even this limited parental oversight. They did not want parents to be centrally involved in their children's academic training. They resented the influence that parents still possessed over education, and they looked for ways to minimize that influence. In short, they aimed to expand the influence of the school at the expense of the parents. The "imperial school" sought not to assign lessons for study at home, but to abolish them.

PART III. CONCLUSION: PARENTS AND SCHOOLING TODAY

The super-charged rhetoric about homework that was common during the first half of the 20th century may appear quaint or alien to modern-day sensibilities. Today, E. C. Brooks's notion that children do better academically with parental help is the prevailing educational wisdom. Parents are rarely looked on (openly, at least) as obstacles to the proper schooling of their children. In one California community, probably not atypical, a school district statement explains to parents in detail the homework requirements of students all the way down to kindergarten. More significantly, the statement explicitly recognizes homework's value as a means of communication to parents (Moreno Valley Unified School District, n.d.).

But the consensus about homework that was evident in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is a historic anomaly. Over the course of the 20th century, we have found little agreement about homework among experts, teachers, and parents. The recent consensus may represent only a lull in the storm. And even if the homework debate is largely settled—that is, very few scholars, teachers, or parents seriously advocate "the end of homework," as do Kralovec and Buell (2000)—we have not yet reached a similar consensus over the broader issue of parental influence in schooling. In this context, the historical debate over homework has continued relevance.

Educators now generally agree that parents ought to be involved in schooling, because parental involvement translates into higher academic achievement.¹² But is parental involvement in education important only for this instrumental reason, or is it important for the more basic reason that parents have the right to guide the education of their children? The answer

to this question may force us to reconsider the way our society makes decisions about education. Parental involvement can mean many different things. Although parents and educators agree that parents must be "involved," they remain locked in a heated battle over who should take the lead in the education of children. The big underlying question is whether, in educational policymaking, the family ought to march to the beat of the school, or the school to march to the beat of the family?

This basic issue is raised in various contemporary debates in education, such as year-round schooling, busing, the distribution of condoms to students, and the teaching of values. The battles over homework that we have surveyed in this essay suggest that the decisions a school makes regarding these issues implicitly demonstrate the extent of the school's—and the state's—respect for the prerogatives of parents.

Notes

1 (Chaika, 2000; Davenport, 2002; Denny, 2000; Holloway, 2000; Hui, 2000; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Lukasiak, 2000; Natriello, 1997; Schevitz, 1999; Seligman, 1999; Strauss, 2000; Winerip, 1999; Zernike, 2000). We have elsewhere challenged the belief that homework loads have significantly increased in recent years or, indeed, have increased at all during the past half century (Gill & Schlossman, in press).

2 The validity of some of these claims may be doubtful (Cooper, 1989, 2001; Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

3 Kralovec and Buell appear to subscribe to this model. Indeed, they even employ the rhetoric of "colonization" (2000, p. 5), to describe the outside constraints that, in their judgment, reduce children's freedoms and burden their everyday lives.

4 Although she views homework mainly as motivational training, Janine Bempechat powerfully invokes the communication/collaboration model when she challenges the distinction between "family time" and "homework time" that is central to Kralovec and Buell. She asks (Bempechat, 2000), "Why can't homework be built into the time that we spend with our children as a family?" A recount of a debate between Bempechat and Kralovec and Buell at the Harvard Graduate School of Education provides more insight on the fundamental differences between them (Gavel, 2000).

5 Neither of these models, it should be noted, views homework primarily as a tool for academic achievement. We concede that most parents probably think of homework first in its academic function.

6 From different critical perspectives, Lawrence Cremin and Diane Ravitch demonstrate the dominance of the "progressive" paradigm between the 1890s and the 1950s (Cremin, 1961; Ravitch, 2001).

7 These time estimates were median responses.

8 Half an hour per day was the median response. The picture is complicated by another survey response: 59% of responding junior high school parents preferred that "all required study be done at school." This is surprising, because it is inconsistent with virtually every other parent opinion poll we have seen, all of which suggest that most parents support homework. Perhaps California parents, like California school districts, were more "progressive" than their counterparts in the rest of the nation. Or perhaps this anomaly resulted from sampling bias or the unusual phrasing of the question, which apparently did not include the word "homework."

This interpretation is consistent with the parental preference for half an hour of homework, and with the additional survey result that 53% of parents did not consider existing homework requirements (which ignored an official prohibition) "excessive."

9 A large historical literature analyzes the appeal of science to the "progressive" mindset (Callahan, 1962; Crunden, 1982; Drost, 1967; Haber, 1964; Lasch, 1977; Rodgers, 1998; Rothman, 1980; Tyack, 1976; Wiebe, 1967).

10 Along these lines, consider the argument of Etta Kralovec, coauthor of *The End of Homework*, as reported in Newcomb (2000): "Homework disempowers teachers and deprofessionalizes them... Homework is a black hole—teachers can't monitor who's doing the work, and they have a hard time following academic progress when they don't have complete control over the work kids do." The idea that schools ought exclusively to direct the academic development of children has been a strong undercurrent in some quarters of "progressive" education for the past century.

11 There was a curious disjuncture in early 20th century "progressive" thought regarding relations between parents and experts during the pre-school versus the school-age years. For the pre-school ages, the "progressives" strongly advocated, via the wildly popular parent education movement, that parents study and apply directly in their households the child-rearing advice of leading experts in child health and child psychology. But the parent education movement, with perhaps the partial exception of Sidonie Gruenberg, had remarkably little to say to parents about their educational role once the children entered the elementary grades and beyond (Grant, 1998; Schlossman, 1976, 1981, 1983; Wollons, 1990).

12 *The Policy Statement on Homework*, California State Board of Education, November 8, 1995, contains the following statement on parent involvement: "Ask parents, guardians, and other care providers to be involved and provide the tools for meaningful participation. Homework, particularly for students in the elementary grades, provides significant opportunities to enhance direct parent involvement, such as reading out loud. At the middle and high school levels, the nature of parent involvement changes, but its importance remains. School-home communication is exceedingly important with regard to homework and its place in student learning and achievement." A letter dated September 29, 1997, from Delaine Eastin, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, California Department of Education, and Yvonne W. Larsen, president, California State Board of Education, to school superintendents and principals throughout the state also observes that homework "is a significant experience that provides parents an opportunity to share in their child's education and success."

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