

Guest Blogger Jenny: Private Elementary School Homework: Too Much, Too Little, or Just Right?

Description



Homework used to just be a given in school, the thing you had to do upon your return to home. I don't remember anyone helping me much, or asking me about it, or registering complaints with the teacher regarding it. It just was.

Cut to today's schools, full of different homework policies and parents often tearing their hair out over nightly homework battles. Kids are crying. Kids are losing stuff. Parents are scratching their heads over math they once knew but now can't fathom explaining. Tutors are hired. Tutors are fired. And everyone wonders if the situation is the same at another school.

After speaking with a couple of friends, I've come to the conclusion that there's no cohesive homework policy at work anywhere. Volume and difficulty runs a wide range.

For instance, my daughter is in 4th grade at Mirman. Mirman has a deserved reputation for being academically demanding, and I had heard horror stories regarding the homework situation. The horror seems unfounded. My daughter manages her own homework workload, receiving most of it on a Monday and having it due Friday. She then, with the help of a whiteboard calendar, parcels the work out through the week. Sometimes she over or underestimates and has a particularly light or heavy night of work, but for the most part it takes her an average of about 40 minutes per night. That's hardly a punishing amount. The only problem she has is in organizing the various folders and notebooks she has, many of which fail to make it into her backpack and to school. Obviously, we need to work on that.

Compare that homework scenario, though, with the one at a traditional private school in Hancock Park. My friend's daughter is in 3rd grade, and her homework quantity suddenly skyrocketed after the holiday break. Her daughter (an amazing student), used to around 30 minutes of work per night, was suddenly laboring for three hours. And when my friend consulted other parents in the class, they reported the same phenomenon: kids staying up past 9 pm, crying, miserable and overworked. The ramp up of the workload seemed mysterious, the teachers' goals unclear, and the parents pretty much confused. Obviously, some investigation into the sudden change in the homework curriculum needs to happen.

How does the private school homework compare to public school? Again, it seems totally inconsistent. My daughter attended Third St. Elementary until last fall. The homework situation seemed relatively light, but if there was work that took her longer than ten minutes, it was either some extra-special busywork or a project (meaning I had to do the project, too. Joy). But one friend who sends her two kids to a very popular charter school has a different take on homework, since the load and approach varies from teacher to teacher. Her fourth grade son gets his work on a Monday and has to spread it out (Mirman style), plus he also has 30 minutes of reading a night; his teacher isn't a huge stickler. But her second grade level daughter has a tougher, more traditional teacher and the load seems somehow bigger.

Perhaps the most reasonable approach to the homework question is the ten-minute rule, meaning that in kindergarten and first grade students get ten minutes of homework, with ten minutes added each subsequent grade level. Looking at it that way, my daughter's 40 minutes a night, in fourth grade, seems perfectly doable. Homework at The Willows operates much the same way, with homework building by grade level, and often assigned on a Monday and collected on a Friday. At The Willows, homework seems very much linked together to a united theme and is completely tied to what they're studying. The result? No busy work.

Keep in mind, though, that while such amounts do no harm, they might not do any good, either. There are no studies linking rigorous homework in elementary school with any sort of scholastic success later on; indeed, the hardworking Japanese have been doing away with elementary school homework, and they seem pretty academically successful.

While it might seem helpful and informative to ask about a private school's homework "policy" at an informational interview, the answer might not really reflect the reality. Overall, homework seems to depend on the teacher, not on the school. And, really, that might be better, because if you're unhappy about your child's homework load, it's far easier to approach one teacher than fight an entire school's policy and philosophy. *Jenny Heitz has worked as a staff writer for Coast Weekly in Carmel, freelanced in the South Bay, and then switched to advertising copywriting. Her daughter started 4th grade at Mirman School this year. She previously attended 3rd St. Elementary School. Jenny has been published recently in the Daily News. She now writes about gift ideas and products on her blog, [Find A Toad](#).*

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