

EDITORIAL DESK

No More Teachers, Lots of Books

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SCHOOL is letting out for the summer, the final bell signaling the precious, unadulterated joy that comes with months of freedom stretching out ahead. But for many students that feeling will never come. Instead, summer these days often means more textbook reading, papers, exams and projects. It's called "vacation homework," an oxymoron that overburdens our children and sends many back to school burnt out and sick of learning.

Last summer, for example, students at one charter school in the Bronx were assigned 10 book reports, a thick math packet, a report on China including a written essay and a handmade doll in authentic costume and a daily log of their activities and the weather. Their parents say they are hoping this summer will be different, but who knows what drudgery will be assigned now that they've finished second grade?

An anomaly? Hardly.

Fifth and sixth graders in a Golden, Colo., public middle school are required to keep a journal on a different math topic each week this summer, read three books and complete a written and artistic report on two of them.

And what about high schoolers -- just a little light reading to ease teenage angst? One ninth grader we know was assigned a packet of materials on the Holocaust. Another must read a 656-page book on genocide, on top of three chapters of a science textbook followed by a 15-page take-home exam, prepare a 20-slide PowerPoint presentation and complete an English assignment involving three books and essays.

All parents want their children to be happy, healthy and competitive in a highly competitive world. But is year-round homework -- or the nightly homework marathons during the school year, for that matter -- the way to achieve it?

As adults know, a break from work is a necessary antidote for stress. We need what psychologists call "consolidation," the time away from a problem when newly learned material is absorbed. Often we return from a break to discover that the pieces have fallen into place. Too many of our children today are denied that consolidation time. And when parents are told that their children's skills will slip without summer homework, we have to wonder: if those skills are so fragile, what kind of education are they really getting?

In fact, there's serious doubt about whether homework has any benefit at all. Most studies have found little or no correlation between homework and achievement (meaning grades and test scores) in elementary school or middle school. According to Harris Cooper of Duke University, the nation's

leading researcher on the subject, there is a clear correlation among high school students, but he warns that "overloading them with homework is not associated with higher grades."

Yet very few teachers have ever taken a course on homework or know what the research shows, and many told us homework assignments are an "afterthought."

Another claimed benefit of homework -- instilling responsibility and self-discipline -- is undermined when homework is so overwhelming that parents routinely have to help their children every step of the way.

In fact, most experts believe reading is the most important educational activity. Yet a poll released last week by Scholastic and Yankelovich found that the amount of time youngsters spend reading for fun declines sharply after age 8. The No. 1 reason given by parents: too much homework.

So, what's a parent to do? While it might be too late to challenge this summer's assignments, it's not too early to gather like-minded parents and get a head start on changing next year's policy. If your children just can't bear taking that Holocaust folder on vacation, give them permission not to read it and promise you'll take it up with teachers or school administrators in the fall. Encourage your children to read, play games, write stories and even experience a little boredom. It might just bring out their innate creativity.

In 2000, parents in Arlington, Va., banded together and took complaints about summer homework to the school board, spurring an overhaul of the district's policy. More parents around the country should stop complaining to each other and let school officials know that they won't stand by as large parts of our sons and daughters' childhoods are stolen for no good reason. Our children will grow up happier and healthier -- and perhaps even have time to read a good book.