School students are facing more homework than ever, but does it do them any good?

Year 9 student Eugenia Axarlis worked on her homework until 11.30pm the other night. The Shelford Girls' Grammar student spent four hours working on a writing assignment about a city sculpture.

In the end she took a shower to "calm down" and called it quits. Homework has reduced Eugenia to tears before - and she is not alone.

Like most schools, Shelford expects year 9 students to average one to two hours of homework a night.

But as Imogen Kroker, also in year 9 at Shelford, has found, the workload can fluctuate, along with the anxiety levels. "Some nights we have absolutely nothing and then other nights you have two or three things," she says.

Imogen says if she does a bit each night it's not so bad. "But if you let it build up all week and then you try to finish everything in one night, it can be pretty stressful."

For every student who complains of too much homework, there is a teacher who argues the student didn't manage their time properly.

Homework remains a contentious issue at home, school and among educationists - so much so that some parents are calling for it to be banned.

Tasmanian State School Parents and Friends president Jenny Branch began a campaign last week to stop teachers setting homework in primary and high schools. "I really want someone to show me homework is beneficial," she says.

"If it is not, I don't think we should be having it."

Parents Victoria does not object to homework but executive officer Gail McHardy says each school must have a policy developed in consultation with parents, students and teachers.

Reaching agreement can be tricky.

Parents Victoria has conducted two focus groups of parents which found they were divided 50-50 on the value of homework. Ms McHardy, says parents either strongly supported it or didn't believe in any.
Latest research at RMIT University backs the latter view. Jacinta Cashen has just completed her master's degree on homework in primary schools at RMIT. She analysed previous research, and conducted a small-scale study at an inner-Melbourne school.

Ms Cashen says there is no conclusive evidence that homework leads to higher academic results, or that encouraging children to study at a young age leads to good study habits in senior years.

Despite these findings, the amount of homework being given is increasing, she says.

Ms Cashen, also the president of the Victorian Council of School Organisations and a former teacher, says many teachers and parents don't believe homework is useful - but teachers assign it because of parental pressure to do so, and parents ask for it because they feel they should.

In his new book, The Homework Myth, former teacher Alfie Kohn argues that the reasons given for homework - higher academic achievement, increased self-discipline and sense of responsibility - are generally not substantiated by research.

"But this has rarely prompted serious discussion about the need for homework, nor has it quietened demands that even more be assigned," says Mr Kohn, an American who has written eight books on education and human behaviour.

He says the negatives of homework include: the burden on busy parents to act as homework monitors; the stress on children to complete it and do well; family conflict that often leads to nagging parents and upset children; children having less time for other activities, such as exercise, social interaction, rest, reading and "hanging out with parents"; and children having less interest in learning.

Despite this, he says, many parents unquestioningly believe that homework is critical to academic success.

That's not Shelford principal Pam Chessell's experience. "Homework is a hoary chestnut. Some parents here want none, others want double and we could never set enough."

She believes the benefits far outweigh the occasional bad night a student might have. "In my view, the value of homework is in developing attributes: self-discipline, planning, self-motivation, capacity to work independently, development of intellectual discernment," she says.

Shirley Grundy, Deakin University's dean of education, can see both sides. One argument is that schools should teach all that children need to learn in class, she says. On the other hand, homework is an opportunity for them to become independent learners.

Teachers who don't set homework are regarded as "slightly deficient or uncaring", she says.

A former primary-school teacher, Professor Grundy does not believe children up to about years 5 or 6 should do homework other than reading practice.

If they have worked hard at school all day, "they need time afterwards to play and be children", she says.

But she says upper-primary and secondary-level students may need homework to develop independent study skills.

Many parents question whether homework is independent work. Too often mum or dad are drawn in
to help with tasks that the child claims weren't covered in class. Parents can also be exasperated by the scale of some projects.

Professor Grundy says teachers must be clear about why they are setting homework. "This might be to reinforce or extend what has been done in class, to practise skills or become an independent learner. Students will pick up if a teacher gives homework without a purpose - if they don't assess it quickly or feed it back into the learning program."

Jane d'Oliveyra, director of the Middle School at Shelford, agrees that "home study should reinforce learning in the classroom" and "be a positive experience for all family members."

"If students struggle to complete the set work, they are encouraged to discuss this with their teachers to determine a suitable load," she says.

But what constitutes a fair load is hotly debated.

While Ms Cashen at RMIT believes the amount of homework is increasing, Camberwell High School year level co-ordinator Richard Geddes believes this is wrong. He says the time commitment expected from students hasn't really changed that much in his 40 years in teaching.

"In year 7, we would expect around about an hour a night, five times a week, and a little more over weekends. In year 12, it's about three hours a night. I don't think the time spent on homework has necessarily increased. It's more about the other things going in a student's life - sports, music lessons, part-time jobs. I think it's a reality of modern life. Having after-school activities makes it harder to develop a regular commitment to other things and that sometimes impinges on homework."

He says students often tell parents that they don't have any homework. "But, at high-school level there usually is always something - even if it's just half an hour of quiet reading," Mr Geddes says.

Parents, he says, should always be involved. "Showing an interest lets the student know that you are interested. Even if you don't understand it enough to help them with it, sometimes just talking them through it can help."

This can be more onerous than it sounds.

With five children aged 11 to 27, Kate Austin has had lots of homework to supervise over the years and is aware of the fine line between helping and taking over. "There's a definite role to assist with organisation with homework but the temptation to do it with them has to be avoided. They ask too many questions and you sometimes give them the answers without thinking. You have to get them to utilise their own resources."

In earlier years, homework often meant going to the library to pore over textbooks. Thankfully these days, her youngest daughter, Rachel, 11, can do her research on the internet.

As a year 6 student at Toorak Primary School she brings home about one hour of homework each week night. "It can be tough," Rachel says, but she is used to it now.

Homework is harder for migrant or refugee families to adjust to, partly because parents can't help much.

The Carlton Library Homework Club, run in conjunction with Carlton/Parkville Youth Services, is one of many programs available in libraries and government schools to children from
non-English-speaking backgrounds.

At times most parents will find themselves struggling to help. Private tutoring is particularly popular for subjects such as mathematics.

Frances Paroissien, director of Hendersons Educational Services, says many parents lack confidence - and sometimes they feel the tasks set are pointless.

"Because there is so much commercially prepared material available, some teachers give worksheets and tasks for homework which are not relevant to the teaching done in class," she says.

Despite such criticisms, psychologist Evelyn Field remains a strong advocate of homework, even from a young age. She says children's attention wanders for about a third of their time in class, whether it's "daydreaming about lunch, an argument they had with their brother that morning, or what the teacher is wearing". Homework is an opportunity to go over what they have covered that day.

However, Ms Field says it has a deeper purpose, including instilling a sense of resilience and responsibility. "It's about using your potential and extending it further, and teaching children that if they persist, if they keep working, they will see an improvement. They are learning the ability to learn and to value study for its own sake."

Some schools avoid the bogey of homework by calling it something else.

St Michael's Grammar School in St Kilda talks about "out-of-school work". Rather than traditional homework, this can include sport, music and time with families for its prep to year 12 students, says head Simon Gipson. "Too often homework is set because schools believe it should be set, not because it is directly related to, or enhances, the learning."

Prep to year 4 children already do a full day's work, so are not given set academic tasks each night, adds head of junior school Annabelle Knight. Instead, each Monday teachers ask the students, in consultation with parents, to choose from a list of out-of-school work for that week.

These activities might include practising measurements by baking a cake, learning maths tables by creating a rap dance, or playing a board game with their family. Children can negotiate which nights they do these activities and fit them around, say, violin or soccer practice.

Ms Cashen's RMIT research also found that "learning at home" - through such activities as discussions, family outings, sport and music - was very important.

The parents, teachers and students she interviewed were opposed to "old-fashioned, teacher-directed" homework, such as worksheets, endless projects and spelling lists - all of which had a loose connection to what was done in class.

Ms McHardy of Parents Victoria sees individualised school policies as essential. These should define what is homework, be flexible, and take into account students' backgrounds. The policy should touch on issues such as: equity - whether, for example, all children have access to computers and books; parents' education levels; the number of children in families, whether most parents work full-time; and whether many families are single, separated or blended.

Other issues are the ages of children - years 8 and 9 may need more prompting to do their homework - and individual learning styles and work habits. "For example, homework diaries can be good for children who aren't very organised, but others who always do their homework may resent
having to have them signed," says Ms McHardy.

Whatever the attitude to homework, Camberwell High's Richard Geddes says failure to do it still inspires creative excuses.

"There aren't as many dogs eating homework these days," Mr Geddes says. "But there are quite a few computer crashes and lots of printers without ink."

**THE EXTRA HARD YARD:**
**HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?**

**State Government guidelines**

**Prep to year 4:** Mainly daily reading, plus practising skills or gathering extra information. Up to 30 minutes a day, none on weekends or vacations.

**Years 5 to 9:** Daily independent reading and extension of classwork (projects, essays, research). Should be co-ordinated across secondary teachers to avoid unreasonable workloads. Between 30 and 45 minutes a day (year 5), and 45 to 90 minutes a day (year 9).

**Years 10 to 12:** One to three hours per week night, with up to six hours on weekends at VCE level.

**Shelford Girls' Grammar guidelines**

**Prep to year 2:** 10-15 minutes a night, including reading and occasional research.

**Years 3 to 4:** 30 minutes a night including formal and informal tasks.

**Years 5 and 6:** 40 minutes a night including formal and informal tasks.

**Year 7:** 1 hour, building to 1 1/2 hours over the course of the year.

**Year 8:** 1-1 1/2 hours

**Year 9:** 1 1/2-2 hours

**Year 10:** 2 hours

**Year 11:** 2-2 1/2 hours

**Year 12:** 3 hours

**HOME STUDY - THE GREAT DIVIDE**

**The academic**

There is no conclusive evidence that homework leads to higher academic results, or that encouraging children to study at a young age leads to good study habits in later years, says Jacinta Cashen (left), who has just completed research on homework at RMIT University.

**Parents groups**

Tasmania: "If homework is not beneficial, I don't think we should be having it," says the president of Tasmanian State School Parents and Friends, Jenny Branch.

Victoria: Supports homework so long as each school has a policy, developed with parents, teachers and students, says executive director of Parents Victoria, Gail McHardy.

**The US author**

Reasons given for homework, such as higher academic achievement, are not substantiated by research, says Alfie Kohn, author of the new book *The Homework Myth*.

**The principal**

Homework develops attributes such as self-discipline, planning and the ability to work independently, says Shelford Anglican Girls' Grammar principal Pam Chessell.

**The classroom teacher**

Homework is quiet, contemplative time that is great for reviewing work away from a class full of other noisy students, says Camberwell High School year level co-ordinator Richard
Geddes.

The psychologist
Homework instils a sense of resilience and responsibility, says Evelyn Field.

The student
Homework can be tough, but is mostly fun, says Rachel (right), in year 6 at Toorak Primary School.