

Michael Gove scraps homework rules

Schools have been given the go-ahead to reduce the amount of homework they set for pupils after complaints from parents that studies are cutting in to family time.



Kirstie Allsopp, the television presenter who has campaigned against homework in primary schools, last night welcomed Mr Gove's move Photo: AP

By Julie Henry, Education Correspondent

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Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, has scrapped national guidelines which set out how much time children should spend doing homework each night. Instead, head teachers will decide how much extra study, if any, their pupils require.

Officials said that the aim was to cut bureaucracy, and insisted that homework would remain an important part of education.

However, the move was welcomed by parents who have called for less homework to be handed out.

Kirstie Allsopp, the television presenter who has campaigned against homework in primary schools, last night welcomed Mr Gove's move and said: "Getting rid of the guidelines might free up teachers to think a bit more creatively about it".

Under the old guidelines, introduced by Labour in 1998, primary schools were told to set an hour of homework a week for children aged five to seven, rising to half an hour a night for seven-to-11-year-olds. Secondary schools were told to set 45 to 90 minutes a night for pupils aged 11 to 14, and one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours a night for those aged 14 to 16.

While the rules were not statutory, teachers came under pressure to follow them as they were said to give "a clear idea of what is reasonable to expect at different ages". They also allowed parents to challenge teachers who set more, or less, than the recommended level. Many schools reproduced the guidelines in their own homework policies.

Supporters of homework warned scrapping the guidelines could lead to some schools abandoning it altogether, to spare teachers the trouble of extra marking.

Opposition has grown towards the guidelines, fuelled by an anti-homework movement in the United States and research questioning the efficacy of such assignments, particularly in primary schools.

Teachers complain about chasing up missing work and argue that it causes upset among the youngest pupils, while parents have claimed that too much study is making children anxious and reducing the time available for sports and play.

Some primaries have already abandoned traditional homework. Since September Frittenden Church of England Primary, in Kent, has replaced it with an optional weekly 45-minute homework club.

Elizabeth Bradshaw, the head teacher, said: "We had feedback from parents, or notes to the teachers, saying 'my child is very worried that they haven't completed it on time', or the child would come in to the classroom in tears because they had left it in the car. We simply wanted to remove that stress and focus on the learning for that week in a homework club where it is done, marked, and informs the learning of the next week."

Ryde School, a primary in Hatfield, Hertfordshire, regards activities such as a walk in the countryside, playing board games and cooking as "homework".

Its policy states: "Children are not little adults and therefore cannot be expected to study at home as adults do. Children spend six hours a day at school and are usually tired or 'filled' with school learning by the end of the day. Homework must be kept to a minimum and be of a light, relaxed nature."

The Department for Education said yesterday that the shake-up formed part of the Government's plan to give more autonomy to schools.

Allsopp, who has two children and two stepchildren, said: "If you have three children, what happens to the other children while the parent is settled in the corner helping each one with their half an hour of homework? Eating a pizza alone. It ends up separating families at that key time.

"Learning at home should be about people doing things together as a family – reading a book, eating, watching an interesting documentary, attending an exhibition that ties in with what the child has been doing at school. These things are incredibly important. What I am 'anti' is the silly task set by a teacher to tick a box.

"Sometimes homework can set child against parent. I remember someone I'm very close to was in Sainsbury's and the child was in tears saying 'We've got to go, mummy – if I don't do my homework I won't be allowed in the playground tomorrow'. It is very important that parents back up what goes on in school, that is paramount. But some homework is almost adversarial."

But Chris McGovern, a former head teacher and chairman of the Campaign for Real Education, warned that scrapping the guidelines could send the 'wrong message' to schools.

He said: "The danger is that schools will use this as an excuse to dilute the amount of homework. Middle-class children will do their homework anyway. Guidance for children who are coming from more deprived backgrounds is probably more important."

Professor Alan Smithers, director of the Centre for Education and Employment at Buckingham University, said: "I'm all in favour of trusting schools but I hope that Ofsted will check that appropriate amounts of homework are being set.

"There's a risk in abandoning the guidelines that some schools and some teachers will see it as the green light to get rid of the unwelcome burden of marking lots of homework."

A Department for Education spokesman said: "Homework is part and parcel of a good education, along with high quality teaching and strong discipline. "We trust head teachers to set the homework policy for their school. They know their pupils best and should be free to make these decisions without having to adhere to unnecessary bureaucratic guidance."

The shake-up comes as a new study by London's Institute of Education reveals that homework, even in small amounts, boosts the academic attainment and social skills of secondary school pupils.

The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project showed that homework was linked to improvements in 14-year-olds' academic prowess and social skills as well as reductions in levels of aggression and impulsiveness.

Lisa Trotman, a mother of two, from Bristol, said homework could cause friction at home but helped prepared children for the workload of secondary school.

Her son Cameron, 11, who is in his final year at primary school is set homework on Friday evening which must be handed in by Wednesday.

"If I can catch him when he's still in school mode, we get it done quite smoothly," said Mrs Trotman. "Otherwise it's prodding and pushing, cajoling and encouraging over the weekend.