

Business	A35
Corrections	A22
Editorials/Opinion	A30
Flash!	A19
Long Island	A20
Lottery	A75
Nation	A28
Obituaries	A42
Reaching Newsday	A22
TV listings	C22
Weather	A34
World	A29

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TOP STORIES

DEBATING END TO

LI parents, educators see pros and cons of eliminating traditional study method

BY JOIE TYRRELL

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Homework brings out strong opinions in Long Island dads Kelvin Guzman and John Cramer.

Guzman, who lives in Freeport, wants his 7-year-old to bring home assignments from school. It's how he tracks his son's progress. Cramer, of Hicksville, is tired of seeing his 11-year-old daughter loaded down with homework. He wants her to have a life outside the classroom.

Their opposite views exemplify a nationwide debate about homework that made its way to Long Island last month, when the Long Beach school district opted to eliminate traditional homework for grade-schoolers. Come fall, students in grades K-5 will be encouraged instead to read in the evening. Public school systems in Florida, Maryland, Tennessee, Vermont and Washington have enacted similar policies.

The Long Beach district has roughly 1,600 children who attend four elementary schools; the system's overall enrollment is about 3,700.

"The idea is to make reading central ... and to make sure learning time at home is filled with tasks that actually DO encourage learning," said Jennifer Gallagher, the Long Beach superintendent. "And we want to be sure that after-school time also allows for family time and free play, both of which provide benefits in educating the whole child."

Not only are parents lining up on both sides — so are educators. Homework reinforces classroom lessons and helps build a sense of responsibility, its supporters say. Opponents make the case that after-school assignments can stifle development of broader interests and should take place under a teacher's guidance.

The pros

Long Beach's decision has been praised by local and state education experts, including the state Parent Teacher Associa-

tion, as well as Cramer and some of his fellow parents.

"Sometimes they give you homework during the weekend and that's usually when you have more stuff to do. And then if you get homework during the weekend it's taking over your life even more," said Cramer's daughter, Emma.

Alan J. Singer, an education professor at Hofstra University, points out that the Long Beach district isn't eliminating all homework but merely cutting out "rote assignments" that have been a way to get students ready to take standardized exams. "Learning is more important than test prep and we want them to do more creative work, rather than repeating rote assignments over and over again," Singer said.

Last year, Washington state's Vancouver public schools, near Portland, Oregon, changed its homework policy. Now, the roughly 24,000-student district doesn't give any assignments to children in grades K-3, and fourth- and fifth-graders receive two to four assignments a week that shouldn't take more than 45 minutes to complete.

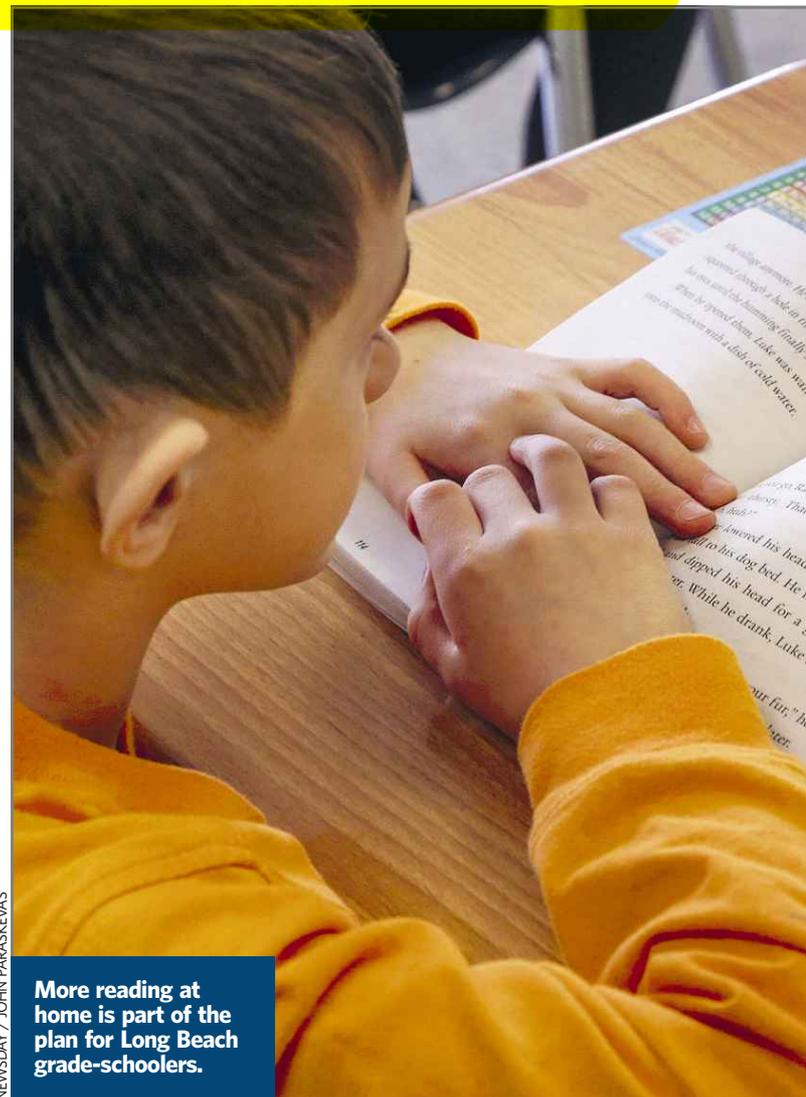
"Learning happens when children are engaged in different interests, even play," Debra Hale, Vancouver's executive director of teaching and learning, said in a statement.

For Linda Kraemer, an education professor at Molloy College in Rockville Centre, the Long Beach district is making "absolutely the right move."

"Learning should be taking place with the support of the teacher and sending kids home to learn things they didn't have time to do in the day — that is a problem," Kraemer said.

Reading is a better predictor of academic achievement, Kraemer said, noting that a child who reads for a minute a day will see a few thousand words a year, while a child who reads for 20 minutes will see more than a million words.

Long Beach families can do many enriching activities in place of homework, said Kraemer, who once taught grade school herself, "like working on



NEWSDAY / JOHN PARSKEVIAS

More reading at home is part of the plan for Long Beach grade-schoolers.

a puzzle together or doing a craft or tending a garden or going to the library. There are tons of opportunities for learning that don't look like homework."

The cons

The Long Beach decision directly affects Shamon Sanders, who has a first-grader in the district's East Elementary School. He disagrees with it: "Homework is a major part of learning. It's really important."

Duke University's Harris Cooper published studies, one in 1989 and one in 2006, that show Sanders may be on to something. His review of dozens of studies points to a number of positives that stem from homework, including the opportunity for parents to express a positive attitude toward education and

track their child's progress in school. And students who do math problems or practice spelling words with their parents do better on tests, said Cooper, a professor in Duke's psychology and neuroscience department.

"I am glad my grandchild doesn't go to these schools," said Cooper, referring to schools that don't assign homework. "I want them to bring that little bit home so I can see what's going on."

Instead of scrapping after-school assignments, Cooper recommends that districts put a time limit on homework that increases as a child advances grades. For example, a first-grader's homework should not last longer than 10 minutes, and a second-grader should do no more than 20 minutes. It shapes behavior and teaches time management, he said.

HOMEWORK



What's ahead for Long Beach students

When Long Beach grade-school students return to the classroom in September, their homework won't be what is considered traditional assignments like math drills or spelling words. Instead, they will be encouraged to read with their parents.

Superintendent Jennifer Gallagher told parents in a note at the end of this school year that she wants every family "to WRaP: WONDER, READ and PLAY."

The notion will be introduced in a video that the district will roll out in the fall. Also coming are reading suggestions as well as a "menu" of other activities that parents can do with their children.

Right now, Gallagher said, a team of staff members is preparing accountability measures for reading as an after-school assignment.

For example, younger students can draw pictures about a setting or a key plot development in a book that they have read, and older students can create presentations about the themes they have read. Students can discuss books, plots or themes in online discussion groups.

Long Beach school officials have invited Hofstra University to partner with the district's curriculum committee to review the change and its effectiveness.

"We are committed to doing what's best for students — if we need to change or modify our practice, we will certainly do that," Gallagher said.

Ken Smolka has three sons and falls squarely in Cooper's camp. The Farmingdale dad said he thinks homework sharpens their learning skills by making them review what they accomplished in class. In addition, he said, "they learn to accept responsibility."

Brian Fritsch of High Achievement New York, a private advocacy group that supports statewide assessments, calls an end to traditional homework "shortsighted."

"While it is important to maintain a balance for students inside and outside of the classroom, homework plays a role in reinforcing classroom learning and in helping students develop a sense of responsibility, along with other positive habits," Fritsch said. "It should

be left to the teachers — who are responsible for kids every school day — to decide what is best for the students in their classroom."

New York State United Teachers, the statewide teachers union, doesn't have a stance on homework, saying it is a local issue. The Long Beach Classroom Teachers Association couldn't be reached for comment.

Rita Norman thinks her middle-school student should have homework with reading mixed in. "To her she would never want to do homework, she would never want to read. But then, you have to go in: 'OK, you have to do it,'" the Central Islip mom said, referring to her daughter. "We'll help you as far as we can and then you have to

comprehend."

Debate aside, the New York State School Boards Association expects other districts will be watching what happens in Long Beach. "The staff at Long Beach are looking out for the best overall results from the students and it will be interesting to see how the no-homework policy rolls out," said Al Marlin, the association's communications manager.

The superintendent of the Patchogue-Medford school district, Michael Hynes, likes what he sees in Long Beach.

"I believe it is an amazing step," Hynes said. "I believe it embraces the whole-child approach and most important, is what's best for children."

With *Keshia Clukey, Raisa Camargo and Craig Schneider*



The driver of this Saturn sedan was killed when a tire struck it.

Cops: Man says tire his

A driver who believes his tire was the one that crashed into a car and killed another driver on Sunrise Highway has come forward and is cooperating with police, authorities said.

Suffolk County police said Saturday that Joseph Nickel, 48, of Islip, contacted them to say he was driving a 2002 Ford F-350 pickup at 2:15 p.m. Thursday while towing a 2004 Ringo trailer heading east on Sunrise Highway and later noticed he was missing a tire.

David Dorazio, 60, of Linden-

hurst, was driving west on Sunrise Highway near Exit 39 in West Babylon when a tire struck his Saturn sedan Thursday afternoon, killing him, and then hit an SUV on the highway. No one was injured in the SUV.

Police said Nickel is cooperating and his truck and trailer were impounded for a safety check as part of the investigation. Authorities said Saturday he has not been charged with any crimes or vehicle violations.

— JOHN ASBURY

Five in NJ family die in Del. crash

TOWNSEND, Del. — Police say five people killed Friday in a crash on a Delaware highway were a 61-year-old father from New Jersey and his four daughters.

Delaware State Police on Saturday did not release the names of those killed, but they did say the New Jersey family was from the town of Teaneck and the daughters included a 20-year-old, a 17-year-old and two 13-year-olds.

The 53-year-old mother was taken to the hospital with serious injuries.

Police say the family was riding in a minivan Friday afternoon on U.S. Route 1 in Townsend when a pickup truck traveling south crossed the median for unknown reasons and hit the northbound minivan and a car.

The truck driver, a 44-year-old man from East New Market, Maryland, was treated and released from the hospital.

The single occupant of the car was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

Photographs from the scene showed a blue tarp covering a white passenger vehicle with massive front-end damage.

The vehicle's roof appeared to have been cut off by rescue workers and was lying upside down on the ground nearby. A few feet away was a maroon extended-cab pickup truck, which appeared to be a commercial vehicle, with its passenger side caved in.

Dozens of emergency personnel responded to the scene as authorities worked to clear debris, The News Journal of Wilmington reported.

Charles "C.R." McLeod, a spokesman for the Delaware Department of Transportation, said Route 1 was closed in both directions for 17 miles for hours after the crash.

The names of those killed in the crash were not immediately released because next of kin had not been notified.

The Delaware State Police Collision Reconstruction Unit is investigating.

— AP