

Schools Are Wasting Student Time on Assignments Beneath Their Abilities

To look at international exams and results from various tests, one would think that America's children are dimwits. [Only a quarter](#) of high school seniors are proficient in math. Thirty-seven percent of them are proficient in reading. And in science, only 22 percent make the grade.

But while these stats make our children look somewhat dense, new research suggests that they are likely not the problem. In fact, they are more than up to the challenge to do great things academically... they just don't get the chance.

According to a [new report](#) from The New Teacher Project, many of today's students work very hard and turn out good work and grades in the classroom. Unfortunately, the assignments students are working on are all too often beneath their abilities. As the graphic below demonstrates, roughly three-quarters of classroom hours are spent on assignments that are not grade-appropriate. These assignments range from "fill[ing] in missing vowels in a vocabulary worksheet" in eighth grade to "making a vocabulary poster" in an AP physics class.



Many parents would like to believe their children are capable of far more ambitious projects, and again, research backs up this hope. As the report explains, "When students did have the chance to work on content that was appropriate for their grade, they rose to the occasion more often than not."

And that extra effort due to higher expectations and more challenging work saw some good returns:

“In classrooms where students had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they gained nearly two months of additional learning compared to their peers. Classrooms with higher levels of engagement gained about two-and-a-half months of learning. In classrooms where teachers held higher expectations, students gained more than four months.”

Sadly, this report is not the first indication that academic expectations have taken a beating in recent history. Even a simple comparison of school [reading lists](#) from a hundred years ago to those of today shows that contemporary students are deprived of challenge and high-quality content.

Famous New York teacher John Taylor Gatto also understood this. In his book, [Weapons of Mass Destruction](#), he relays a story he once heard:

“If you put fleas in a shallow container they jump out. But if you put a lid on the container for just a short time, they hit the lid trying to escape and learn quickly not to jump so high. They give up their quest for freedom. After the lid is removed, the fleas remain imprisoned by their own self-policing. So it is with life. Most of us let our own fears or the impositions of others imprison us in a world of low expectations.”

As Gatto goes on to explain, such a story was a lightbulb moment for him:

“Reading that, my whole life as a school teacher flashed before my eyes. I had been hired to be the lid on the petri dish which the kids would butt their heads trying to follow their own path until one day, exhausted, they would quit trying. At that point they would be fit subjects to be trained.”

America is waking up to the fact that its children have for

too long been subjected to a curriculum beneath their abilities. Is it time we take the lid off education and re-implement the rigorous content that will help children excel in thinking and understanding?