

The school homework load in the Czech Republic and in international comparison²

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Summary of key issues

- The quantity and usefulness of homework (HW) is a matter frequently discussed by teachers, parents, and the public, not to mention pupils themselves, in the Czech Republic and across the globe. Quite apart from the fact that expert studies in this area did not reach consensus about the benefits of HWs on pupils' education so far. And, no research has ever previously charted the HW load in the Czech Republic in comparison with other countries, nor what factors (schools, teachers, pupils) affect it.
- Our findings based on data from TIMSS surveys among pupils in the 4th and 8th grades at school in natural sciences and mathematics show that Czech pupils are rather underburdened with HW in comparison with those in other countries. In the 4th grade Czech pupils spend 13 minutes on average doing homework related to each school lesson, which is below the average among the countries participating in the survey. In the 8th grade the average time spent on homework per lesson is just 9 minutes, which is the lowest value among all 45 participating countries.
- Our analysis of the factors most affecting the number and length of HW tasks reveals that both in the Czech Republic and globally there is a marked difference between mathematics and natural sciences: pupils are given approximately one third more homework tasks in mathematics and these are approximately one third longer than those given in the natural sciences. In the Czech Republic, teacher characteristics such as their age, experience and teaching style, also play a certain role. On the other hand, teacher, school and pupil characteristics only explain 5% of overall differences in HW load. These findings indicate that the characteristics of particular schools, teachers and pupils do not have any substantial effect on the HW load.

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- This study does not aspire to detect any causal effects of HW on pupils' school outcomes nor any other desirable or adverse aspects of HW. Nevertheless, we show that the estimated (non-causal) relationship between HW load and pupils' results is substantially different depending on whether we look at differences between countries, between schools or within schools. We thus illustrate that simplified or even ignorant presumptions about these relationships may lead to mistaken conclusions, for example that greater HW loads causally worsen pupils' results, which it might be tempting to assume on the basis of international comparisons.
- This study's findings reveal that Czech pupils have a very low HW load in comparison to pupils from other countries. This does not, however, automatically mean that Czech teachers should start to give their pupils more HW. First of all, there is no evidence, even from other countries, that greater HW loads automatically improve learning outcomes. Second, debates about HW load tend to disregard other key questions related to the amount of HW suitable in the local educational context. While providing answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this current study, these should be the subject of further research and expert debate. Good teachers should, furthermore, be capable of assessing the suitability or otherwise of setting HW in their particular local and educational contexts.