

# Study: Too Much TV Viewing Lowers Students' Test Scores

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The first major statewide study of the relationship between television viewing and school achievement scores clearly shows that too much television has a negative impact on students.

The study does not make clear exactly how much is too much. Scores of more than 500,000 students indicate that achievement drops with even small amounts of television, although the

sharpest declines occur with more than four hours of daily viewing.

Included for the first time in the state Department of Education's annual report on student achievement, the television segment of the study was compared by department research director Alexander Law "to the early studies of the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer." Officials say it is the first such study "of any magnitude" in the nation.

"In every category, whether the students were bright or dull, the more TV they watched, the more their scores went down, and significantly so," said state schools chief Wilson Riles at a

press conference announcing the study results Thursday.

"I would ask parents across the state to turn off the tube at 8 p.m. every night, to have the kids do homework instead," Riles said. "The schools can't do it all, never could do it all, and if we don't have the cooperation at home, we can't accomplish anything."

Education department officials were quick to say the study does not establish a direct cause-and-effect relationship between television viewing and the steady decline of achievement test scores for hundreds of thousands of

California youngsters. But they said the apparent link is clear.

"I was not surprised that TV had the effect of decreasing their test scores, but I was surprised at how much," Law said. "The results are overwhelming. The longer students spend watching TV, the lower they score. We were surprised at the amount of time California students spend watching TV."

The study surveyed the television viewing habits of public school sixth

and 12th graders who were asked to estimate how much TV they watched.

The results were particularly damaging for older students, more than 5 percent of whom said they watch at least six hours per day, and whose test scores were the lowest in all fields.

Of the 227,549 12th graders tested, results showed a steady decline in mathematics, reading and written expression test scores as the amount of daily television viewing increased. The majority of students, or 51.9 percent, watched two hours or less per day, but the students who watched no television attained the highest scores.

The same was true of sixth graders, although the drop was less pronounced. Some 31 percent watched three or more hours per day, and 20 percent watched more than four. A sharp decline in test scores occurred for those watching more than three or four hours a day.

In the two largest school districts in Sacramento County — San Juan and Sacramento City Unified — the statewide findings generally held true, although complete results were not available from the districts Thursday. In San Juan, 26 percent of high school seniors watched three or more hours of TV a day, compared to 35 percent in the city district.

City district scores traditionally are lower than San Juan, and the San Juan

students who watched as much TV as city district students scored slightly higher. In reading, for example, San Juan seniors who watched four or more hours scored 62.3 percent correct answers, compared to 57.5 percent for the city district seniors. In both districts, the highest scores were those of students who watched little or no television.

Emphasizing that his explanations are speculative and a matter of personal preference, Law's comments raised questions about the long-held view that students do better in school if their parents guide them to so-called "quality" programming.

"There is on TV enough quality of choice that by discriminating viewing, you can get very, very good information to students," Law said. But he admitted that view was contradicted by the TV-test score study that clearly shows "students who do a lot of homework and don't watch TV score the highest." In fact, he said, scores drop "any time you inject TV."

As for the bulk of television programming, Law's advice to parents was to turn off the set if they want their kids to do well in school. Because of his interest in the TV-test scores relationship, Law said he "started watching shows I had never watched before."

"The content, quite frankly, boggled my mind. Archie Bunker has never spoken a grammatically correct sentence. In TV news, the heritage of Edward R. Murrow does not live. Basically, on the news, you have to be pretty and you have to be able to read."

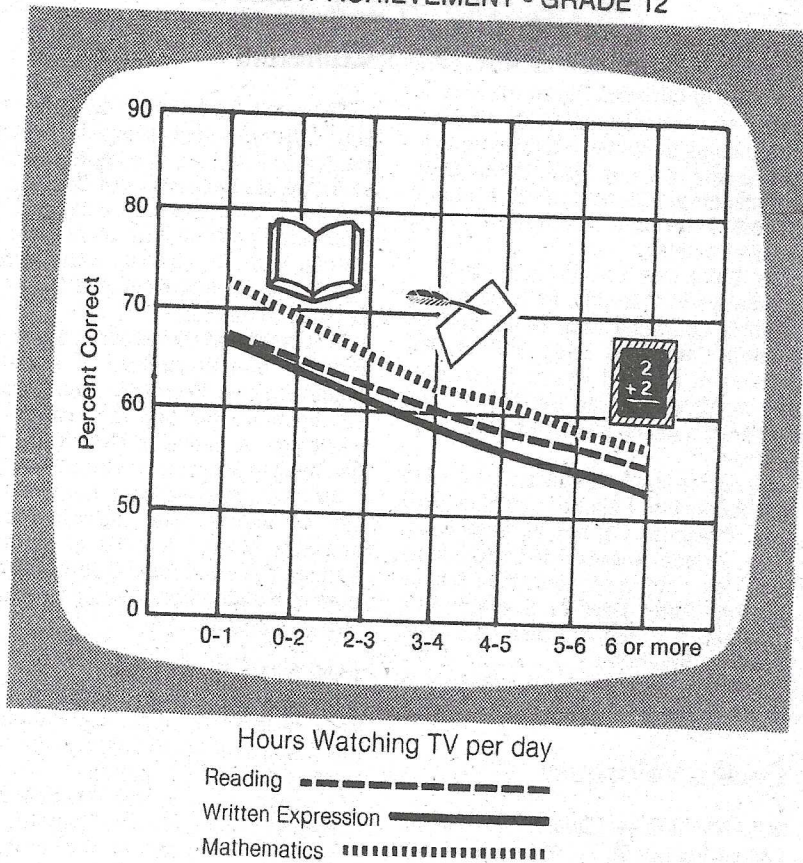
Ironically, he said, "soap operas have the highest literacy of any programs — perhaps because of all those surgeons and attorneys."

Although children who watch a steady, lengthy daily diet of TV do poorly on achievement tests regardless of

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their parents' economic status, the TV test results show a clear tie between large amounts of TV viewing and low socio-economic levels.

"The amount of time students indicated they spend watching television is strongly related to socio-economic level," the study concluded. More poor children watch more TV, and more TV means lower test scores.

The only exception to the TV-test score link was in the reading portion of the sixth grade test for children who spoke "limited English." Those students did slightly better on the reading portion of the test if they watched more TV.

Law said educators can exercise little control over after-school TV viewing among their students. But he emphasized the test results which showed a definite correlation between achievement scores and the amount of homework assigned — or, more important, completed.

The study also showed that students who read more — for school as well as for enjoyment — do better on the achievement scores. "Not unexpectedly," the study concluded, "those students who read more tend to watch less television."