

A Vacation? It's Time to Finish Homework

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By JANE GROSS

GLEN RIDGE, N.J. — A chart on Peggy Jurow's refrigerator tells her older son, John, exactly how much time remains before the start of his senior year in high school and exactly how much of his summer homework remains undone.

"I like him to visually see it," said Mrs. Jurow, a lawyer. "I don't want to get to the point where it's Labor Day at 3 o'clock in the morning."

As the clock ticked toward Sept. 3, the first day of school for John, his customary bravado wore a bit thin. He is carrying four Advanced Placement courses at Glen Ridge High School, which is at the forefront of a trend toward more demanding summer assignments. By his mother's estimate, John had at least 70 hours of work to do when summer started. He has nearly as much as it draws to a close.

Summer homework was first assigned years ago as voluntary reading as a way to encourage literacy, keep minds alert and prevent academic backsliding. But the workload has escalated, along with competition among high schools for high rankings, even in the popular press (New Jersey magazine ranks Glen Ridge No. 3 in the state) and ambition among students for Ivy League acceptances.

Now, there are often mandatory reading and writing assignments in grade school. And some high schools have added summer preparation for the growing numbers of students enrolled in the Advanced Placement classes that colleges tally to judge the rigor of their high school workload.

Even proponents of homework wonder how much is too much. "It's an excellent strategy in moderation," said Harris Cooper, a professor of psychological

sciences at the University of Missouri, who cites higher standards, more demanding curriculum and the risk of summer "learning loss" as justification for vacation assignments.

"But in many instances," he added, "parents who complain have legitimate concerns. If the workload isn't reasonable, given the cultural and familial issues that surround summer, you hit the law of diminishing returns and then lose the support of parents and kids."

Few schools have a summer workload like the one in Glen Ridge. But Summit High School in nearby Union County, Great Neck South on Long Island and the Ramaz School, a yeshiva on Manhattan's Upper East Side, to name a few, also make assignments so demanding that parents shorten vacations, leave teenagers at the library while the rest of the family is at the beach and expect all-nighters at the end of August.

In Summit, another highly ranked high school, Ruth Gais wanted to write a note for her daughter Clare Needham, 16, to get her out of some of her summer homework. But Clare feared retribution. Instead, she returned home early from the Adirondacks to finish "The Bonfire of the Vanities" by Tom Wolfe, read a biography of Alice James and write a six-page paper on it, and do another paper on "The Illusion," a Tony Kushner adaptation of a 17th-century play by Corneille. She also had to read two books of her choosing and keep a weekly journal.

Clare said she had approached the summer with "a sense of dread," despite the thrill of spending a month in France with the Experiment in International Living. "I need to let my brain rest," she said. Her mother, a rabbi who attended private school at Brearley nearly four decades

ago, where summer work was then nonexistent and is now moderate, complained that Clare's "love of learning could be destroyed in the name of preserving Summit, N.J.'s, reputation."

Education "is not about this," Ms. Gais said. "It's about creating souls and good citizens."

For John Jurow in Glen Ridge, a typical teenage procrastinator, a week on Long Beach Island with his family and a month as a camp counselor left enough free time to get through the 815 pages of "Trinity" by Leon Uris, part of his Advanced Placement English assignment. But late in August he had just begun "Jane Eyre" and a journal in which he had to make observations on the novel's character development, literary devices, diction, plot and setting.

For Advanced Placement physics, he still had to read 10 chapters in a commercial study guide on mechanics and electrostatics, make and memorize 40 flash cards on topics including metric prefixes and Newtonian mechanics, and prepare for a quiz the first day of school. For A.P. French, he had polished off a packet of exercises, but almost forgot to read a short story and watch a film in French, critique both in essays and make a 10-minute audio tape. In A.P. art, he had yet to begin a painting, sculpture or other piece on the theme he intends to work with all semester — say, faces or windows.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm happy about it," said John, who insisted he never "gets stressed" about schoolwork. "But I've been conditioned."

His parents lament the lack of downtime for John and his younger brother, Matt, a junior at Glen Ridge and a more industrious student. They worry that mandatory assignments replace pleasure reading. They

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resent having to nag the boys. But they recognize that they, like other parents of their ilk, want their children to be competitive at the nation's top colleges, their high school to rank among the best and their real estate values to reflect a first-rate school system.

"It all feeds on itself," said John's father, Steve, an environmental compliance officer for New Jersey Transit.

Both the Glen Ridge superintendent and the president of the Board of Education are gung-ho about their summer curriculum, which they credit for the district's unusually high scores on Advanced Placement tests, which determine whether a student will get college credit for the course. Daniel Fishbein, the superintendent, notes that A.P. classes are electives, and says that students deserve the best opportunity to be successful on the tests and that it is "unfair to make them do it between Labor Day and April 30." (The school year starts later in the Northeast than elsewhere, so students have less time to prepare for the exams, which are given nationwide in May.)

Elisabeth Ginsberg, president of the board, said that Glen Ridge was a "school system that delivers" and "expects the best-of-the-best to stretch themselves." She added that work done now "paces the load better" during the regular school year.

In Glen Ridge, with a population of 7,271, a median household

income of \$105,638 and property taxes that commonly top \$20,000, summer schedules are already crowded with extracurricular activities. Many of the same students racing, say, to finish "Sarum" by Edward Rutherford for honors English are also tuning up their instruments at a weeklong camp required for the band or preparing for field hockey or football season with two-a-day workouts.

Etta Kralovec, co-author of "The End of Homework" (Beacon Press, 2000), questions these priorities. "Better the schools should tell the athletes to work out on their own the last two weeks in August and pay to bring back the A.P. teachers," she said. "Holding kids to higher standards and then telling the families they need to bear the burden of that achievement is school reform on the cheap. We need to examine whether summer vacation needs to be shortened."

In practical terms, it already has been for many students, including Ana Aldea, a contender for valedictorian at Glen Ridge High School.

"Summer is over," the girl said glumly. "School already began for me. I guess this prepares us for college better. At least the workload won't be a surprise. But through the years, it's gotten worse and worse. The teachers, the coaches — it's insane. They need to set a limit."

Amanda Kelly shares most of her Advanced Placement classes with Ana, a fellow senior, and until this summer they also played field

hockey together. But Ana dropped the sport to focus on her first-semester grades and an early-decision application to the University of Pennsylvania. She cut short a trip to her native country, Romania, to finish her summer assignments and has been hitting the books seven hours a day since mid-August.

Amanda, whose mother guesses that she studied at least 100 hours this summer, has been on the hockey field four hours a day since Aug. 19. She is a diligent girl. Despite a month at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey for a summer program, a week at field hockey camp and 10 days on a family vacation in California, Amanda has completed the most daunting of her assignments, reading and keeping a journal about "Jane Eyre."

In neat girlish hand, page numbers in the margin, she produced a 26-page log of her observations on the 433-page book. Then she turned her attention to "Trinity," calculus, chemistry and French.

"Some is fine," said Kathleen Kelly, Amanda's mother. "Otherwise the kids might just vegetate. But this is over the top."

Then she pulled the September issue of New Jersey magazine from a stack of mail and turned eagerly to the school rankings and Glen Ridge's exalted place. "Have you heard we're No. 3 again?" she asked. "Maybe it's worth it."