

## *From hitting the beach to hitting the books*

By **MELISSA DIPENTO**

Swimming at the pool. Band camp. Video games. Ice cream cones. Harry Potter books. Family vacations. Hanging out with friends.

For most students, summer has been a season of fun in the sun. But it probably feels like it has gone by faster than a melting popsicle.

But now, with the 8 a.m. school bell looming, it's time to wind down and get back into the academic groove.

The key to a successful change of pace, from hitting the beach to hitting the books, is all about easing into the transition slowly, says Sharon Vitella, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and assessment at the K-8 Mount Laurel School District.

As the summer draws to end, Vitella said parents of elementary students can prep their children for the school year by including them in everyday activities, such as grocery shopping, reading and walking.

These regular events can also get students' brains geared up for the school year.

"Make reading a part of summertime. Read to children daily. And for older kids, read a newspaper or magazine article and discuss it," Vitella said. "Math can be used while grocery shopping ... numbers, cents and prices. Reading numbers is good for young children."

Vitella also suggested students accompany a parent on a back-to-school shopping trip for clothing and supplies.

In doing so, students get some say in what they purchase and are also aware of how much it costs and why it's needed.

And before the summer celebrating is over, Vitella said, it may be good to participate in a family activity before school begins. Talking a nature walk is a good option, she said, because students can identify plants and animals and have the opportunity to discuss what they saw.

"Parents can be aware of the learning opportunities and include students in the everyday things," Vitella said.

For even younger students, engaging their minds before school begins can be simple and fun.

The Learning Experience at Cherry Hill's director of training, Meghan Kelly, said young children should be encouraged to participate in many household activities, such as cooking, planting, painting and cleaning to keep their minds on learning.

"Let kids participate in cooking and meal preparation. Math skills are reinforced when you have them measure the ingredients needed for recipes," Kelly said. "Assign household jobs, such as sorting whites from colors and folding laundry. Kids can also make grocery lists and cross off items once they are in the cart."

Children of all ages heading back to school will feel some sort of alienation from their parents and friends once summer is over, said Kristen Waterfield, president of the Malvern School in Medford, which focuses on early education.



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“The most important thing parents can do is talk to their children, and get them excited about the adventures that they will experience as the new year begins. Children need a routine and explaining to them what they will be doing in school and what is expected of them really helps with the transition,” Waterfield said. “Also, it’s important for them to know that change and flexibility are good, and being open to new and different experiences will help them enjoy school even more.”

Another challenging part of the transition for students can be the need for adjustment in sleep schedules.

Dr. Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, associate dean and professor of marketing at the Rutgers School of Business-Camden, said adjusting multiple sleep routines in the family at the same time might present a conflict.

Kaufman-Scarborough, who studies time management, said the kinks could best be worked out when the family comes together to address the upcoming changes in schedules.

“In getting back into the swing of things, ask ‘How many things are reasonable to do?’ Even adults have a hard time with this,” Kaufman-Scarborough said. Try a family calendar. A schedule eliminates any surprises.”

For elementary school students, Kaufman-Scarborough said, it is important for parents to recognize that younger students may not have had homework in the past or very little of it.

For high school students, carving out a specific time and space for homework is a good way for teens to complete their tasks.

“Video games, computers and distractions on the TV ... there can be a good deal of interference,” Kaufman-Scarborough said. “Set expectations; homework has to happen before X, Y and Z. Everyone has to respect the person with homework.”

The most important tip for parents, she said, is to set the groundwork for homework and sleep routines prior to the start of school.

“Time management is setting the groundwork. It’s harder to implement the importance of homework when you’re three weeks into the semester,” Kaufman-Scarborough said.

Another suggestion for students is to practice waking up at the new, earlier time a week or so in advance.

“Rearranging the body clock is a shock the first week,” Vitella said. “The first week is a big week of adjustment and practicing makes it easier.”

It is also important that students know what to expect on the first day of school. Many districts often welcome students for a tour or plan orientation events prior to the big first day.

Officials at the Lenape Regional High School District host various events prior to the start of school, to ease freshmen in to the transition and give them the opportunity to meet staff and students from other towns who are new to them.

And for upperclassmen, the school offers SAT prep programs and essay writing workshops to help students know what to expect at the next academic level.

“Elementary, as well as high school students are both susceptible to having anxiety about returning to school. For example, incoming ninth grade students could be anxious about being in a new, larger school. We try to ease these anxieties by allowing them to come into the building before school starts,” Assistant Superintendent Carol Birnbohm said.



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“Upperclassmen may be anxious about their post-secondary plans. All of these (programs) are designed to support our students to help them feel they can succeed on standardized assessments or get accepted to the college they want to attend.”

Parents, too, can play a large part in easing the back to school fears many students of all ages have. Birnbohm said parents should be particularly aware of how their children are feeling about going back to school just prior to starting.

“If a teen is extremely anxious about returning to school, we urge parents to call their child’s school counselor to discuss their anxieties to determine what the school personnel can do for their child,” Birnbohm said. “Parents can also help make their teen feel comfortable by making sure they have all the supplies they need to begin the school year, or will get them as soon as their supply list is made available.”

For younger students, recognizing any back-to-school fears they may have and talking about them together can be beneficial for both parent and child.

“Transitions are a natural part of life, and for young children especially, they can be quite a challenge. As parents, we can do a lot to ease their anxiety, and make experiences such as going back to school, actually positive, growth moments,” Waterfield said.

Many educators agree that keeping an open dialogue between teens, parents and teachers is also crucial to a successful transition back to school.

“Communication is the key, no matter what the age of the child, to starting the school year successfully. Parents should discuss any apprehensions their child may have for the upcoming school year with their teen,” Birnbohm said. “Parents should also let their teen know that teachers, school counselors and administrators are there to help.”