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Taking Summer School to Get Ahead, Not Catch Up

By KYLE SPENCER AUG. 16, 2016

GILL, Mass. — Chase Pellegrini de Paur didn't flunk math, and he is not trying to hone his study skills. The 15-year-old honor-roll student nevertheless spent six weeks this summer studying geometry at the prestigious Northfield Mount Hermon boarding school here.

The goal was either to get credit for the class, which would let him skip ahead to higher-level courses earlier in his high school career, particularly Advanced Placement ones, or to take the course again in the fall and, already familiar with the underlying theorems, be all but guaranteed a top grade.

"It's a win-win," said Chase, a rising sophomore at New Canaan High School in Connecticut.

As the competition to get into the most selective colleges intensifies, high-achieving students are attending academic summer schools to turbocharge grade-point averages or load up on the A.P. courses seen as gateways to top-tier schools.

The practice even has its own lexicon: Students who are planning to repeat a class at their regular high schools are "previewing"; those who are using summer classes to skip ahead and qualify for higher-level subjects are seeking "forward credit."

Critics, however, say the summer classes only add to the inequities of the college admissions process, in which wealthy families can afford to hire expensive SAT tutors and consultants who help develop the perfect college essay, while poorer students must fend for themselves.

Kimberly Quick, a policy associate for the Century Foundation, a think tank based in New York City said students who could not afford to spend their summers taking extra classes were being left further behind in what she called “the college access game.”

“Lower-income students are much more likely to have to work in the summer, often full time, or take care of other family members,” Ms. Quick said.

Those students, she noted, are the ones who might benefit the most from the advantages, like strong career networks and higher graduation rates, that top colleges can impart. Higher-income students often already have greater options.

There are no hard statistics available on how many students are taking these classes, but education advisers say the numbers are on the rise, particularly in New York City and its suburbs, as well as places where college admissions can seem like a competitive sport, including Raleigh, N.C., and Silicon Valley.

Many of the classes are offered at private schools, and they report a growing number of attendees. At the Hun School of Princeton, N.J., a 102-year-old boarding school, 187 students enrolled in its five-week summer school, up about 16 percent from 161 in 2014.

Ten years ago, the nearby Lawrenceville School did not offer for-credit summer classes. Instead, it hosted mostly sports and recreation-related programs from outside organizations. This year, more than 40 students enrolled in the school’s accelerated math courses, as part of a rigorous, four-hour-a-day program that covers a full year’s curriculum in six weeks. It is one of several academic programs offered at the school during the summer.

At the Horace Mann School in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, 154 students enrolled in the academic summer session. Forty-four of them were in a six-week

physics class that covered a year's worth of material at a rapid clip, one of several for-credit science and math classes offered at the school's summer session.

"It's so popular, we run it as a lottery," said Caroline Bartels, the summer school director at Horace Mann.

Some high schoolers take classes through online programs like Indiana University High School, Stanford Online High School or the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. The online classes often cost less and allow for more flexibility than those that are in person.

The Mountain View Los Altos High School District in California runs a summer school for students who need to catch up or bolster their skills, but the district directs high school students who want to accelerate their studies to two local community colleges. And high schoolers in North Carolina are encouraged to take accelerated, for-credit classes through a statewide virtual school.

The demand is driven, at least in part, by students' belief that they need to accumulate Advanced Placement classes to impress top colleges. According to the College Board, which oversees the A.P. program and designs the exams, more than 90 percent of the about 2.5 million test takers in 2015 sat for three or fewer of the exams. But the percentage of students who took 10 exams, while very small, more than doubled over the decade between 2005 and 2015, to 0.7 percent, or 16,580 students over a four-year administration range.

Brian Taylor, the director of Ivy Coach, a college advising firm on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, said the belief was that college admission boards rewarded quantity when it came to A.P. exams. "When you have a kid who has taken 10 A.P.s and a kid who has taken three, all things equal, they're going to take the kid with 10," he said.

But Trevor Packer, a senior vice president at the College Board, said it did not support "a race towards more, more and more."

"We want there to be balance," Mr. Packer said.

He added that the College Board had worked hard to increase the number of students — particularly low-income ones — taking A.P. classes, but a recent report by the federal Government Accountability Office found a significant gap in participation across racial and economic lines. At schools that were high poverty and where 90 percent or more of students were black or Hispanic, only 12 percent took one or more A.P. classes. At wealthy schools that were predominantly white and Asian, 24 percent did.

Jill Tipograph, a summer educational consultant and career coach from Manhattan, said summer academics could “help maximize the student’s profile” and be part of the “pre-college plan.”

The programs are rigorous, with long days and hours of homework. And they can be lucrative for schools: Northfield Mount Hermon’s program costs \$8,200 for summer boarders. The Horace Mann summer physics class costs \$4,175. The schools offer scholarships for some students.

Greg Leeds, who runs Northfield Mount Hermon’s summer session, which enrolled 286 students this year — 113 in the college prep program — said these programs gave parents “more bang for their buck” than enrichment classes that were not directly related to work being done during the school year, because students got something tangible in the end: credit or a shot at an A grade in the fall in a class they had previewed.

That was the case for Sarah Harte Taylor, 17, who previewed an Algebra 2 class last year at Wolfeboro: The Summer Boarding School — a summer-only school in eastern New Hampshire. Her mother, Lisa Harte, from Midtown Manhattan, said that when Sarah returned to her high school, she aced the class.

Hunter Walker, 17, from the Upper West Side, who was studying American history at Northfield Mount Hermon, agreed that the programs could help improve a high school transcript. He was looking for credit so that he could skip the class in the fall and take A.P. computer science instead.

Hunter, a rising senior at the boarding school, said the class was intense and sometimes stressful. “But it’s worth it,” he said. “It was a very efficient way of doing

things, very constructive.”

Not everyone thinks it is good for the students. Psychologists like Madeline Levine, who has written extensively about the demands of adolescence, said focusing students too intensely on academic pursuits came at a cost. “Growing up has a whole bunch of developmental tasks, only one of which is getting into your first-choice school,” she said.

Even some of the educators offering the classes have their doubts.

At Lawrenceville, administrators have debated the merits of its accelerated math program. This is largely because some faculty members, like Hardy Gieske, a math teacher who serves as director of students for summer school, think that many students should avoid accelerating the learning process when it comes to math.

“They have to soak in it for a long enough time for it to take root,” he said.

Still, the school keeps the program open because there is a demand and it “helps the bottom line,” Mr. Gieske said.

And at Horace Mann, Ms. Bartels said she believed many students were better off getting a break from school. She said she told many of them: “If there is anything else you can do this summer, do it.”

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