

From the
UPPER SCHOOL
DIRECTOR

John Schafer



Slowing It Down

The start of the year until Thanksgiving is the longest stretch of the school calendar without a major break. The first quarter has just recently come to an end, grades and comments have been mailed home, and students are working hard. They are ready for some downtime.

I think it goes without saying, but our students are great: lively, curious, ambitious, and kind, and they are too busy.

Many have multiple obligations—in and out of the classroom—to attend to every day. They feel pressure to achieve at a high level in all they do, and they lack not only sleep but time to unplug, take a break, and reflect. I am generalizing a bit here, but I think I speak for those of us who have been at Menlo for several years when I observe that our students seem more stretched and less rested than was the case just a few years ago. I also think students are more grade focused and brittle than in the past.

Menlo students pack their schedules with classes and with major extra-curricular commitments (both school-sponsored and, increasingly, outside activities), and more students seek out AP and honors courses. Last May, for



example, more students sat for more AP tests than ever before, and a larger percentage of those students were sophomores than has ever been the case. As students press hard to be admitted into our most challenging courses, they express fears of “falling behind” or worry that “doors will be closing” if they can’t get into accelerated courses.

Parents and students choose Menlo for several reasons, but way up on that list is its commitment to academic excellence and its breadth of opportunities. So I guess we cannot be surprised that students look to challenge themselves in their classes and eagerly join the team, pursue opportunities to perform, and commit to clubs—and these all provide meaningful experiences students will long remember. Nor should we be surprised that students care deeply about their performance and try hard to achieve at a high level. It is also worth stating the obvious: we have a challenging academic program because we have a mission to prepare students for success in college and beyond. I think we do a good job on that front, which is confirmed by survey results from our graduates and current parents who have older kids in college. Young alumni overwhelmingly report that Menlo gave them the skills and background to meet the demands of college



work. They also say, especially those who attend the selective colleges that so many of our students aspire to, that college professors' expectations are high.

To get a fuller sense of the student experience at Menlo, we've had groups of teachers shadow students for a day. It's an exhausting experience. Students have to switch gears and transition numerous times throughout their class day and then head off to their activities and return home to a night of homework. There is no question that some students devote far more time to homework than any of us would like. It is hard to generalize about homework, however, since students attack the assignments with different degrees of focus and intensity and work at different paces. And some students take four homework-generating classes, most take five, others take six, and a few even take seven. Additionally, procrastination and the lure of multitasking and technological distraction entice students differently. But even the student with fewer classes typically has a lot on his or her plate, feels stretched pretty thin, and is getting fewer than the nine hours of sleep that pediatricians recommend for teenagers.

We want to give hungry students the chance to challenge themselves, but we counsel them about the potential perils of an additional or a fast-paced class, and we ask them to think deeply about the need to balance all of their commitments. I am not sure students really hear our full advice, as many come back a couple of months later distraught when they are not earning a top mark in the class. I don't have data on this, but I feel that, relative to a few years ago, more students believe they have to push themselves beyond their capacity. And, of course, a (perhaps *the*) major source of pressure stems from the fact that our students pursue acceptance to a relatively narrow set of colleges and universities, all of which have lower rates of admission than in the recent past.

One of our strengths has always been the partnership between parents and the School. We all have a role in helping our students to lead healthful and balanced lives. For parents, I think, this means being in conversation with your kids and helping them set limits and priorities. Some of our students have simply signed on for way too much. One way to think about whether to add a class or take on an activity is to have the student and parents together plan out a weekly schedule. Begin by mapping out time for important priorities such as sleep and family time. Then, see if the homework, extra-curricular activities, social time, downtime, and anything else the student wants to do can fit into the remaining hours. If it doesn't, something has to give.

“One of our strengths has always been the partnership between parents and the School. We all have a role in helping our students to lead healthful and balanced lives.”

Of course, the School has a role here, too, and it is appropriate to ask if we have notched up the work, the expectations, and the pressure. Teachers are in frequent conversation about our assignments and our expectations of students. Ideally, on average, we aim for about two and a half hours of homework for freshmen and sophomores and approximately three to three and a half hours for juniors and seniors. And in recent years we have pared back many of our assignments, which has required some academic sacrifices. In English, for example, we assign fewer books than in the past; in math, some teachers have made homework optional and most have students start the work during class time. And we have made school





breaks homework free. This is not to say we have fixed the problem of load and busyness for our students, but it is to say we are paying close attention and making adjustments in our approach.

We also believe we can help address this issue by slowing things down a bit by making changes to our daily schedule. Our current schedule, in which students attend five or six classes a day, is just too packed. We have surveyed the teachers and students to gauge their priorities and help

“These conversations invariably get to the core values of teaching and learning and community at Menlo. I could not be more pleased with the self-reflective process we are going through.”

conversations invariably get to the core values of teaching and learning and community at Menlo. I could not be more pleased with the self-reflective process we are going through.

us weigh the tradeoffs that any schedule change would entail. And it has been impressive to observe the thoughtful dialogues in all corners of the School—from advocacy to Student Council to our lunchtime Community Circle to an assignment for our Advanced Topics Computer Science programmers—about developing a new schedule. These

Our goal is to unveil a new schedule for the 2016-17 year by January, and perhaps we will even pilot it in the late spring. It is too soon to say what all of its features will be, but we have set some parameters based on our survey results:

- We will start later in the morning (likely around 8:30 am).
- We will end around the same time (so as not to trigger more class-sports conflicts).
- Fewer classes will meet each day (we’d like to average four and a half classes per day over the course of the rotation), and to avoid cutting class time too radically, classes will need to be a little longer than the current 55 minutes.
- We will continue to have tutorials and community time (advocacy, assembly, and a fairly long lunch—students were insistent on that last one).

A new schedule will not fix all that we are worried about, but it will be an improvement, as it should make the day (and night) feel less frenzied. Students will be able to sleep a little longer and will only have to prepare for four (or perhaps sometimes five) classes a day. They will have to switch gears and transition fewer times during the day—which our teachers who shadowed students found so difficult—and at night as they prepare for the next day. They should bring more focus to their work, and with fewer classes per day, there will be fewer days with multiple assessments, which our students find so taxing.

Changing a school’s schedule is never easy, but I am optimistic, and the conversations we are in give me reason to be. Students and teachers are actively involved in the process, and there is a consensus that slowing things down—or having students do fewer different things over the course of the day—will enable everyone to be a bit happier, healthier, and more balanced.

We’ve all been working hard. I hope the coming Thanksgiving break gives us a chance to rest and recharge before we head into semester-end exams.

