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SAT Pressure Is On, and Even Online Prepsters Noodge

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THERE are thousands of SAT prep courses, but Laura Wilson, founder of a new online company, Wilson Daily Prep, has managed to come up with a fresh angle.

If teenagers taking her SAT course online do not do their nightly assignment, they get a warning e-mail message. And if they still don't do it, they are put on her Slacker list, and then Mrs. Wilson, or someone from her staff, picks up the phone in the office here, calls the slacker's parents and rats out their kids. "I'm the Mother Noodge," Mrs. Wilson said. "Nobody noodges like I noodge."



Stewart Cairns for The New York Times
Nick Torcivia and his mother, Patrice Torcivia, at their Niskayuna home, where Nick prepares through Wilson Daily Prep.

"They're always surprised to hear there's a voice reaching out from behind the computer," said Melissa Slive, a staff member busy making calls to rat out 23 kids one recent morning. "They don't think anyone is watching or paying attention."

While there's no scientific data yet, everyone's pretty sure what happens next. "The kids get yelled at," Mrs. Wilson said.

This was the story of Nick Torcivia, 16, a junior at Niskayuna High, three hours north of here in suburban Albany. Nick is a well-adjusted, typically overprogrammed, all-American boy (A-/B+ grades, plays three sports, has a part-time job) who leaves for school at 6:30 each morning, doesn't get home until 7:30 most nights and then has several hours of homework. Free time? "Not really," Nick said.



Alan Zale for The New York Times
Laura Wilson in her office in Chappaqua makes sure someone monitors SAT prep students.

Nick figured a way to buy a few measly minutes of peace by gaming the online SAT course his mother signed him up for. He realized that an automated warning e-mail message would not be generated until he missed six nights of homework. So he'd skip five, then do it.

Alas, poor Nick. Little did he know that the Wilson SAT prep slacker squad scans nightly homework logs for just such suspicious patterns.

Ring, ring, ring. "When I told him we got a phone call," said Nick's mom, Patrice Torcivia, "his eyes popped out."

"I was kind of surprised," admitted Nick. "I didn't realize they'd call, like — *your parents.*"

"He tried to say, 'No, I've been doing it, I've been doing it,' " Ms. Torcivia said. "Then he said, 'Well, maybe I haven't, but I will.' " Right. While the mother had no plans to abandon Nick in Nebraska, she knew she had to do something parental. "I went and yelled at him," Ms. Torcivia said.

Nick learned a tough lesson: SAT prep is always watching.

The economy may be in freefall, but one industry that continues to look promising is SAT test prep. It is, after all, an industry that thrives on parental fear and misery. And the worse the economy gets, and the more families look to scholarships to offset the insane cost of college, the more important it becomes to ace the SATs.

In Nick's case, he's a good lacrosse player with good size (6-foot-2) and has good grades at a competitive suburban high school, but as his coach made clear, it's not enough. "He felt Nick's SATs would be really critical," Ms. Torcivia said. "A really good SAT score could maybe bump him in." And since Nick would like to go to Duke or Johns Hopkins, he needs a LOT of bumping in.

His mother is divorced, has two younger children, works as an instructor at Empire State College, is studying for her doctorate in education and does not have a spare \$200,000 lying around. So for Nick, it's either get a scholarship or go to a state school.

This is bliss for SAT prepsters like Mrs. Wilson, but it's misery for kids like Nick, who have the demographic misfortune of being high school juniors at this moment. For those

who thought the pressure on kids was ridiculous when the Dow Jones was at 14,000, stand back; we're about to see ridiculous to the 10th power.

When Nick was told that there was a time when high school students like himself took no SAT prep — including his mom and Wilson Prep's Mrs. Wilson, both 41 — he looked confused. “No, I didn't know that,” he said. “I assumed everybody always did SAT prep. It's all I know.”

At some moment between the mid-1980s and modern times, we reached the point where failing to provide SAT prep for your son or daughter constitutes child abuse. This was driven home to Mrs. Wilson about eight years ago, when she was nine months pregnant, working as an English teacher here at Horace Greeley High and tutoring a handful of students privately for the SAT. She went into labor, and leaving school, was chased by a boy she was tutoring. “I told him I was having my baby,” she recalled. “He said, ‘You'll be back by Friday — can you tutor me then?’ ”

Oh, the madness.

In 2001 Mrs. Wilson quit teaching to devote more time to SAT prep. She now has 10 tutors working for her. Besides monitoring the Internet assignments, they see 120 students in her office here; teach three SAT prep courses of 30 students each at the local high school; and serve as SAT prep consultants for another 150 students a year in the nearby Harrison district. “It keeps growing and growing and growing, oh my God,” she said. She already has a waiting list for next year.

She now does less individual tutoring herself, although for those who insist (“what everybody wants is me”), she will take a few students one-on-one for \$300 an hour.

She herself did well on the SAT, though nothing astonishing (“high 600s on the verbal”). But by deconstructing the test, showing kids what to expect and pinpointing questions that keep turning up year after year — in short, teaching them how to game the stupid thing — she says she can typically add 200 points to a student's three-test total.

She knows a million test prep tricks. For the essay, her students go in armed with five fabulous facts, three historical moments, familiarity with two novels and a surefire writing formula. What is the meaning of sacrifice? “I teach them, ‘Sacrifice is X, sacrifice is Y, but most of all sacrifice is XYZ.’ ”

Last summer, she started the online business, which costs \$139 for three months. Every day a student like Nick is supposed to answer six questions, which should take five minutes. "It's very important they do it every day to internalize the patterns of the test," Mrs. Wilson said. "That's why we monitor the homework. With Nick, he kept showing up on day 6. It's not what I want. I'm all about internalizing." There are also interactive vocabulary games and weekly news articles whose themes must be summarized in five words.

Ms. Torcivia had been shopping online for "something not \$1,000 where he could do a little every day," when she found Wilson Prep. She also hired a private SAT tutor, who has come to the house a few times for \$30 an hour. (This is what people mean when they say, "You know, Chappaqua is not Albany.") Like most parents going through it the first time, she is in a state of shock. "The biggest difference I see," she said, "is all the help the kids get along the way."

Students used to take the SAT for the first time at the end of their junior year, but like a lot of kids now, Nick will take it in December, "for practice," his mother said. "They say it's good to get used to it."

She often feels conflicted between wanting her son to feel the pressure so he'll be focused, and not wanting him to feel the pressure because she loves him, and a nervous breakdown does nobody any good. At one point during the interview at their home, Nick said there was some pressure now, but he felt there would be lots more next year, when he's a senior.

"By then," his mother said, "it will be too late."