Children will soon be headed back to school and it's important to prepare them for the year ahead. As the educational landscape grows increasingly competitive, even the smartest students need an edge.

With today's hectic lifestyles, however, it can be difficult for parents and kids to find the time for enrichment.

"Turning your regular activities into a learning experience can go a long way towards getting kids ready to go back to school," says Kim Tredick, a 5th-grade teacher in Santa Clarita, and the 2006 Milken Award Winner. "Just be careful to make the learning fun and not too much like schoolwork."

Here are some ways to clear those cobwebs in preparation for a new school year:

Making the Most of Downtime — Be sure time away from school includes a good dose of intellectual enrichment. Museums, nature centers and historical sites should be a staple of your leisure time and weekends.

Take advantage of time in the car or downtime in general. Whether you're waiting for dinner to be ready, or you're on a lengthy road trip, use learning tools like Brain Quest, a question and answer game, to make the time both fun and educational. Because the materials are curriculum-based, the decks and workbooks will give kids a direct leg up on next year's curriculum.

"Kids don't necessarily want to think about being in the classroom when they are away from school, but educational games can actually make prepping for the school year fun," says Tredick. "Let the kids quiz you while cooking or driving as they'll learn as much from asking the questions and it doesn't feel like homework."

Reading and Writing — Give your children a variety of materials to read, like cookbooks, chapter books, nutritional panels, newspapers, magazines and movie schedules. Then test their understanding by summarizing what they read. Let them read aloud to you, siblings, neighbors

and grandparents every day.

Children can practice writing and help you at the same time by composing grocery lists, to-do lists and car directions. Encourage them to keep journals and correspond with relatives — both with handwritten letters and emails. Help improve their writing by editing together, paying attention to capitalization, punctuation and spelling.

Everyday Math — Math is everywhere, so use it to your advantage. Cooking together from a recipe is a fun and practical way to learn about measurements, timing, and following directions.

School may not be in full swing yet, but savvy parents can help jumpstart their kids' minds well before their first assignments.

— *Statepoint*