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Do the benefits outweigh the challenges?

Thinking About When to Start the School Day

By Glenn Cook

Night after night, my teenage daughter would come home late from dance classes, eat dinner and go right into her homework, sitting at the desk in my office and working until well after we went to bed.

Around 6 a.m. the next morning, the process started over again because she had only an hour to get to school before classes started at 7:20 a.m.

This routine, sadly, is common for many teens, and emerging research shows that it puts them at risk for a host of health problems and poor academic performance. Sleep scientists say older students should not start school before 8:30 a.m., but that poses a host of logistical challenges for districts, working parents and students who participate in extracurricular activities.

Do the benefits outweigh the challenges?

Those who've gone through the process, often a multi-year effort, say *yes*. But as with any large change, you have to engage the community and take their thoughts into consideration before making a final decision.



Photo by Jim Cummings, APR, Glendale Elementary School District

The science is clear: Later start times are healthy

The push to move start times began in force in 2014, when the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement urging districts to begin classes at 8:30 a.m. or later for middle and high school students.

Today, only 17% of public middle and high schools meet that benchmark, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But the number is growing steadily.

In Seattle, start times for middle and high schools moved back 55 minutes – from 7:50 to 8:45 a.m. – starting in the 2016-17 school year.

In December 2018, University of Washington researchers published a study showing that students are getting 34 minutes more sleep on average, grades have improved, and absences and tardiness have decreased.

That study, combined with other research from sleep scientists across the United States, points to a host of risk factors associated with adolescents who do not get the recommended 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night. Among them:

- Increased risk of obesity,
- high blood pressure,
- car accidents,
- anxiety and
- depression.

Craig Canapari, director of the pediatric sleep center at Yale University, has made presentations to several Connecticut districts about moving start times back. He says the benefits of doing so far outweigh the logistics schools may face.

“This is one of the few domains in public health where **the science is very clear: If you move start times later, kids do get more sleep. They don’t just sleep later,**” Canapari says.

Canapari notes that sleep “is a buffer to stress,” pointing to research that shows teens who do not get enough rest face an increased risk of anxiety and depression.

Lack of sleep also impairs decision making and can increase risk of injury.

“Teenagers are just as smart as you or me, but it’s about their decision-making capacity,” he says.

“Because their frontal lobes are not as developed, they are not as good at making



Photo by Jim Cummings, APR, Glendale Elementary School District

decisions as older people. When you don’t get enough sleep, you’re more likely to be impulsive and listen to the pleasure-seeking drive, whether its food, drugs or earlier sexual activity.”

Sleep is a buffer to stress.

In addition to the health concerns, Canapari notes that **lack of sleep impairs a teen’s ability to retain information**. The reason, he says, is that “memory consolidation” occurs during REM, which does not happen until you’ve been asleep for at least 4 to 5 hours.

“The second half of the night is where the majority of REM sleep occurs, so they’re actually losing some of the sleep that helps them to learn,” he says.

The devil is in the details

When parents in California’s San Juan Unified School District started pushing for later start times in 2015, the staff and board of education were “skeptical of how doable the change was,” says Trent Allen, APR, senior director of community relations.

“It’s such a heavy lift,” says Allen, whose district serves almost 40,000 students at 64 sites.

How would homework and extracurricular activities cut into the time you have for dinner with kids in the evening or family time?

“The question was whether the benefits were great enough to justify the cost and the amount of work it would take. You could see the science and the logic behind it, but of course the devil is in the details.”

San Juan used a two-way engagement platform called Thoughtexchange to survey parents, students and staff about moving start times back. More than 7,000 people participated in the online process, in which they answered pointed questions, shared thoughts and assigned rankings to various suggestions.

“It was the most who’ve participated in any process we’ve ever run in any format,” Allen says. “It showed there was strong support for the idea and the concept, but how do we mitigate the impacts?”

The major concerns are common to any district considering this type of change: **How moving the start times would impact athletics and extracurricular activities as well as working parents.**

“The biggest thing that was a bit of a pause for us was how this change would cut into home time for families,” Allen says. “How would homework and extracurricular activities cut into the time you have for dinner with kids in the evening or family time?”

Ultimately, the board agreed to move start times back 5 minutes per year for 3 years. Although the district is now assessing the impact of that decision, Allen expects the district to approve 3 more years of gradual changes.

“We’ve had a few tiny issues at some school sites, especially where we have two schools right next door to each other. Their start times were only 5 minutes apart as is, so we let the elementary school stay at its time and moved

the high school start time, which has made the traffic issues much, much less.”

In the long run, San Juan and other California districts may not have a choice on when school starts. In April 2018, the California Legislature passed a bill requiring most middle and high schools to begin classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m. by 2021. The bill was vetoed by Gov. Jerry Brown, who is no longer in office, and Allen anticipates the legislation will be up for another vote this year.

“Going very gradually seems to be adaptable for folks,” Allen says. “Certainly some would like for us to go faster, but I think we’ve found a nice middle ground to mitigate the impact, get started later and still move in the right direction.”



Photo by Jim Cummings, APR, Glendale Elementary School District

Anticipate potential challenges

After two years of study, surveys and discussions, Connecticut’s Greenwich Public Schools shifted its high school start time by an hour in 2017-18. Students now start classes at 8:30 a.m., while middle schoolers now begin 5 to 10 minutes later. The elementary grades were not affected.

Kim Eves, Greenwich’s director of communications, says the district started looking at the change after the American

Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle and high schools start at 8:30 a.m. or later to give adolescents a chance to get more sleep.

Parents were surveyed twice, first about whether the times should change and then by how much. A study was conducted with students to garner information on their sleep and study habits. A committee then was appointed to review the surveys and the student study to develop recommendations for the school board.

“There was a lot of support for it in the community, and we tried to anticipate all the potential challenges we’d have to overcome,” Eves says. “We did so to some degree and in a couple of areas underestimated the impact it might have.”

In Greenwich, Eves says another survey administered after start times were moved showed the biggest challenges were traffic and “compression on the back end of the school day.”

“It had a big impact on traffic for us, because we now have a much closer start and dismissal time for our schools,” she says. “For people commuting into and out of our town on the main route, the traffic issue became quite a problem.”

While the district worked closely with the town of Greenwich to “make small fixes with traffic flow and quick fixes with the lights,” Eves says **solving the end-of-day problem for students required some out-of-the-box thinking.**

“The extra hour for sleep in the morning is great, but it put pressure on our kids at the end of the school day because they now have one less hour for athletic practices, academic contests, and to get their homework done,” she says.

For the 2018-19 year, administrators reduced class times by 3 to 5 minutes and added a 30-minute “opportunity block” to the end of the school day.



Photo by Jim Cummings, APR, Glendale Elementary School District

Students can remain in their last class period, start homework, get extra help from the teacher, go to another classroom or participate in extracurricular activities.

“We have 90 to 100 different choices of non-instructional, non-credit bearing activities that teachers are sponsoring or providing,” Eves says.

“Students also can get passes from their athletic coaches so they can get on the bus early and not miss their contests. Even though we’re just starting the second semester of it, the opportunity block seems to be working.”

Include all stakeholders

Illinois’ High School District 214, located in the Chicago suburb of St. Charles, used a process similar to Greenwich in moving start times for its 9 campuses. The district, which is the second largest of its kind in the state, now starts classes at least 30 minutes later as part of a 2-year pilot program, says Patrick Moggee, director of community engagement and outreach.

“It was important to us to include all stakeholder voices in the process,” says Moggee of the shift, which took effect in 2017-18.

“We formed a calendar committee that led the process and conducted surveys, held listening sessions and conducted numerous

conversations with students, parents and staff.”

Discussions, which started in 2015, started in earnest following an initial survey that received more than 6,500 responses, Mogge says. The calendar committee then developed recommendations that included new start and end times, timing of student participation in co-curricular activities, and homework-free breaks throughout the year.

Mogge says the committee still meets to talk about how implementation is going, but there have been “no major issues” thus far.

Indiana’s Plainfield Community School Corporation shifted its start times by 20 minutes in 2016-17. While the shift was “not huge,” communications director Sabrina Kapp says the district “certainly had some pushback” from parents.

“We worked really hard to facilitate a plan that didn’t totally destroy the day,” Kapp says, noting the switch came as a result of meetings the superintendent had with various constituent groups.

“Some people appreciated us making the effort. Others said, ‘Why did you only do 20 minutes?’ Some said, ‘You totally messed up my work situation and now I have to find childcare.’ And some said, ‘You’re doing the right thing.’

“In the end, we all survived,” Kapp says. “I wish there could have been more difference in time, but if that 20 minutes means more sleep, especially for teens, then I think it’s a good thing.”

Canapari agrees. “We celebrate the sleep deprived in our culture,” he says. “We think it’s great when our kids stay up late to get their work done or participate in activities, when, in fact, it is putting their health at risk.

“The issue has to be about health. It’s hard to argue about health,” Canapari says. “I’m 45, and when I was in high school there was a smoking section outside where I could light up a cigarette between classes. Today, that seems crazy but it is how things were done. I’m hoping the culture shifts on sleep as well. Then we can look back on this at some point and say the same thing.”

Glenn Cook is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Alexandria, Va. He created a communications program for North Carolina’s Rockingham County Schools, where he worked for 5 years before moving to the National School Boards Association in 2001. At NSBA, he worked in various roles over 12 years, including as editor of *American School Board Journal* (ASBJ), director of publications and finally as assistant executive director of communications and publications.

Cook’s writing and photography have appeared in a variety of national publications, many of which focus on K-12 and higher education. In addition to his other freelance work, he remains a contributing editor to ASBJ, where he also serves as the communications/public advocacy columnist.

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