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# Logistical Thinking Behind Later School Starts

Letting high school students get more sleep has a research base but reality hits when districts consider daily schedule changes

**BY ALAN N. WECHSLER**/*School Administrator, May 2018*

**Paul Jenkins, superintendent in Glens Falls, N.Y., launched a newsletter titled *StartTime* to keep parents and staff informed as the district considered later start times for high schoolers to accommodate adolescent sleep patterns.**

It seems like a simple concept — starting high school later to allow teenagers to sleep later. Doing so adapts to the natural sleep cycle of teens, which research shows leads to improved student achievement, higher graduation rates and fewer disciplinary

referrals.

But what seems easy in principle can be difficult to implement in practice. While some school districts around the country report success at changing to a later start time, others gave up on implementing the idea or tried it for a while and went back to the earlier starting hour.

School districts that made the change stick say good communication with families and staff is key to success. They moved the process slowly and deliberately and included the community. Districts that were unable to move start times commonly point to obstacles such as increased transportation costs, opposition from working parents, families' needs for teenage students to watch younger siblings during afternoons and time conflicts for students with after-school jobs.

### Compelling Science

Today, an estimated 400 school districts nationwide have moved their secondary schools to a later start, according to the publication *California Schools*, which investigated the phenomenon last year. (Other experts believe the number is even higher.) Modifying start times is not a one-size-fits-all solution to meeting the needs of high school students. However, it is a potential action with proven results that many districts should consider to help improve students' educational outcomes, experts say.

"Once you start to look at the data and the research, you begin to understand why it's so important," says Paul Jenkins, superintendent of the Glens Falls City School District, located in a gateway city to New York state's Adirondack Mountains.

Glens Falls changed its high school start time in September 2012, moving from 7:45 to 8:30 a.m. In the 5½ years since, the high school, with its 620 students, reported significant academic improvement and a 30 percent rise in students arriving to school on time. While other changes were taking place at the time, Jenkins says, "I think the change in start time was one of the big ones."

The data behind these reforms are compelling. "Current scientific literature has clearly documented the positive outcomes associated with delayed high school start times," writes Judith Owens, a medical doctor and sleep expert who co-wrote a well-publicized 2014 study.

Around the onset of puberty, adolescents experience a change in circadian rhythms. The amount of sleep they need doesn't change — about nine hours — but the sleeping and waking cycle is shifted up to two hours later. The period of 5 to 7 a.m. is especially vital because of the REM sleep that takes place around this time. Thus teens naturally stay up later at night, but in many cases are forced to wake up before their bodies are ready. In 2006, the National Sleep Foundation reported "six in ten 9th- to 12th-grade adolescents (62 percent) get an insufficient amount of sleep on school nights."

Students who don't get enough sleep are at risk of more than just napping in homeroom. Owens says lack of sleep can affect mood, attention, memory, behavior control and impulse control. It can also lead to reduced academic achievement, higher rates of absenteeism, increased use of stimulants, greater risk of car accidents due to drowsiness and health problems such as obesity and diabetes.

Now a professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School and director of the Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Boston Children's Hospital, Owens continues to advocate for adoption of later start times nationally.

"The more we look at this, the more evidence we accumulate to suggest that this is the right thing to do," she says.

There is even an economic benefit to later start times, according to a 2017 study by the policy analyst organization Rand Corp. Last year, Rand released its economic analysis of later start times in U.S. schools and concluded the American economy could gain as much as \$83 billion within 10 years if high schools around the country went to an 8:30 a.m. start time. The benefits would be realized mainly due to more well-rested teenagers avoiding fatal car collisions, doing better academically in school and obtaining higher-paying jobs after they graduate.

The benefits would be realized in spite of potential increased costs to schools, such as having to buy more buses, according to the study.

### **Two-Year Preparation**

At Glens Falls, studies like the one by Owens helped inspire the district to consider a later start for the high school. The idea was first raised by teachers and administrators, Jenkins recalls. Too many high school students were groggy during first period, they

told him. Was there something the district could do?

The school district spent two years studying the idea. Jenkins launched a newsletter for parents and staff titled *StartTime*, which was dedicated to information on the importance of sleep and adolescent circadian rhythms. The district also invited sleep experts to present information to parents and conducted a student sleep survey. The district has one unique attribute that made the change easy — its territory is only four square miles. Most of the high school's students walk or are driven to school, so changing the bus schedule — a major issue for many districts contemplating the move — was not a concern here.

Although some parents were initially opposed to the move, most adjusted quickly, Jenkins says. Jenkins, who had two teenagers in the high school at the time of the change, says each gained as much as 45 minutes of sleep each night. Since the change was made, graduation rates have risen from the low 70s to 89 percent, he says. The district also saw reductions in disciplinary actions, tardiness and absenteeism.

### **Optimizing Start Times**

In the Bedford County Public Schools in central Virginia, Superintendent Douglas Schuch implemented a staggered start time in 2011. The high school moved its opening from 8:30 to 8:55 a.m. while the elementary school moved its start from 8:30 to 7:55 a.m. The new schedule met the approval of all 20 principals "who had done the reading on adolescent sleep," Schuch says.

The proposal for a more efficient, two-tiered bus schedule initially was driven by economics. It required fewer bus drivers and buses, which saved the district \$400,000. The amount was equivalent to about eight teaching positions at a time when Bedford County had cut more than \$10 million from its \$110 million budget due to the recession. Those cuts included the loss of about 180 full-time staff and popular programs such as high school courses in the arts and agriculture.

The move to a later start was announced six months before taking place, giving families and bus drivers advanced warning. Not everyone was happy with the change. Some bus drivers lost their jobs, some parents saw child care costs increase, and other parents worried about young kids waiting at a school bus in early-morning darkness.

Still, the amount of savings to the district was a compelling factor that won over most community members, says Schuch. "We simply had the opportunity to be more efficient with our transportation," he says, adding, "I'm pleased we were able to make a decision that supports the adolescent sleep cycle."

In 2014, the Beaufort County School District in South Carolina's Low Country flipped its high school and elementary school start times, allowing the seven high schools to start at 8:45 a.m. and its 18 elementary schools at 7:45 a.m. The district, which enrolls about 22,000 students, began the change at one high school and soon moved it to its six other high schools.

Jeffrey Moss, Beaufort County's superintendent, says data gathered by the district found that students' grades — and students' attitudes toward school — improved after the scheduling shift. Incidents of tardiness and discipline have decreased.

Still, criticism continues, mainly fueled by parents of elementary students concerned about the early bus pickups. "It's an ongoing conversation," Moss says.

### **Insurmountable Walls**

Other schools considering these moves found enough problems to scuttle their hopes. In California, the Rocklin Unified School District weighed a later start time for its high schoolers in 2016 but backed off. The district, located at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains east of Sacramento, determined it would need to purchase four new buses and hire four new drivers, a significant cost. Also, surveys sent to parents found a majority opposed.

"We had a divided community," says Kathy Pon, deputy superintendent of educational services in the 11,500-student Rocklin district. The board of education considered the matter after more than six months of study but set it aside owing to opposition.

In North Carolina, the Wake County Public School System found a similar transportation obstacle. In addition, some vocal parents objected because their teenage children were needed to look after younger siblings after parents left for work or before they returned, and the high school athletic teams would have trouble getting to away games on time if school started later.

In the suburbs of San Francisco, the San Mateo Union High School District briefly studied a possible shift in school start times in 2016. What ultimately caused the school board to abandon the idea was commuting, a major stress on residents' lives in this densely settled region. Teachers worried about the heavier traffic they would confront driving to work in the morning. Some also predicted they wouldn't be able to stay as long after school ended for clubs, sports or remedial help for students because of the need to beat the evening rush hour. Parents feared their children would be stuck on buses in clogged traffic longer.

"We didn't get the full concerns until people realized we were serious" about a later start for secondary schools, says San Mateo's superintendent, Kevin Skelly. "Moving from 8 to 8:30 made a big difference." ([See related story.](#))

The district dropped the idea of a daily schedule change but decided to pursue other methods of promoting sleep. A staff committee examined the quantity of homework students were receiving and whether that caused them to stay up later. In health classes, teachers conducted discussions about the importance of sleep, and the district sent home letters to educate parents about the issue. Notably, San Mateo's 9,000 high school students start their instructional day 60 to 90 minutes late (depending on the school) once a week for staff meetings. "One day does help replenish them," Skelly says.

### **In the Issaquah, Wash., district,**

**Superintendent Ron Thiele is using University of Washington researchers to study the impact of the later school starting hours put in place last September.**

### **Midway Solutions**

Meanwhile, some school districts, realizing the unlikelihood of implementing new school day schedules, are finding ways to compromise.

Ann Arbor Public Schools in Michigan came up with a plan that allows all 9th- through 12th-grade students in all five of the district's high schools to arrive at the start of second period if they wish. As an alternative for missing first period, students can take an additional class after school, enroll in an online course, attend a local college class or design an independent study program with a local expert. The plan was instituted in time for the 2017-18 school year.

In conjunction with these changes, the district worked with partner Durham Transportation to push back the earliest bus routes so no student is picked up before 7 a.m., even if their school day starts with the traditional first period class.

Paul DeAngelis, executive director of high school education for the district, says only a few high school students opted for the later start in its first year because schedules were set before the program was unveiled. But he expects to see interest grow.

"We believe in the research related to start times for teens," DeAngelis says. "By looking to create more alternative instructional delivery methods ... we are beginning to meet the needs of students who want a later start time."

The 20,000-student Issaquah School District in Washington found a different answer. For 15 years, the district had been discussing the idea of an 8:30 a.m. start time for the entire district, an hour later than what had been in place. The usual concerns from parents prevented the district from moving further.

Superintendent Ron Thiele split the difference. He recommended the three high schools start at 8 a.m., with the middle school at 8:10 a.m. and the elementary school at 9:10 a.m. It went into effect last September.

The new start times resulted in a more efficient bus schedule, but cost the district \$700,000 for new buses and additional drivers. In a district with a \$256 million budget, located in the heart of Seattle's booming tech community, it was something they could accommodate easily.

"There's not a lot of things I can do that costs (only) \$700,000 that can positively impact thousands of students," Thiele says.

The district continues to study the change, working with the University of Washington to survey teachers, students and community members about the impact. Issaquah's

leadership also has commissioned a survey of students about their sleeping habits to learn if the later start is making any difference. Thiele says, "I felt like I took a step in the right direction."

**ALAN WECHSLER** is a freelance education writer in Albany, N.Y. Twitter: [@alwechs](https://twitter.com/alwechs)

## Advice to Schools: Take it Slow, Listen and Expect the Unexpected

Considering a later start for your high school? It's likely not going to be a smooth process. But those who took the plunge say there are a variety of steps districts can take to make success more likely and less painful.

Their advice: Take it slow to allow all parties to prepare for change; communicate well to all community members; solicit input from staff, parents, students and the community; and don't expect your experience to be the same as other schools.

"People are very accustomed to start times," says Doug Schuch, superintendent of Bedford County Public Schools in Virginia. "You really need to understand your community and to what extent it impacts them."

Bedford moved, following lengthy deliberation, to a later start time in 2011. Schuch ensured every interested party was involved in the planning, including some who might not come to mind at first — such as business owners who employed students after school.

"Involve your community in a discussion around this and get them to help champion your cause," he counsels. "If they don't feel like they're a part of this decision, getting their support may be problematic."

### **Parent Understanding**

In Glens Falls, N.Y., district leadership made certain parents understood the rationale behind the move. Sleep experts, including a doctor and academic researchers, came to Glens Falls to talk about adolescent brain development and sleep patterns. The district hosted evening sessions for parents and even created a newsletter specific to the proposed change in school day schedules. Notably, the district continued to report on the issue publicly after the change was put in place to demonstrate the improved sleep patterns in students (based on surveys) and corresponding improvements in academic performance and student behavior.

Six years after the change, says Glens Falls Superintendent Paul Jenkins, "we don't get any complaints. Everybody's used to it."

Jeffrey Moss, superintendent in Beaufort County, S.C., suggests districts take their time.

"We studied it for a year," he recalls. "Lessons learned for us: We probably should have done a little bit more education about what we were studying and presented it, through town halls, at each high school. A very good public relations program will educate parents what it looks like

and feels like.”

In Beaufort, the modified start times began at one high school as a pilot program before moving it to all seven high schools in the district, drawing on successes at one school to show the benefit of a later start to the school day for teens.

### **Roadway Realities**

In other communities that effected this change, leaders suggest considering every potential impact a later start might create. Every school district is different. Some districts found even a half-hour change would lead to serious traffic burdens — either for buses on local roads or at the schools themselves — that created insurmountable issues. Others found increased cost for new buses and drivers they didn’t expect and knew they could not afford.

“Every community is unique — traffic, layout of district, suburban, urban, rural,” says Ron Thiele, superintendent of Issaquah, Wash., district. “Something like this touches so many families in your community. It needs to be done thoughtfully, and you need to let the community get used to it.”

Judith Owens, an expert on pediatric sleep issues at Harvard, has studied and promoted late starts for years. She stresses the importance of having all parties in the community be on board, from the superintendent and the board of education to all school unions and even community leaders. In some cases, she says, the process to approval can take years. Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, with 183,000 students, needed 15 years of debate and deliberation to move to a later start for its 27 high schools, she says.

In some states, legislation may make efforts at the district level moot. According to the advocacy group Start Schools Later, bills to make high school start times later have been introduced in at least 11 states: California, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia and Washington.

— ALAN WECHSLER

## in San Mateo But Modeling Better Habits

**BY KEVIN SKELLY**/*School Administrator, May 2018*

**Even though the school board’s 2016 attempt to move back the school start by 30 minutes in San Mateo, Calif., was unsuccessful, Superintendent Kevin Skelly (standing) says the district benefited in several significant ways.**

In our zeal to achieve, to learn and to do more, sleep can be a casualty. We know the value of sleep, especially the clarity of mind and improved physical performance that come with it. And yet it is one of the first sacrifices we make at the altar of modern

success, both as adults and, perhaps more damagingly, for our children.

Many teenagers wear their lack of sleep as a badge of honor. They boast of how little sleep they are getting, how busy they are and how many activities they are packing into their lives. One of my favorite high school students goes as far as to call sleep a waste of time in her frenetic world. And who are our young people's models in this regard? We adults!

I once heard a talk about difficult conversations during which the speaker recommended "HALTING" before one proceeds with something. That means figuring out whether you or the person you are confronting is Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired. Our decision-making ability is so impaired by fatigue. Teenagers, with their impulsivity and developing moral compasses, are particularly vulnerable to the ravages of sleep deprivation.

### **A Board Initiative**

Given sleep's central role in the social, emotional and physical health of our students, school leaders have a responsibility to promote its value and support its acquisition. In the fall of 2016, the board of education in our 9,000-student high school district in the San Francisco Bay Area, with my full support, made a big push to move the starting time of school back 30 minutes a day. The decision was made in recognition of the research that shows students' more typical nocturnal tendencies are unsupported by earlier school start times. We made a 30-minute later start time an annual district goal. Despite our strong push and deep engagement, significant resistance from parents, students and staff scuttled our campaign for starting later than the 8 a.m. opening bell time for our high schoolers. Traffic congestion in the morning was raised as a major issue by the objectors, but so were family work routines, students' after-school activities and jobs, and the mismatch between working staff and our proposed schedules.

### **Still Some Value**

Despite the fact we didn't achieve our goal, four positive outcomes emerged from our efforts.

First, our survey results pointed to homework's time demands as a big challenge for students. This year we have a committee reviewing the research on homework and suggesting a rewrite of our existing board direction in this area.

Second, we moved weekly staff collaboration times to the beginning of the day and class start times back once a week. Now students have at least one day a week when they can sleep in while staff work schedules are unchanged.

Third, we moved the times of many interscholastic athletic contests later, in response to family surveys that brought up concerns about how much class time students missed because of athletic events.



Finally, our community has become far better educated about the value of sleep. We shared widely the best research on the value of a good night's rest for school-aged children as well as the results of our own surveys of students. This is what I wrote, in part, to our community: "The over 3,000 students who completed the survey reported that they believe (correctly) that they NEED between 8 and 9 hours of sleep, but report that they get, on average, a full two hours less than this. ... We will continue to explore ways to help students get more sleep ... and develop other healthy habits. At the same time, as first teachers and 'sleepers,' what you do as a family and what you model is vastly important."

### **Personal Impact**

Perhaps it is because I am growing older and moving slower that I enjoy a good night's sleep and acknowledge its benefits more than ever. I am gentler to those whom I love, more patient with those with whom I struggle and a considerably better listener and problem solver if I am rested.

Different people need different amounts of sleep and sleep differently. But I don't know any teenagers who can make it without sufficient sleep for more than a few days. While it sometimes made for stressful nights, there were many rewards for ensuring my kids went to sleep at a decent hour, turned off the computer and worked productively on their homework so that sleep could be, what Shakespeare called, "great nature's second course, chief nourisher in life's feast."

Some of my fondest and most vivid memories spring forth from those times when I am rested. As summer nears, consider some good, long nights of sleep and perhaps a few afternoon naps thrown in for good measure!

**KEVIN SKELLY** is the superintendent of the San Mateo Union High School District in San Mateo, Calif.

## You Can't Overcommunicate When Schedule Changes Are Raised

**BY LIZ GRIFFIN**/*School Administrator, May 2018*

When Eric Conti, superintendent of Burlington, Mass., Public Schools, blogged last October about a proposal for a later school start time for high schoolers, he included a link to a *New York Times* article on "The Science of Adolescent Sleep."

Though he figured the research evidence on student well-being would be persuasive, parents quickly voiced concerns on social media and during face-to-face meetings, according to Conti. One parent, clearly unsympathetic to teens' bio-rhythms, blurted out in an online forum: "If these snowflakes are not getting enough sleep, how are they all getting into college? Maybe if

they were not on their devices all night they might get to be on time.”

That was followed by a proponent of a later start time, a mother who posted about her child’s excessive homework load: “I watch my child do homework until 11 most nights and on nights when she has had band rehearsal until 9 p.m., she is sometimes up until 2:00-3:00 in the morning.”

### **Heated Debates**

Conti’s recent experience in his 3,600-student suburban district in northeastern Massachusetts illustrates how debates on time-change proposals for schools play out on social media today. Public comments can be contentious and discussions quickly can become overheated. On school start times, parents of elementary students hold different concerns than those of high school students.

Communication by the district’s top leaders may play a significant role in the policy outcome. Veteran leaders who’ve dealt with the rough-and-tumble state “no one solution will suit everybody.” Still, they shared these tips:

- » Acknowledge the tension and the anxiety that schedule changes generate.
  
- » Don’t get personal. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. Allow comments on the district’s Facebook and Twitter sites.
- » Educate every stakeholder (students included) about recommendations on teenage sleep by the Centers for Disease Control and the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- » Ensure two-way communication — face-to-face discussions, surveys, a superintendent’s blog and other social media.
- » Show what options are being discussed and the cost implications.
- » Listen carefully and tailor messages to each audience about proposed changes. Staff may want flexibility on deadlines for transferring to another school. Businesses will want a heads-up owing to the impact on parents’ and students’ work schedules. Coaches and athletes will want to know the effect on after-school practices. Parents will face child care issues. Board members will want to know costs and who supports the initiative.
- » Be transparent about the decision making. Put survey data on the district website and a calendar that informs people several months in advance.
- » Use humor when appropriate. (Parents may struggle to get a teen out of bed and out the door in time, yet parents/teachers find teens are easier to live with when they are rested.)

### **A Joint Move**

Conti found collaboration with fellow superintendents in his region — especially those who are part of the same interscholastic athletics league — was key to the conversation. “We approached delaying the start of high school as a league, not individual districts,” he says. Conti will ramp up communication again when Burlington’s new schedule, which starts high school 65 minutes later, begins this fall.

**LIZ GRIFFIN** is managing editor of *School Administrator*.