

## **School start time & teen sleep**

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### **[Headnote]**

Sleep studies have shown that teenagers' internal clocks are not compatible with the early hours of most high schools. Recent research indicates that starting the school day later can benefit teens and everyone around them.

The question of when high schools should start classes in the morning is at the center of a great debate in communities across the United States. During the past four years, hundreds of school districts discussed later starting times for the high school day because of recent findings from sleep laboratories doing research on teen sleep patterns.

The brain is where the cycle of becoming sleepy and actually falling asleep begins. Medical researchers have discovered that teenagers have a different sleep pattern than either young children or adults. Teen brains do not begin the cycle to fall asleep until about 11:00 p.m. and the brain continues to be in the sleep mode until about 8:00 a.m. The 11:00 p.m.-8:00 a.m. sleep-wake cycle in teenagers is extremely resistant to change. As a result, when teenagers wake up at 6:00 a.m. because school starts at 7:15 or 7:30 a.m., their bodies still want (need) to be asleep. It is not surprising, then, that studies have shown 20 percent of teens fall asleep in their first two hours of class. Attempts to get teens to go to bed earlier have not been successful mainly because their bodies are not yet into the sleep cycle. Teens report that even when they are very tired, they do not feel sleepy until around 11:00 p.m. Parents have long suspected that teens say they are not able to fall asleep earlier because they just want to stay up late. Now the research shows that teens really can't feel sleepy until about 11:00 p.m. and they really can't get out of bed without a struggle much before 8:00 a.m.

### **Pushing Back the High School Start Time**

Given the findings from the medical researchers about teen sleep patterns, two school districts in Minnesota decided to begin their high school day more than an hour later than before. Edina High School, a suburban high school outside of Minneapolis, was first, but now all of the high schools in the city of Minneapolis begin their high school classes at 8:30 or 8:40 a.m. These changes have affected nearly 15,000 high school students.

Now that three years have passed in Minneapolis since the changes and four years

have passed since the change in Edina, much is becoming clear about the effect of having a later starting time. I am conducting an impact evaluation with team of researchers from the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CARED in the College of Education at the University of Minnesota. The most clear and observable difference is that few students now fall asleep at their desks. Teachers report the students are more alert in class and are much more engaged in the class discussions. They also like the later starting time because it gives them more time to incorporate the most recent morning news from across the world into their lessons for the day.

Students say they are more awake throughout the day and less likely to fall asleep doing homework, working at the computer, or even watching TV They also get better grades for their schoolwork and feel in a better mood more of the time. Parents say that their children are "easier to live with" and they now have time in the morning to chat with their teens about the schedule for the day ahead.

According to principals, the atmosphere of the schools is calmer during passing times and in the cafeteria. Even the school nurse tells the researchers there are fewer sick kids, and the school counselor sees fewer students coming in to report that they are having problems at home or difficulties with their friends.

Overall, the change to the later starting time for high schools has been viewed as highly beneficial for a number of reasons. Initially, the districts that pushed back the starting times were concerned that fewer students would participate in sports or after-school activities because of the later dismissal. All of the data gathered to date do not show that either of those concerns ever became a problem. Participation in all afterschool activities has remained the same, and those students who go to after-school jobs did not shorten the number of hours they could work. In fact, students found they are less tired at their jobs than they were when they had to get up so much earlier. All in all, the shift to a later starting time has been a good decision. The "growing pains" for making the change are now all but disappeared, and the students, parents, and teachers do not want to go back to anything earlier.

\* More resources on the topic of school start time and teen sleep can be found on the CARET website at <http://carei.coled.umn>.