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Get up! Sleepy teens roam school halls while debate goes on about changing start times

BY JOSHUA CREEL - NEXT CORRESPONDENT
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It is 6 a.m. Teenagers groggily get out of bed and prepare for the school day to begin. For most, their school day starts around 7:30. They may have a test or a project to present. But are they really awake? Teens have long complained that they are tired early in the school day, which makes for a perennial debate between administrators, teachers, parents and students.

Recent research has shown that the teens' argument has scientific value. These infamous 7:30 or 8 a.m. classes house not a group of alert students but those who exhibit sleep symptoms similar to patients with narcolepsy. This can affect their performance in school and their overall health. So the debate rages on: Should schools change start times and make them more conducive to teenagers' sleep patterns?

Teens not only enjoy staying up late and sleeping in late, it is a part of how their bodies function. According to research by Dr. Mary Carskadon, a professor at Brown University and director of Chronobiology and Sleep Research at Bradley Hospital in Rhode Island, a human's biological clock, or when they feel it is time for bed and time to be awake, begins to change around puberty. So when teenagers say good night to their parents, they're about to get a second wind -- they're actually still wide awake. While it may appear to be simple teenage rebellion, staying up later than their parents can just be a normal body function for a teen.

One high school freshman sent a message to his friend at 11:30 a.m. on a weekend. The friend wrote back at 2:30 p.m. the same day asking, "What were you doing awake at that ungodly hour?" Teenagers seem to function much more efficiently as the day moves along. Students in their first-period classes can fall into

REM sleep in 3.4 minutes, which is similar to narcoleptic patients.

If teens function better at later times, why does school start so early?

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One of the main reasons is transportation.

"The tail of transportation wags the dog of the educational system," said Dr. Charles Stoddart, a professor at Fredonia State College and former superintendent of the Orchard Park Central School District.

Karen Miller, a teacher at Park School, said, "This problem revolves mostly around logistical difficulties and financial limitations."

At large schools, such as Orchard Park High School, a great portion of students take the buses. The availability of time slots depends on the size of the bus fleet and the area which it must span.

But smaller schools have more options.

The Union-Endicott Central School District, a smaller district near Binghamton, moved the start times back from 7:30 to 8:30. This has resulted in better work and better grades from the students. However, the idea also hit many bumps in the road.

A problem with virtually all plans to move school hours is extracurricular activities. Students take part in sports practices and participate in school performances. Union-Endicott ran into problems by having to move sports and play practices before the school day started, so in essence the students had to get up earlier and stay even later. Also, students whose extracurricular activities were held in the morning were not able to perform as well because they were so tired.

The most popular idea among students would have the school day be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

"I like to sleep late; starting school later would be great," said Nicole Wagner, a freshman at Cleveland Hill.

Most school boards believe six hours of "seat time" equals a productive school day. Thus, a six-hour school day is virtually impossible. Then, how about 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.? The debate can go on and on. While school administrators are well aware of the problems facing teens and sleep deprivation, they are often unable to do anything about it because of a lack of available resources.

"As a psychologist, mother and taxpayer, I'd prefer my teenager to be well rested and support any necessary funding to achieve the goal of starting school later for high school," said Renee Baskin of Orchard Park.

Research has shown that younger students are able to function earlier in the morning and at a more adequate level. This leads to the debate about swapping times -- younger students have the earlier school day, and older students stay later. A few schools have attempted to make this switch.

Locally, some of the larger schools that have later starts times are: Amherst High School, 8:30 a.m.; Bennett High School, 8:20 a.m.; and Lafayette High School, 8:30 a.m.

However, when the upper school population answered a poll about school hours, it was a resounding NO to switching to a later start time.

"I think it's better that we start earlier ... we can finish quicker and do more after-school activities," said Taylor Brown, a freshman at Williamsville North, which begins its school day at 7:45 a.m.

Emily Brucks, a freshman at Kenmore West, agrees. "I don't want school hours to end later -- that would mean we'd have to stay later."

"I see a lot of opposition to it," said Colin Fowler Chapman, a sophomore at Park School. "I think we should leave things the way they are; changing it up would be too costly, and it would be tough to get used to the new routine."

High school students not only deal with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, a good portion of juniors and seniors have paying jobs. They require the earlier school day in order to do their job later in the day -- yet another major complication in swapping school times.

Chris Lauricella, headmaster of Park School, said, "The research is out there, it's just hard to do

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Joshu Creel is a freshman at Park School.

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