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School Start Time and Sleep

"Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," said Ben Franklin. But does this adage apply to teenagers? Research in the 1990s found that later sleep and wake patterns among adolescents are biologically determined; the natural tendency for teenagers is to stay up late at night and wake up later in the morning.

This research indicates that school bells that ring as early as 7:00 a.m. in many parts of the country stand in stark contrast with adolescents' sleep patterns and needs.

Evidence suggests that teenagers are indeed seriously sleep deprived. A recent poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation found that 60% of children under the age of 18 complained of being tired during the day, according to their parents, and 15% said they fell asleep at school during the year.

On April 2 of 1999, Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), introduced a congressional resolution to encourage schools and school districts to reconsider early morning start times to be more in sync with teens' biological makeup. House Congressional Resolution 135 or the "ZZZ's to A's" Act would encourage individual schools and school districts all over the country to move school start times to no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

"I hope this is a wake up call to school districts and parents all over this country," said Lofgren. "With early school start times, some before 7:00 a.m., adolescents are not getting enough sleep.

"Over time, sleep deprivation leads to serious consequences for academic achievement, social behavior, and the health and safety of our nation's youth," the Congresswoman added. "We must encourage schools to push back their start times to at least 8:30 a.m. — a schedule more in tune with adolescents' biological sleep and wake patterns and more closely resembling the adult work day."

POLL DATA:

In fact, public opinion seems to side with Lofgren's "Zzz's to A's" resolution. According to the National Sleep Foundation's 2002 Sleep in America poll, 80% of respondents said high schools should start no earlier than 8:00 a.m. each day; nearly one-half of these respondents (47%) said start times should be between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. Only 17% of those polled said high school classes should begin before 8:00 a.m.

EFFECTS:

A study by Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom at the University of Minnesota, demonstrates the impact of pushing back school start times. After the Minneapolis Public School District changed the starting times of seven high schools from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m., Dr. Wahlstrom investigated the impact of later start times on student performance, and the results are encouraging. Dr. Wahlstrom found that students benefited by obtaining five or more extra hours of sleep per week.

She also found improvement in attendance and enrollment rates, increased daytime alertness, and decreased student-reported depression. Many experts agree that adolescents require 8 1/2 to 9 1/4 hours of sleep each night, however, few actually get that much sleep.

Even with compelling research, changing school start times can be challenging for school districts. Administrators have to delay busing schedules. Coaches worry about scheduling practices and many parents rely on the current start times for reasons such as childcare or carpools.

Students are concerned that being in school later in the day means that it will cut into after-school jobs and other extracurricular activities. Still, there are convincing reasons to push back school start times. Mary Carskadon, PhD, a renowned expert on adolescent sleep, cites several advantages for teens to get the sleep they need:

- * less likelihood of experiencing depressed moods;
- * reduced likelihood for tardiness;
- * reduced absenteeism;
- * better grades;
- * reduced risk of fall asleep car crashes; and
- * reduced risk of metabolic and nutritional deficits associated with insufficient sleep, including obesity.

Dr. Carskadon is Director of the Chronobiology/Sleep Research Laboratory at Bradley Hospital in East Providence, R.I., and Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Brown University School of Medicine. She is a member of NSF's Sleep and Teens Task Force. With the resumption of school classes in the fall, start times are likely to remain a hot topic. Thus far, individual schools or districts in 19 states have pushed back their start times, and more than 100 school districts in an additional 17 states are considering delaying their start times.

"Changing school start times is not the only step needed," says Dr. Carskadon. She also advocates reducing weekend sleep lag (staying up later). "It's important to add sleep to the school curriculum at all grade levels and make sleep a positive priority."

ADVOCACY:

Advocating for Sleep Friendly Schools can seem like a challenging task; however, here you will find tips, guides sample materials and case studies to support your efforts and help you conduct your advocacy campaign. Sleep is so important to all of us, and for teens it seems nearly impossible to get enough. So don't sleep on it; start today to help create sleep-friendly schools that promote healthy, safe and productive students!



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