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FAMILY FEATURES

Getting A's with More Z's

The fight for later school starts has backing from doctors and statistics.

By Renee Sklarew



Lev Dalgachov/Shutterstock

In Loudoun County, public high schools begin at 9 a.m. High schools in Arlington and Alexandria Counties start after 8 a.m. Yet for more than a decade, parent advocates have failed to convince Fairfax County to implement later start times for secondary schools. Most Fairfax high school students begin their first class at 7:20 a.m.

The most compelling objection is over cost—moving thousands of students on buses to elementary, middle and high schools is an expensive, complicated process. But even with a persuasive campaign that outlined a cost-effective way to start high school

later, Fairfax County declined to make sweeping changes.

Undaunted by the stalemate, two women remain on the forefront of the fight for later start times—Board of Education member Sandy Evans and SLEEP founder Phyllis Payne. The duo manages a website called sleepin Fairfax.org where families can sign a petition in support of later start times for secondary schools.

Payne explains why this issue won't go away: "We hear stories about students dropping out of high school, because they simply couldn't function with the current schedule. We've heard about students who end up in truancy court. Yet no one mentioned they should speak to their pediatrician about the trouble they're having waking up in time to get to school. Many children and families are made miserable by the very early start times that prevent teen students from getting the sleep they need to be healthy, happy and able to learn."

Advocates point to research from the medical community that shows students with later start times acquire significant health benefits. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) in Arlington maintains that adolescents who start their classes at 8:30 a.m. or later gain five hours more sleep per week. The result, according to NSF: Students are tardy less often, have increased cognitive ability, and are better able to cope with stress.

Pulmonologist Philip Fuller is the medical director of the Sleep-Awake Center at Fredericksburg's Mary Washington Hospital and has practiced sleep medicine for 20 years. When asked about the benefits of later start times for adolescents, Fuller says, "A good deal of research shows sleep is very important for memory and learning. The evidence fairly strongly suggests that later start times are better. Inherently, the majority of kids with a later start will get more sleep, which is beneficial to grades as well as being safer."

Fuller cites a study reported by the 2010 American Academy of Sleep Medicine comparing two school systems in the Virginia Tidewater area. High school students with a 45-minute-later start time had significantly fewer traffic accidents than the earlier risers.

The annual Fairfax County Youth Survey included questions about sleep in 2009. The results proved high school students are sleep deprived—37 percent of Fairfax County 12th graders sleep six or less hours per night. Sleep deprivation is fueled by several factors, including early start times, use of electronics, homework load, extracurricular activities and part-time jobs.

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Sleep deprivation is also linked to depressive moods, obesity and difficulty concentrating. So, it's no surprise that parents and health professionals continue the fight for later start times. "Change is hard, and seems even harder for a large bureaucracy," comments Payne. "But having school schedules that actually work for students, instead of hindering their progress, is critical."

Cost of no Z's Adolescents have trouble falling asleep before 11 p.m.

They need **8.5 to 9 hours** of sleep every night.

Source: National Sleep Foundation
 Total hours of sleep high school students average on school nights: **6.1 hours**

Source: The American Academy of Sleep Medicine June 2010
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/06/100609083221

41% higher teen crash rate in Virginia Beach than Chesapeake in 2007

Virginia Beach: School began at **7:20 a.m.**

Chesapeake: School began at **8:40 a.m.**

Source: 2008 Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles

As adolescents age, the number of items in their bedroom tends to increase (from two items in 6th grade to four items in 12th grade). Specifically, 9th- to 12th-grade adolescents are more likely than 6th- to 8th-grade adolescents to have the following items in their bedroom:

- Internet access (26% vs. 14%)
- Electronic music devices (94% vs. 85%)
- Computer (32% vs. 22%)
- Cell phone (57% vs. 21%)
- Telephone (43% vs. 23%)
- Television (60% vs. 53%)

source: National Sleep Foundation 2011

www.sleepfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2006_summary_of_findings.pdf

You're Getting Sleepy

62% 11th-grade adolescents and **68%** 12th-grade adolescents report driving a motor vehicle while feeling drowsy within the past year.

51% of adolescents report they are tired during the day and have difficulty falling asleep.
 SOURCE: National Sleep Foundation and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

(November 2011)

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3 Responses

Lisa Ross Says:
 November 24th, 2011 at 11:01 am

Research shows also that sleep deprived people can have attention lapses, show poor judgment and make frequent mistakes in cognitive tasks —EVEN when they claim not to feel sleepy. In addition, even moderate sleep restriction leads to a detectable negative impact on the neurobehavioral functioning of children with ADHD (and I have 2 such children). New research earlier this year showed that an average nightly sleep loss of about 55 minutes for six nights was associated with deteriorating performance including inattention, omission and depressed reaction time in children with ADHD. This often resulted in poorer neurobehavioral functioning the following day and affected sustained attention and vigilance, which are essential for optimal academic performance.

The fact is that the too early FCPS school start times are causing at least 2,000 county pre-teens and teenagers with ADHD to be sleep-deprived by making it impossible for them to obtain the

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sleep their bodies require. This forced sleep deprivation causes some of, or exacerbates, their attention issues; can cause mood issues and depression which affects academic performance; and decreases the effects of stimulant medications on student ability to focus, attend to instruction, or perform academically as well as they could if they were allowed the proper amount of sleep for their age.

A recent 20-year study written about in the 9/4/11 "Washington Examiner" also revealed that a lack of focus is the main reason that ADHD students don't complete high school. Only 29% of ADHD students with attention problems completed high school -29%! Thus, it seems impossible to conclude that the Fairfax County School District is providing teenagers with attention deficit disorder an "appropriate" education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when its start times are negatively impacting their disability. It's akin to the schools putting ear muffs on deaf children.

Robin Carroll Says:

November 24th, 2011 at 7:14 pm

I am and have been an advocate for later start times for high schools and middle schools in Fairfax County. As a participant on the latest task force, I worked alongside many other parents and student advocates to get the message across that this is a vital issue and one where we can affect change. It won't cost more and our students will benefit; a win-win situation!

Maribel Ibrahim Says:

November 24th, 2011 at 8:03 pm

This issue has become so important that we are partnering with SLEEP of Fairfax to petition for federal legislation to start schools no earlier than 8:00am.

For more information, visit our website at <http://startschoolater.weebly.com> or view the petition at: <http://bit.ly/tWa4dS>

Regards,

Maribel Ibrahim
The Frugal Writer

<http://www.twitter.com/StartSchoolL8r>

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