

## **Asheville's Susan Reinhardt on sleep-deprived students in Buncombe County schools: A plea for later start times for schools**

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I realize what I'm about to say may cause other parents, teachers and administrators the itch to growl, scratch and rip the upcoming words into shreds. But here they are. This message goes straight out to Buncombe County Schools.

**START LATER.**

Middle school and high school kids need about 9 hours of sleep in order to function at top capacity, according to most studies I've read.

Well, guess what? They aren't getting it. Many fall asleep in class, score poorly on tests and can barely make it through the day.

Here's the deal. Asheville City Schools -- the middle and high school -- start at 8:30 a.m.

Most Buncombe County schools start at 8 or before, kids rising as early as 5 a.m. to make it to the bus stop.

My daughter's final bell rings at 7:45 at Reynolds Middle.

Now that is too danged early. These kids participate in after-school sports or other activities, then delve into unbelievable amounts of homework. By the time my child goes to bed, it's after 10.

And believe me, I've tried everything to get her in bed by 9 p.m., but very few eighth-graders up to high school seniors have their workloads completed by 10. Seems gone are the days of study hall, where we got a jump on things before the final bell rang.

So what can we do? Pretty much nothing, is what I got when talking to school officials.

No one wants to shake the apple tree or, rather, change busing schedules already running tight routes.

Susanne Swanger, associate superintendent for the county schools, said start-up times haven't been addressed in years.

"Research does show older students are staying up later, and we see that as moms," she said. "Changing times would depend on a lot of things, and as of now, we're not aware of any issues. Years ago, it was discussed, but not in my five-year tenure."

My personal feelings toward a county school start of 8:30 arose when my daughter's alarm clock failed.

We overslept by about an hour, indicating that's the amount of extra sleep her body required.

The difference was a more pleasant and focused child.

Studies have shown teens today aren't getting enough sleep.

One reason is that school starts so early, and with pressures of studying late into the night and a schedule of afternoon sports and activities, it's time we rethink school start times.

The morning we overslept, my teen was in a much more pleasant mood, having gotten an extra hour of sleep.

The National Sleep Foundation reported that school districts across the country had consistently positive outcomes when the day began later. Its research shows sleep is a biological necessity and that teens are least likely to rack in enough nightly z's.

While they need a tad more than nine hours a night for maximum benefit, most are clocking in fewer than seven hours a night by their senior years.

"They slog through the day, deprived and struggling to stay awake in class," the NSF reported. "They are also more at risk for car crashes, emotional problems, substance

abuse, impaired decision-making and overall performance in all areas of academics and athletics at school.”

Regardless, I got the opinion school officials didn’t want to upset the apple cart by introducing later start times.

Robbie Adell, principal of Reynolds Middle, believes in an early start time. He said other studies contradict the National Sleep Foundation’s and that kids tend to do their best in the mornings, then sag in the afternoons.

“You have to also look at athletics and after-school activities,” he said. “Our fields don’t have lights. If we extend the school day, these young people might not be able to see to participate.”

When Adell hears of certain students who are chronically tired, an internal investigation typically reveals reasons behind it.

“As a father myself, I tell parents they have to set guidelines as to when they go to bed,” he said. And he makes good sense. “We live in an electronic world. You think they may be in bed, but they could be using electronics” such as cellphones or computers.

He also mentioned that many parents have to be at work early in the morning, and starting before 8 a.m. ensures they will make it to their jobs on time.

“This discussion has been debated a number of years,” he said. “Both sides can build great arguments on when the start of schools should be.”

I sent a quick poll to my Facebook friends on the issues.

Joan Gibson, retired from Asheville City Schools, said, “I felt like it (start times) was too early. I was late a lot of days myself.”

Buffy Queen, community educator of REACH of Haywood County, agreed.

“Many studies have shown teenagers do much better with school beginning later rather than earlier.”

My own sister, Sandy Edinger, mother of two who just completed two years of training to become a teacher, shared her thoughts on the matter.

“Preston (her youngest) starts at 8:30 and has both sleep and alert days,” she said. “His school rotates the schedule as a result. English, math and other classes may be first period for two weeks, and fifth the next two weeks.”

Charlie Glazener, public information officer for Asheville City Schools, said a lot of research pointed positively toward starting school after 9 a.m. and wrapping up after 4 p.m.

“High school students tend to stay up later than decades ago,” he said. But when the schools looked into later days, “we were met with quite a bit of resistance,” he pointed out. “People don’t like change. People get used to routine and want to keep it steady.”

Like Adell, Glazener suggested parents remove their teens’ electronic devices before bedtime.

I’m still siding with the National Sleep Foundation’s studies.

But I’m also planning to snatch my daughter’s cell phone at 9.

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