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Okaloosa school start times among earliest in nation



By KATIE TAMMEN | Daily News
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Local advocates of altering high school start times just got a national ally.

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement this month recommending no middle or high school in the U.S. begin earlier than 8:30 a.m. to better align with the natural sleeping patterns of teenagers.

“We’ve been waiting a long time,” said Lynn Keefe, a local parent and pediatrician who has advocated for the change in Okaloosa County for nearly two decades. “It’s nice to know I’m not the only one crying out for change.”

See all the start times.

The AAP released its recommendation Monday and highlighted issues long-discussed locally by Keefe and fellow doctor Eleanor McCain.

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The organization noted teenagers who get enough sleep are less likely to be depressed, overweight or be involved in car crashes and more likely to have higher test scores and grades.

“Chronic sleep loss in children and adolescents is one of the most common - and easily fixable - public health issues in the U.S. today,” said Dr. Judith Owens, the lead author of the “School Start Times for Adolescents” policy referred to by the AAP.

According to a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics during the 2011-12 school year, high schools in Okaloosa County were among less than 10 percent in the nation to begin before 7:30 a.m.

Okaloosa County Superintendent Mary Beth Jackson declined to comment on the announcement until she had time to look at the AAP’s recommendation.

Neighboring Santa Rosa County fell at the other end of the start-time spectrum in the survey. Its high schools were among 3.8 percent in the nation to begin at 9 a.m. or later. In total, less than 15 percent of schools in the nation started at 8:30 a.m. or later, the survey found.

The district switched over to the later start times for high schools about six years ago to cut busing costs.

“We had a lot of success with it,” said Superintendent Tim Wyrosdick. “We made the change even if it’s very painful.”

The community had to undergo an adjustment he said, and it does have some negative effects on students who work and athletes who need to attend games that begin before school has concluded. But on a day to day basis, the high schools seem to have fewer tardies and absences in first period since they began the schedule, Wyrosdick said.

Walton County falls right between Okaloosa and Santa Rosa. The high schools start between 7:35 a.m. and 7:45 a.m., which put them with about 33 percent of high schools in the nation during the 2011-12 school year.

To date, Superintendent Carlene Anderson said she hasn’t had anyone approach her about changing the start times and the School

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Board hasn't shown an interest in altering times.

"We're not taking any steps toward any changes at this time," Anderson said.

STOP TIMES: A quick look at the bus stop times for high school students revealed Crestview and Baker had the earliest bus stop times. The Crestview bus picked up students at 5:40 a.m. and Baker at 5:41 a.m. The other high schools begin picking up students at about 6 a.m.

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