Later School Start Times Promote Adolescent Well-Being

Moving high school start times can improve student performance and general well-being.

Sleeping in Adolescence

The optimal amount of sleep for adolescents is approximately 9 ¼ hours nightly. Surveys show that, while younger children generally get enough sleep, by early adolescence, most do not; this trend continues to worsen throughout the teenage years (See Figure 1). More than half of teens age 15-17 sleep for 7 or fewer hours per school night.

![Figure 1: School Night Hours of Sleep by Age Group. While 69% of kids age 6-11 get approximately enough sleep, just 1 in 10 15-17 year olds are. Source: National Sleep Foundation, 2014.](image)

Teens are notorious night owls – generally, they go to bed late in the evening and, when given the opportunity, wake up late in the morning. This tendency has biological and physiological roots. The sleep-wake cycle is governed by both the homeostatic drive for sleep (Process S) and the circadian rhythm (Process C).

- Process S builds during wakefulness and makes you feel tired. This process weakens during adolescence.
- Process C helps the body determine when the right time for sleep is. It naturally shifts later during adolescence. This is called Delayed Phase Preference.

Process S and Process C heavily influence mood and learning abilities. While they are interconnected, fixing an issue with one does not mean that an issue with the other will be resolved. That is, simply going to bed earlier does not necessarily make someone less tired in the early morning hours.
Benefits of Sleep

Scientists are still discovering new benefits of sleep. Research has suggested that sleep is vital to almost all areas of human functioning. Some benefits of sleep are listed below.6,7,9,16,21

Sleep leads to increases in/benefits to:
- Memory & learning
- Attention
- Emotional regulation
- Mental health & well-being
- Weight control/Body Mass Index (BMI)

Loss of sleep leads to decreases in/problems with:
- Information retention & cognition
- Student behavior and classroom conflict
- Attendance issues
- Mood regulation

Concerns

Concerns about delayed start times have generally focused less on academic/social/cognitive outcomes and more on logistical complications. Some considerations include:9

- Increased cost, congestion, & delays associated with having busses on the road later in the morning
- Inability of parents to rely on older children for afternoon childcare, as the lower schools would have effectively switched schedules with the upper schools.
- Scheduling conflicts for interservice/interscholastic events with neighboring jurisdictions that have earlier dismissal.

These issues are surmountable, and, with adequate planning, can be minimized or completely eliminated.

Conclusion

While implementation may be complex, particularly when a change would bring a school's schedule out of sync with neighboring systems, delaying school start times so that adolescents begin their instructional day later provides numerous benefits to the students and their broader community alike.

References