

Later school start times catch on nationwide

Education study: Attendance, graduation rates may match the science that teenagers need more sleep

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IN THE DARK OF MORNING—An Ohio district school bus makes a stop at 6:35 a.m. one winter morning. More districts are changing school start times to ensure students get proper sleep to perform at their potential in class.

Many district administrators seem to agree that teenagers need more sleep. A new study released in February indicates that attendance and graduation rates may match the science, too.

Published in *Sleep Health*, the journal of the National Sleep Foundation, the study includes data for 30,000 students in 29 high schools from eight districts across seven states.

Two years after a delayed start was implemented at these high schools, average attendance rates increased from 90 percent to 94 percent, and graduation rates increased from 79 percent to 88 percent.

“In education, studies often focus on qualitative facts rather than quantitative data, but we wanted to show the numbers and cold hard facts,” says Pam McKeever, the lead author of the study and an education researcher at Central Connecticut State University.

Since the 1990s, sleep [health](#) advocates have recommended later school start times in the morning, but districts have been slow to adapt. In December, [the American Academy of Sleep Medicine found that later start times improve sleep and reduce car accidents for students.](#)

And the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended since 2014 that schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

The issue has become so relevant that a first-ever national conference on school start times is scheduled for April 27 and 28 for school administrators and community leaders to gain more insight.

“This conversation isn’t new in education, but we’re all paying more attention to brain [research](#) and what’s best for students,” says Jeff Platenberg, assistant superintendent of [facilities](#) and [transportation](#) services at Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia.

Less rushed, open to learn

Fairfax County high schools shifted start times from 7:20 a.m. to 8:10 a.m. in the 2014-15 school year. The district is developing a formal survey to study results, but anecdotally, Platenberg says students feel rested and ready to learn, and [parents](#) feel less rushed and able to eat breakfast at home with their children.

The district held communitywide meetings to find the best logistical plan that would accommodate bus, athletics and parent schedules. Platenberg proposed 36 different transportation scenarios to move the district’s 137,000 students across 7,000 bus routes.

He ultimately brought four options to the public to discuss. In the end, middle schools moved the opening bell earlier, from 7:45 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., and elementary schools remained around the 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. window to allow the high schools to shift to the later 8:10 a.m. start.

Tips for administrators (cont.)

“Start with the science, and begin the conversation,” Platenberg says. “What does the research mean for your community and what must change?”

In Dobbs Ferry, New York, the community decided both middle school and high school start times should move from 7:35 a.m. to 8:15 a.m. during the 2015-16 school year, which worked for the three-school, 1,450-student district. Surveys of both parents and students have been positive.

“There’s no question that it is less chaotic, even for the school and staff,” says Superintendent Lisa Brady. Administrators are working out additional hiccups, such as transporting students to sporting events because the school day ends at 3:30 p.m. now, about 20 minutes later than before.

For now, they are just accepting increased afternoon traffic flow. And school buses try to get to athletic games on time. “We hope that as more schools move to a later start,” Brady says, “athletic associations will talk about modifying game times as well.”

For more information about the conference, visit www.schoolstarttimeconference.org.