

Should School Start LATER?

Delaying the opening bell could have big benefits,
but it could also interfere with after-school sports and clubs

Are you dragging yourself out of bed to get to school? About 40 percent of American high schools start classes before 8 a.m., and more than 20 percent of middle schools start at 7:45 a.m. or earlier.

Studies show that starting school later—even by half an hour—has major health and academic benefits. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently recommended that middle and high schools delay their opening bells to 8:30 a.m. or later so kids can get more sleep.

But some people argue against letting students hit the snooze button. Opponents say starting classes later in the day is expensive for school districts and cuts into time for extracurricular activities and homework.

Do schools need a wake-up call when it comes to start times?

Let Teens Sleep In

Jilly Dos Santos, a senior at Rock Bridge High School in Columbia, Missouri, had trouble getting up for her school's 7:50 a.m. start time.

"I was habitually 10 minutes late for school, and it was disruptive," she tells *JS*.

After learning that administrators were planning to move the first bell even earlier, Jilly organized a social media

campaign that convinced her school to start later—at 8:55 a.m.

"I have no issues getting up now," she says. "Things aren't so rushed and stressful. I'm not a zombie for part of the day."

A too-early start to the school day can deprive kids of much-needed sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 59 percent of sixth- through eighth-graders and 87 percent of high school students in the United States aren't getting the recommended 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep a night.

Studies show that well-rested teens get better grades, have higher standardized test scores, and miss fewer days of school. They also have a lower risk of being in car accidents and have fewer health problems, such as depression, mood changes, and being overweight.

So why don't kids just hit the sack earlier? It's not that simple, says Danny Lewin, a sleep specialist at Children's National Health System in Washington, D.C.

"Adolescents have a deeply programmed biological [clock] to go to bed later and wake later," he tells *JS*. As kids get older, their sleep-wake cycle shifts so it's difficult for them to turn in before 11 p.m. Teens are wired to be night owls, he says.

Complaints from sleepy students have prompted many schools, from Kissimmee, Florida, to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to push back their start times. Next fall, classes at McLean High School in Virginia will start about 40 minutes later.

Sophomore Melanie Pincus is looking forward to the extra sleep. "I hope to have more energy at school," she tells *JS*.

Rise and Shine

Not everyone is in favor of earlier start times. Many school districts say they would present big challenges.

The Issaquah School District in Washington State recently decided not to change its first bells, which



ring at 7:40 a.m. for middle school and 7:25 a.m. for high school.

“We had a committee work on the problem for two years, and they couldn’t come to a recommendation to change the start times,” says L. Michelle, the executive director of communications for the district. “A later release time can really upset things.”

For Issaquah and many other school districts, transportation is a huge obstacle. Many districts use the same buses for elementary, middle, and high schools. Changing start times—and bus schedules—can raise safety issues.

“We would be having elementary kids at the bus stop early, in the dark, or even walking home in the dark,” Michelle tells *JS*.

A later start, say opponents, also interferes with some teens’ part-time jobs and disrupts after-school sports and clubs.

That’s why Ben Zebrowski-Rocheleau, a seventh-grader at Forsythe Middle School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, doesn’t mind getting up early for class. His school recently considered starting later but decided against it.

“A later school day would interfere with tennis and possibly baseball,” Ben tells *JS*. His current schedule allows him to see friends after school and still have time for homework.

And then there’s the cost. Issaquah, for example, would need to buy new buses and build a garage for them. For some school

districts, the costs could run into the millions.

Plus, says Mateo Perpetuo, a seventh-grader from Monroe, Connecticut, not all kids have trouble getting up in the morning. “I feel energized after breakfast,” he tells *JS*.

To get plenty of ZZZ’s, experts recommend that kids limit their use of electronic devices at night. Kids also need to establish routines so they go to bed earlier—no matter when the first bell rings.

—Lisa M. Herrington



Which statements best support the arguments for and against later start times?

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