

School districts mull early start times

By Kevin Tustin, ktustin@2lst-centurymedia.com, @KevinTustin on Twitter

It's that time of year again. Students are gathering their book bags, textbooks and electronic devices to brace themselves for another year of academics. Whether it's a little tyke on their first day at kindergarten or a senior in high school, schools across the region will be bustling with activity following a summer's break.

Yet for most students, the new school year brings early start times and as a result a lack of sleep. School officials in the Pottstown and Owen J. Roberts school districts and across the region have been struggling with how best to balance student achievement with the early start time.

In the Pottstown School District, John Armato, director of community relations, agreed with research showing teens especially need more sleep than adults but said it's more complicated than simply changing the start time.

"It's hard to implement," he said, "because it requires a change in what students are doing, parents' work situations, extracurriculars start later."

The district did adjust its bell schedule for the 2016-17 school year. Students at the middle school in grades 5, 6, 7 and 8 now attend school from 7:50 a.m.-2:25 p.m. At the high school, students attend school from at 7:55 a.m.-2:40 p.m., while at the elementary level, they go from at 8:40 a.m.-3:10 p.m.

The Owen J. Roberts School District, which neighbors Pottstown in rural Chester County, recently announced that it will have a committee formed by the school board to study school start times.

While school officials grapple with the needs of their students and the demands of reality, health officials continue to say sleep is a crucial part of continued cognitive development and its importance to children shouldn't be underestimated.

"It's one thing if you sleep deprive yourself as an adult, but as a child you're at a really sensitive developmental stage, a lot of really important things are acquired during childhood," said Dr. Mathias Basner, associate professor of sleep and chronobiology in psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. "If you're not getting sleep during this crucial period of development then that's really, really bad."

The National Sleep Foundation recommends nine to 11 hours of sleep for children aged 6 to 13, with teenagers up to age 17 needing eight to 10, with anything less than seven hours deemed inappropriate for both groups.

Basner has been studying sleep deprivation and neurobehavioral studies for 20 years with an interest in sleep time and the relation to waking activities. He recalled just some of the ways sleep can be beneficial.

"We know that sleep has so many important functions, it's by no means passive, it's a very active process. One of the important things that happens during sleep is memory consolidation, so whatever we learn during the day is pretty much written from the RAM of the memory to the hard drive if you will."

"Of course," Basner added, "if you're not getting enough sleep on a chronic basis, not only are you tired during the day, fatigued, your attentional system is not working properly. You cannot attend to the things that you have to learn at school."

"One thing is the memory consolidation, that is really not working. We also know that sleep plays an important role in emotion. If you're not getting enough sleep there may be emotional disturbances, mood disturbances. The cognitive performance during the day with the way your brain works ... you are not performing at the best."

The Suplick family of Haverford knows that all too well.

Natalie Suplick is 9 years old and about to start fourth grade at Media Providence Friends School. Over the years she has been bused by the School District of Haverford Township to her private school in Media.

Had she attended public school, she would be in Coopertown Elementary in Bryn Mawr, but her parents, Christine and Ben, chose to put their daughter in a school that holds true to their Quaker beliefs.

The tradeoff is that Natalie has a 90-minute bus ride to her school one-way each and every day.

With a bus pick-up getting earlier and earlier each year so she can get to school on time when it starts at 8:20, Natalie gets up before 6 a.m. every day to get her 6:43 bus to school. School buses are limited in terms of what roads they may take, and in the case of Natalie, and about 10 other students she rides with to private schools, that means using the Blue Route as part of her trip to school.

And at 7 a.m., anyone will tell you that's not the best road to be on during the morning rush hour.

"We all have our crosses to bear," said Christine Suplick. "If you're getting out of bed early, you're getting out of bed early. What I do have an issue with is a 90-minute commute one way. If you or I had a 90-minute commute one-way we'd change jobs. Honestly, that's the big reason we're starting to think about how we're going to manage it in the long term."

And it's not so easy as driving and picking her up from school when it comes to the work schedules for Christine, a substitute teacher, and Ben, director of engineering and energy planning at the University of Pennsylvania.

"We may end up driving her more, but that's not always going to be possible, either. If I had to look into my crystal ball, we'll have to drive her more," said Suplick.

Natalie is expected to stay at Media Providence through eighth grade.

Dr. Basner said working is the number one waking activity, then traveling, the latter being deemed "unproductive" time. When approached with the concept of a 90-minute school bus ride one-way to school every day, he called it ridiculous.

"Especially since children have to get up really early in the morning and they have these really challenging curriculum where they do extracurricular activities in the afternoon, they have sports ... there's really no time for sleep left," said Basner.

Suplick agreed with him. "I wholeheartedly agree with the doctor. We see a notable change in our daughter's mood and behavior when her sleep is short-changed. We make an effort to limit activities to increase her sleep time, but we have no control over the bus schedule, and agree that it definitely impacts her," Suplick said.

The Suplick family may choose to endure the daily routine of a long commute to their school, but for others it may not be an option.

In neighboring Upper Darby School District, students in the township's Cardington section and a portion of Drexel Hill have no choice but to travel six miles and 30 minutes out to their Walter M. Senkow Elementary School building located in Glenolden. This practice in the district has been going on for years due to not having a building in the township to house these students, more than 250, from overflowing schools.

The longer the commute for students, the earlier the alarm clock gets set.

A common solution to ensuring more sleep time for students at all levels is by changing the start times of schools, and in a way that is more in tune with developing adolescent bodies.

“When children get older, they’re changing from an early circadian preference – meaning they’re going to bed early and also getting up a little early – to a late circadian preference. During the high school years, this is pretty much maximally prevalent,” said Dr. Basner. “The busing system is pretty much picking up high school students first, then proceed to middle school students and elementary school students. This is pretty much exactly the opposite related to the circadian preferences that is prevalent during these different age periods as a kid.”

A 2014 study published in the Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics reports that even a 25-minute delay in start time at the high school level showed improvements in sleep duration, daytime sleepiness, mood and caffeine use, while participants did not go to sleep any later than before.

“Although the decision to implement a later start time for middle and high school students is seldom without controversy, this study adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting compelling health benefits with even a very modest delay in school start time to align more closely with adolescents’ circadian rhythms,” reads the report using a sample size of 193 students.

“Communities considering a change in school start times have often raised concerns that a later schedule will provide less time for homework or participation in sports and extracurricular activities. In this sample, however, students reported no change in the number of hours they spent engaged in athletics, extracurricular activities, and homework after the schedule change was implemented. More importantly, after the schedule change, significantly fewer students felt too tired to do their homework.”

An overall change of start times between elementary and high schools has been linked to transportation costs and working with a tiered bus schedule system, said a 2012 Economics of Education Review study that looked at adequate start times for students at all levels.

With increases in student performance at the high school level with a later start time, the same study could not conclude that later start times were better for prepubescent students’ academic performance.

“If elementary students are not affected by later start times (which cannot be definitively determined from my data), it may be possible to increase test scores for middle school students at zero cost by having elementary schools start first. Alternatively, the entire schedule could be shifted later into the day. However, these changes may be politically infeasible due to childcare constraints for younger students and jobs and after school activities for older students.”

Pottstown’s new starting times at the middle and high school levels are different than most public schools in Delaware County, where high school starts approximately at 7:30 a.m., middle schools at 8 and elementary at 8:30.

“It’s incredibly hard for high school students to get up at 6:30 to catch a bus and start school at 7:30. There are several studies out there that unequivocally show that later school start times for academic performance and, also, for safety,” said Basner.

“The pressure is much higher on children nowadays early on. This is why sleep is often compromised.”

https://www.pottsmrc.com/news/school-districts-mull-early-start-times/article_1288ad38-e27d-52e9-a005-d923df1a30df.html

Pa. lawmaker: Delay school start times

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (WHTM) - A state lawmaker says Pennsylvania's high school students might do better if they didn't have to wake up so early.

Rep. Tim Briggs (D-Montgomery) introduced legislation that would study the effects of a later start time to the school day.

His proposal, [House Bill 2105](#), would direct the state Education Department to study the benefits and any negative impacts of a later start time. He says his bill wouldn't implement the change, just study it.

"The extremely early school start times we see throughout the state may be a serious issue for our student's health and well-being," Briggs said in a statement. "I know most parents wouldn't accept a dangerous or unhealthy schooling environment for their children and we need to start considering how start times factor into that."

Briggs pointed to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), which recommends middle and high schools delay the start of class to 8:30 a.m. or later. The academy said getting enough sleep can be hard for teens with natural sleep cycles that make it difficult for them to fall asleep before 11 p.m.

Adolescents who do not get enough sleep, the academy reported, are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health problems including obesity, are at an increased risk of being involved in an automobile accident, and are more likely to decline in academic performance.

<https://www.abc27.com/news/pa-lawmaker-delay-school-start-times/1037282916>