

# Should high school students have a later start to the school day?


**YES**

## More sleep means improved academic performance

BY RUSSELL ROSENBERG

EXPERTS AGREE that sleep deprivation has a significant negative impact on school performance. Attention, memory, problem-solving ability and mood are optimal when students have adequate sleep. With sleep needs of about nine hours per night, and a sleep clock in the brain naturally geared toward staying up later, early school start times are a major contributing factor to chronic sleep deprivation in adolescents.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that delayed school start times are associated with increased total sleep and improved academic performance. Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom studied the impact of changing school start times from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m. on 18,000 students in the Minneapolis Public School District. Results showed improved grades, increased attendance among ninth-through 11th-graders, decreased student-reported depression and fewer dropouts.

Another study, by Dr. Amy Wolfson, demonstrated that seventh- and eighth-graders attending an early-starting middle school must wake up earlier but do not go to bed earlier to ensure adequate sleep. These students get significantly less sleep than their peers at a later-starting school. The study also revealed that students at the schools with early start times were tardy four times more frequently, and eighth-graders at the early-starting school had lower grades than those at the later-starting school.

Moving school start times is one step in a larger picture of ensuring that adolescents get the sleep they need. It is important for students to know about their sleep needs and have the skills to make a conscious effort to obtain adequate sleep. Like adults, teens assume they are expected to function with a sleep debt. We could be better role models in that regard. Teachers, parents and administrators should embrace the later start times given the positive impact they have on students.

For more information on school start times and other sleep issues, visit the National Sleep Foundation at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org).

*Russell Rosenberg, Ph.D., is a board-certified sleep specialist and chairman of the National Sleep Foundation, a nonprofit organization supporting public education regarding sleep health and safety and sleep-related research.*


**NO**

## Changing start times creates new problems

BY MICHAEL MONACO

ALTHOUGH I'M now in college, and have more control over my personal sleep schedule, I still vividly remember my early mornings in high school—and before that, middle school. From seventh grade on, I was awake early, whether to catch a bus or just make it before the first bell. There were always mornings when I wished I could sleep later. But I understand now—and I did back then—it's not that simple. School start times are part of a complex system, both inside the school system and in the local community, and to make what seems like such a simple change causes a cascade of effects.

In economics, there's a concept called an "externality," which is a benefit or cost not directly transmitted through price—in other words, it indirectly affects a third party. Changing high school start times triggers a series of negative externalities: Later start times would put more

buses on the roads closer to rush hour, exacerbating traffic. School start times affect families' child care arrangements, school transportation budgets, and whether students can work part time.

One of my major concerns when I was in high school was the effect late starts could have on after-school activities. As it was, with a start time of 7:20 a.m., I sometimes wouldn't get home from swim team practices, workouts and study sessions until 7 p.m. Not every student

ran such a schedule, but if later start times discourage students from participating in extracurricular activities, and make it harder for students to be active in the sports, clubs and study groups that are such an important—and beneficial—part of high school, then the negative externalities outweigh any possible positive impact.

There's a saying, derived from a concept in chaos theory, about how the flap of a butterfly's wings can cause a hurricane in another part of the world. Changing school start times can have this "butterfly effect," sparking unintended consequences throughout a community. Could the system be better? Maybe. But will changing school start times alone fix the inherent problems? No. Changing school start times would just make the entire complex system of a county or district even worse.

*Michael Monaco is a sophomore at the College of William and Mary. He attended Hayfield Secondary School in Fairfax County, Va., where start times were hotly debated, and a proposal to change start times was rejected.*



## WEIGH IN!

We want to hear your thoughts on the current "Speak Out" question. Go to [www.aft.org/speakout](http://www.aft.org/speakout) to cast your vote.



In the last issue of *American Teacher*, our "Speak Out" question was:

**Should the high school dropout age be raised to 18?**

ONLINE POLL RESULTS

**75% YES**  
**25% NO**

"I can solve the dropout problem in five minutes: In order to have a driver's license, one must either be enrolled in school and passing with a 2.0 GPA, or be 18 years old."

**PEGGY LEVERTON**

Corvallis (Mont.) Faculty Group

"Many students who were almost impossible to teach at age 16 are ready and willing to do whatever it takes to graduate when they are 18."

**KEN CHRISTY**

Texas AFT

"Raising the dropout age to 18 will not compel those at risk for dropping out to attend school."

**JIM BARNHILL**

Minneapolis Federation of Teachers

"We should let them go at 16, put the money into adult education and tell them to come back when they get tired of saying, 'Would you like fries with that?'"

**RICH POOLE**

Rochester (N.H.) Federation of Teachers