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A Start to Better Teen Sleep

The “start school later” movement recently received a powerful boost from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that said what many by now know as fact: Early school start times prevent many adolescents from getting enough sleep. The CDC found 75%-100% of the public schools in 42 states start before the American Academy of Pediatrics’ 8:30 AM recommendation. The average start time was 8:03 AM.

The CDC report is only the latest in a crescendoing call from a growing number of voices to allow students, who have biologically different sleep patterns and needs as teens than when in other life stages, the opportunity to consistently get a full night’s rest. Cited benefits to middle and high school students with 8:30 AM or later school start times include higher grades, fewer car crashes, and better overall health.

Though the data on school start times is clearly in favor of later first bells (and many of the risks feared by those opposed to the change are resolvable, I suspect), the start time determination is typically decided at the individual school or the district level—which means it will likely be an exceptionally slow movement.

That’s why I think it’s best to think of the teen sleep crisis not as a multiple choice question with only one correct answer, but as an essay question that tackles different aspects of why students don’t get enough sleep. While continuing to push for later school start times, we must also educate parents and teens about changes they can implement today.

The first avenue is educating parents about the importance of setting and enforcing rules about bedtime, such as how much and how late caffeine can be consumed and when the television can be on. The 2014

National Sleep Foundation (NSF) Sleep in America poll, which focused on sleep in the modern family with school-aged children, found that when parents always enforce rules on how late their child can have caffeinated drinks, the child gets an estimated average of 0.9 hours more sleep than children whose parents enforce such rules less consistently or don’t have those rules.



Rules about electronics, especially cell phones, are especially crucial. The same NSF poll found that teens who leave devices on are estimated to get, on average, half an hour less sleep on school nights than those who never leave devices on. Recalling my own teen years, I can vouch that electronics, in my case chatting with friends via online instant messenger, were a significant reason for my insufficient sleep. I could have benefited from a simple lesson about the benefits of turning devices off near bedtime.

Appropriately managing homework and extracurricular activities is likely a more difficult avenue through which to achieve sleep success, but it is one worth pursuing. Speaking to teachers and coaches as early as possible about scheduling conflicts may result in relief, especially if multiple parents speak up together.

With the start school movement growing, I’m optimistic that more and more people are at the very least becoming aware of the negative consequences of teens’ insufficient sleep. The movement is but a start. Real and immediate change will be multifaceted. **SR**

– Sree Roy, sroy@allied360.com

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- HST: One Night or More?
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