

# More sleep equals better students

By William C. Kashatus

**W**hen I was a teenager in the 1970s, I refused to get out of bed for school at 6 a.m. It got so bad that my mother threatened to pour ice water over my head. Not until my father took away the car keys did I force myself to roll off the mattress and become the grouchy morning person who trudged off to school.

Forty years later, my adolescent son is exhibiting the same early-morning behavior. Just like his teenaged father, he's trying to get an education, play sports, and hold down a weekend job on less than six hours of sleep each night; not nearly enough rest for an adolescent who lives in a 24/7 culture.

The obvious solution is to shed the night-owl lifestyle and go to bed earlier. I wish it were that simple.

The onset of puberty triggers a significant shift in the sleeping patterns of teens, who are typically unable to fall asleep at earlier times. As a result, they sleep in later to get the nine or more hours of rest they need to function. Instead of forcing teens to go to sleep earlier, high schools should establish later starting times.

In the 1990s, researchers at the National Institutes of Health identi-

fied adolescents as a major at-risk group due to sleep deprivation. They determined that physiological changes, inconsistent exposure to light, and the irregular secretion of melatonin (the chemical that regulates circadian rhythms) require teens to get nine or more hours of sleep in order to function best, and that their biological clock is set to a later bedtime.

Since most U.S. schools began class at 7 a.m. at the time — while melatonin still pressures teens to sleep — the vast majority of students were sleep-deprived. The NIH also found that sleep deprivation not only had a negative impact on academic performance, but on physical and mental health, sometimes resulting in injury and death related to lapses in attention or delayed response times at critical moments, such as while driving.

Researchers concluded that it would be better for teens to start the school day at 11 a.m., when they are most alert.

But educators, policymakers, and even parents purposefully ignored the research. Some complained that a later start time would be caving in to teens' self-indulgent lifestyle, allowing them more time for late-night social networking and computer games when they should be sleeping.

Also, high school administrators refused to consider the idea of a later starting time because it would interfere with the after-school sports program and other extracurricular demands.

Despite enormous opposition from school districts and policymakers, more than 20 states across the nation have adopted later starting times for teens in certain schools. The benefits have been impressive.

In a recent study published by the Economics of Education Review, those schools that allowed teens more sleep witnessed a significant boost in test scores, an increase in time spent on homework, a decrease in television-watching, and fewer absences than their peers in schools with 8 a.m. starting times.

As standardized test scores are becoming more influential in teacher evaluations and school funding in districts nationwide, later start times for teens are a matter of common sense.

It'd be great if those who run our high schools would wake up to that reality.

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William Kashatus, formerly a high school teacher, sleeps in most mornings. You can contact him at [bill@historylive.net](mailto:bill@historylive.net), but not before 11 a.m.

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