Text B

Later School Start Times: Why Science Says Teens Need More Sleep

Later starts are linked to better mood, stronger academic performance, and improved health outcomes among adolescents

By Kirsten Weir
October 30, 2023

Have you ever wondered why so many teenagers arrive at school exhausted? Research suggests that the problem may not be laziness, but biology. Across the United States, psychologists and sleep researchers have gathered compelling evidence showing that later school start times improve adolescents' health and learning. With the purpose of supporting student well-being, policymakers are increasingly examining the science so that school schedules better reflect how teenagers actually function.

Adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 should sleep 8 to 10 hours per night, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Yet national data indicate that most are not meeting that recommendation. Between 2009 and 2021, the percentage of high school students who failed to get sufficient sleep increased significantly. This trend is concerning since sleep is a critical factor that supports cognitive development, emotional regulation, and physical health.

During puberty, young people experience a biological shift in their circadian rhythms, which makes it difficult to fall asleep early. At the same time, the pressure to sleep builds more slowly. Consequently, teenagers naturally fall asleep later and struggle with early morning wake times. You might assume they can simply go to bed earlier, but biology tells a different story. In fact, sleeping in on weekends does little to reduce the accumulated deficit. To cut to the chase, early start times clash directly with adolescent physiology.

Research demonstrates measurable benefits when schools begin after 8:30 a.m. Students gain longer sleep duration, less negative mood, and improved socioemotional outcomes. Schools that adopted later schedules reported better attendance and fewer instances of students falling asleep in class. Some studies even found reductions in car crashes among teen drivers. These improvements, which extend beyond the classroom, illustrate that later start times are not a luxury but a public health strategy.

Teachers and parents also benefit. Studies conducted in districts that shifted start times showed increased sleep duration among educators, who reported improved daytime functioning. As a consequence, classroom decision-making improved. Considering that sleep deprivation is a double-edged sword that affects both performance and mental health, these findings are significant.

Change, however, is complex. Adjusting bus schedules and extracurricular activities requires coordination. Yet experts argue that while Rome wasn't built in one day, these logistical challenges are solvable. If we read between the lines of the data, the message is clear: aligning school schedules with adolescent biology is one of the most effective systemic changes available.

The evidence is mounting. The question now is not whether sleep matters, but whether communities are willing to act in order to prioritise student health.

Adapted from Weir, K. (2024). Schools shift as evidence mounts that later start times improve teens' learning and well-being. American Psychological Association.

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Answer the following questions.

1. Why might many teenagers arrive at school exhausted?

.....

2. What evidence shows that teenagers are not getting enough sleep?

.....

3. When did the percentage of high school students failing to get sufficient sleep increase significantly?

.....

The following statements are either true or false. Tick [✓] the correct option, then justify it using words as they appear in the text. Both parts are required for **[1 mark]**.

4. Teenagers can fall asleep early if they just try harder.

☐ True ☐ False Justification: .....

5. Sleeping in on weekends helps teenagers recover lost sleep.

☐ True ☐ False Justification: .....

6. Later start times only improve classroom learning.

☐ True ☐ False Justification: .....

Choose the correct answer.

7. How did improved sleep affect teachers' performance?

☐
- **A.** They became stricter with students
- **B.** They reduced lesson planning
- **C.** They worked longer hours
- **D.** They improved classroom decision-making

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8. Why is changing school schedules described as complex

- **A.** Students resist later start times
- **B.** Bus schedules and extracurricular activities require coordination
- **C.** Teachers do not support it
- **D.** Schools lack enough classrooms

9. How do experts describe the difficulty of implementing changes?

- **A.** Impossible to solve
- **B.** Solvable with planning
- **C.** Expensive and unnecessary
- **D.** Time-consuming and pointless

10. What does "the evidence is mounting" indicate?

- **A.** There is growing proof of the importance of sleep
- **B.** Schools are ignoring sleep issues
- **C.** Teachers are complaining about schedules
- **D.** Bus schedules are increasingly complicated