

HOW TO MAKE SCHOOL

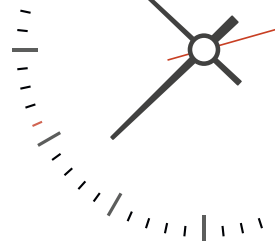
EARLY-MORNING HIGH
SCHOOL CLASHES WITH
TEENAGE BIOLOGY,
BUT CHANGE IS HARD

THE NAME OF THE STUDY said it all: “Sleepmore in Seattle: Later School Start times Are Associated with More Sleep and Better Performance in High School Students.” In 2016–17, Seattle Public Schools pushed back high-school start times by 55 minutes, from 7:50 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. And just like that, students slept an average of 34 more minutes per night and their grades went up 4.5 percent, researchers found.

It was yet another entry in a long bibliography of studies showing the benefits of a later start time for teenagers (including “Rise and Shine” by Jennifer Heissel and Samuel Norris, in this issue). This growing body of evidence is in line with broad expert consensus that early school days are in conflict with adolescents’ biological sleep patterns and need for 8 to 10 hours of sleep a night. In 2017, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine officially recommended that middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. The American Academy of Pediatrics has been pushing for that same start-time threshold since 2014. And a

by DANIELLE DREILINGER



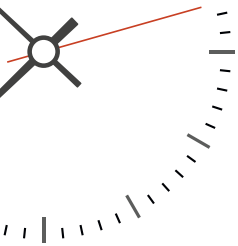


START LATER



Parents hold signs at a Boston School Committee meeting, protesting a proposal to change the times that the school day would begin and end. The plan was rescinded.

PHOTOGRAPH/CRAIG F. WALKER; THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES



2011 study published by the Brookings Institution found that delaying start times by one hour would cost \$1,950 per student (\$150 per year for 13 years), but lead to \$17,500 in additional lifetime earnings.

For a change that seems like a no-brainer, however, delaying high school times can be notably tough to pull off. As of fall 2015, only 13 percent of public high schools followed the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In fact, U.S. high schools remained more likely to start before 7:30 a.m. than schools with younger children.

The crux of the matter is that schools are a collection of moving parts, from predawn janitorial and food-service prep to busing and afterschool activities. Family work routines are often organized around school rhythms. Shifting secondary-school start times sends shock waves through those systems.

“Schools are a huge part of a family’s life,” said Deb Putnam, Boston coordinator for Start School Later, a nonprofit advocacy group. “They drive so much.”

Boston Public Schools offers a cautionary tale for changing start times. After the district announced a plan in 2017 to start most high schools later and elementary schools earlier,

high-school start times. Saint Paul is in the homestretch of a years-long effort to do so. Here is what I learned.

1. Expect an uproar.

Because of the cost of transportation, many districts stagger school start times so their fleets of buses can make multiple runs, called “tiered” scheduling: elementary schools at one time, middle schools at another, and high schools at a third. Typically, when administrators plan to move high-school start times later, they opt to flip busing schedules with elementary schools, giving young students earlier start times. However, that multiplies the anticipated impacts: districts hear complaints not only about how the changes will affect teenagers’ afternoon activities but also about the safety of young kids waiting for buses in the dark, the practicality of moving bedtimes earlier, and the mismatch between earlier dismissals and families’ work schedules. “School’s done at three o’clock and no one’s off work,” said YMCA of Fort Wayne chief operating officer Chris Angellatta, whose organization runs afterschool programs. So families have more hours of childcare to cover—which is especially tough if they’ve relied on an older sibling coming home first.

FOR A CHANGE THAT SEEMS LIKE A NO-BRAINER,
HOWEVER, DELAYING HIGH SCHOOL TIMES
CAN BE NOTABLY TOUGH TO PULL OFF.

furious parents packed school committee meetings. Members of the city council and local civil-rights leaders declared that the new schedules would imperil lower-income families’ job security. The school superintendent, Tommy Chang, eventually rescinded the decision. The turmoil was widely considered to be a factor in Chang’s early departure from the job six months later.

Nonetheless, districts continue to make and stick with similar schedule changes. How can communities prepare for the shift, and what have districts done to ensure new start times are put in place as smoothly as possible?

I took a close look at practices in three school districts to find out. They are: Saint Paul Public Schools in Minnesota, a diverse urban district of 38,000 students who speak 125 languages at home; Kanawha County Schools in West Virginia, which serves 26,000 students in the capital city of Charleston and surrounding rural communities covering 913 square miles; and Fort Wayne Community Schools in Indiana, which enrolls 29,000 students. Two of these districts—Kanawha County and Fort Wayne Community Schools—have already pushed back

West Virginia’s Kanawha County instituted new school start times at the beginning of the 2018–19 school year. About half of the primary schools already started before 8 a.m., so some administrators thought adjusting the rest of them to start early wouldn’t be so tough. And in social-media posts in January 2019, some elementary-school families praised the new schedule: “Love the start times, we can get to work on time,” one mom wrote on a local news outlet’s Facebook page. But more families complained. The early bus times mean more parents are driving their kids to school, they wrote, snarling traffic. Some parents had heard that kids were falling asleep in class; others wrote that they barely got to see their children before bedtime. “Elementary school children should not be getting on a bus at 6 a.m. Can we use some common sense here,” one woman posted.

In Saint Paul, the prospect of moving elementary-school start times earlier prompted such a negative reaction—it seemed to “pit schools against each other” according to local board of education member Steve Marchese—that the board put off changing the schedule multiple times. One strategy it



Some parents blame early start times when children are found asleep during classes.

considered would have allowed the district to let all schools open late. Older students would have used passes to ride the regional public-transit system instead of taking traditional school buses. It wouldn't have saved money, Marchese said, but "then we could run a two-tier system" of yellow buses. Unfortunately, the transit system leaders remained firm that their buses could not accommodate a significant influx of students, he said. The plan approved for fall 2019 continued to call for early elementary start times, which roughly half of families had opposed in earlier district surveys.

2. Anticipate and address likely problems.

When changing start times, it's crucial for districts to try to anticipate their effects and lessen the impact on families—especially those with lower incomes, who tend to have less flexibility in their schedules. Otherwise, they risk sending the message Putnam sensed in Boston: "The perception of the community was, 'You're reducing the bus budget by making me pay for daycare,'" she said. (Boston Public Schools did not respond to requests for comment.)

Officials in the Saint Paul and Fort Wayne districts made coordinated efforts with municipal and community partners to help parents manage safety, sports, and childcare. For instance, Saint Paul city government is installing lighting in more municipal fields so they can be used later into the evening. More Fort

Wayne sports teams (and some clubs) now meet before school.

All three districts have focused on improving safety for elementary-age children catching early buses. Saint Paul rearranged routes so some younger students have a shorter walk to their stops, district chief operations officer Jackie Turner said, and is providing reflectors for bags and jackets. In addition, the city is starting a long-term project "to put up street lights and install sidewalks" where they don't exist, she said.

In West Virginia, Kanawha County pupil transportation executive director Brette Fraley thought the new timetable was in itself safer. It's simpler and more coordinated, he said, and that has "allowed us to build additional time into the schedule to make it a little safer, a little slower." In addition, the district has installed new safety lighting on 50 buses serving students on rural routes.

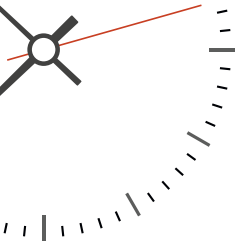
The lights shine in two directions to illuminate pathways for students getting on and off the bus. The district also added new blinking "STOP" arms on 10 buses.

Perhaps most important, the Fort Wayne and Saint Paul districts expanded childcare for elementary students. In Fort Wayne Community Schools, a fee-based afterschool program is run by the local YMCA. The agency now serves 1,200 students in nearly 30 sites, compared to 300–350 students in half as many sites previously, said Angellatta. He anticipates further growth.

Saint Paul Public Schools runs its own fee-based afterschool program, called Discovery Club. The district is surveying



Expanding childcare options can be crucial to making changes in start times work for families who have complicated schedules and who might otherwise resist.



parents to identify where to expand. “We’re hoping to put together a very cost-effective, if not free, program,” Turner said. The system also has discussed expanding its offerings with the help of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, which has “committed that we are going to be there for kids,” said president and chief executive Terryl Brumm.

“We may need to add staff. We may need to add extension sites,” she said.

Although Kanawha County seems to have been less vocal about this issue, “the district also planned for additional child-care staff and hours,” district spokeswoman Briana Warner said. “Teachers were added in areas of need and times were adjusted where needed to allow for additional service hours.”

Districts have also addressed some concerns by providing information. Some Fort Wayne parents worried that a later start time would teach their children to be lazy and ill-prepared for the workplace. “There was just some education around what do jobs look like these days,” district spokeswoman Krista Stockman said. “They’re not necessarily starting a 6 a.m. factory job.” Saint Paul officials are pointing out that an earlier schedule may help parents who have to be at work early

of the potential opportunities to capitalize on sleep science and close efficiency gaps in transportation scheduling can help districts make a strong case to the public.

Several officials said they’d seen how research on teenagers’ biological clocks and sleep needs can convince opponents. For Sissonville High School principal Ron Reedy in West Virginia’s Kanawha County, the alpha and omega of his pitch to parents and his own staff was that the later schedule benefited students. “We as a society have a responsibility to our youth, and whatever is best for the kids ought to be our prime directive,” he said— regardless of the inconvenience for adults.

“Do the research, present it on its face,” he advised. “A reasonably minded person is going to be able to look at this and find no counterarguments.”

It helps to present such data early on. Looking back on what happened in Boston, Putnam of Start School Later rued the fact that the district released an analysis of racial equity and school start times only after angry parents were already crowding meetings. “If they had put that [out] earlier in the conversation ... and talked about how disparities exist,” she said, “it may have helped it play out a little differently.”

TYPICALLY, WHEN ADMINISTRATORS PLAN TO MOVE HIGH-SCHOOL START TIMES LATER, THEY OPT TO FLIP BUSING SCHEDULES WITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.

and who have been paying for before-school care. Brumm of the Boys & Girls Clubs is touting the benefit of more time in the agency’s care, saying she’s “seen a much better outcome” with more time in afterschool programs.

Finally, Saint Paul is offering an out. Each attendance zone will have at least one 9:30 a.m. elementary option, Turner said, and human resources is trying to make sure that staff can transfer to different schools if necessary. Nor has the district given up hope that it will be able to move elementary-school start times later again: it is still pressuring the public transit agency to accommodate high-school students, Marchese said. Similarly, the Kanawha County Board of Education has promised to see if there’s any way to move elementary schools later, Warner said.

3. Gather evidence, and present it clearly to families.

Change of any kind can be a tough sell: families often prize hard-won stability and predictability over promised improvements they haven’t yet seen for themselves. But a careful study

Sometimes making the case means talking about budgets, which can be well-received if done carefully and if the new schedules actually will save money. Fort Wayne was motivated to change start times by “a need to cut transportation expenses,” Stockman said. The decision allowed the district to transition from a two- to a three-tier bus timetable. Only then did the research come into play: “Someone had to go first, and just based on the research, we decided it would be more beneficial to have the high-school students [start later],” she said. The district simultaneously began enforcing a no-bus policy for students who lived near school and restricting the ability of students who do ride the buses to vary their routes home depending on their after-school plans. “That was a lot harder for parents,” Stockman said.

In Kanawha County, although the superintendent cited sleep research in announcing his decision to change school start times, officials have since emphasized the logistical benefits to the district. The new system requires fewer buses and drivers to cover the rural district’s sprawling territory, which calls for driving up to 18,500 miles per day, transportation director Fraley said. For example, the district started the year

30 drivers short due to a boom in oil and gas jobs, and “if we had been under the old bell schedule we would not have had enough drivers to have school.”

Communication with families goes both ways. Outreach can backfire when districts aren’t willing to take into account what families say. Boston elementary-school parents generally said in a district survey that they wanted later start times and high-school parents preferred 8 a.m. or earlier—and plenty of families were furious when the district announced schedules

start-time plan. He regrets that now. “I think it would have maybe given people more of a sense that they could voice their concerns,” he said, and “maybe prepare the public more for what was going to happen.”

4. Give advance warning.

Saint Paul Public Schools has had a long runway—and used it. As early as 2010, the then superintendent discussed and then officially tabled the issue. Administration studied the issue in 2014, then braked in response to parent concerns. It came up for a vote before the local school board the following year but was defeated 4–3. Meanwhile, other local districts like Minneapolis and Wayzata were successfully changing their high-school start times, which kept the issue in the local news headlines without forcing families in Saint Paul to weather the disruption.

The district opted to test an 8:30 a.m. start time at just one high school in 2015. It provided free transit passes so students could ride city buses to school. The experience was sufficiently positive—the school had a record-high number of students on the honor roll, and students reported greater participation in afterschool clubs and jobs, according to local news reports—that Saint Paul expanded the experiment to a second high school.

The new schedule was initially not welcomed by Saint Paul parent Arline Hubbard and her son Sean, now a senior at the initial test site, Johnson Senior High School.

“When we started talking about the change, I was so against it,” Hubbard said. Then she saw that her teenager really did have an easier time getting up. He said he found it easier to pay attention in school.

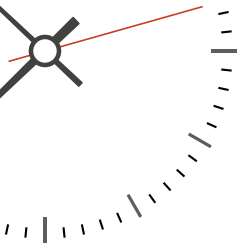
When his school started earlier, “once school was over the day did seem to feel longer,” Sean said. However, he also remembered everyone trying to use the bathroom at once before school, seeing his classmates fall asleep, and “not really being all the way focused” until third period. With a later start time, he said he is “getting better grades and [feeling]



Shifting high school later sometimes means that elementary school students are being picked up by buses in pre-dawn hours. Some school districts have added new extra lights for safety.

that did the opposite. Because the district had brought on a team from MIT to redo the scheduling, parents said that their lives were being ruined by an algorithm.

As far as Kanawha County school board member Ryan White can recall, administrators did not formally invite parent comment before announcing or implementing the new



more energized and ready for school.”

Disrupting teenagers’ family caregiving responsibilities was a major concern in Saint Paul, but the Hubbard family found the new start time did not interfere with Sean’s babysitting his nephew, a pre-kindergartner who starts school at 7:30 a.m. Sean helps his nephew get off to school in the mornings, and Johnson’s 3 p.m. closing time is still early enough that he can help babysit afterward.

In all, families saw that change was not as disruptive as some had feared, and ultimately, in 2016 the district approved changing most school start times. Even then, leaders built in a two-year transition period before the decision would

number of students marked tardy at Sissonville High School has declined noticeably, Reedy said. Bus drivers have filed fewer bus behavior write-ups for younger students, said Fraley. However, at a school board meeting in January, students from Herbert Hoover High School complained about the later dismissal times, saying that they interfered with afterschool jobs.

“Some students have to work in order to help their family pay monthly bills,” junior Cari Hively told the board, according to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.

In Fort Wayne, officials have not seen “a dramatic increase in test scores or anything like that,” said Stockman, the district spokeswoman. Initially, the number of students marked

SAINT PAUL CITY GOVERNMENT IS INSTALLING LIGHTING IN MORE MUNICIPAL FIELDS SO THEY CAN BE USED LATER INTO THE EVENING. MORE FORT WAYNE SPORTS TEAMS NOW MEET BEFORE SCHOOL.

take effect. And that was pushed back in 2018, to give a new superintendent time to get up to speed.

At least, district chief operations officer Turner said, districts should allow more than a semester and a summer. “Any [big] decisions past late winter, like February, you really should be making for the *next* school year,” she said.

5. Just do it. And don’t expect to win over everyone.

Despite Saint Paul Public Schools’ commitment to parent engagement, there was no point in trying to get complete buy-in, said Turner.

“If we were making this decision based on popularity, we wouldn’t have done it,” she said. “We didn’t approach our engagement with the understanding that we were going to try to get a 90 percent or an 80 percent [agreement] rate.”

Broad change is sometimes only achieved as a mandate. In looking at experiences in changing school start times elsewhere, Turner concluded that “there’s more value in actually doing it,” she said.

Marchese, the Saint Paul board member, agreed.

“Some folks said it’s not equitable to change it, and some said, ‘Well, it’s not equitable the way it is now,’” he said. “There’s only so much you can do about the fact that we have 38,000 kids and 38,000 different ways that families organize their lives.”

So what happens after new schedules go into effect? It’s too soon to consider students’ test scores in West Virginia, but the

“tardy” declined, but the effect was temporary.

There has been a positive effect on student safety for teenagers driving to school, she said—the extra 90 minutes sometimes let ice, fog, or snow melt or burn off. And students are simply *awake*. “First period under the old system was kind of a wash,” she said. “It was a real struggle to get kids to engage.”

Occasionally, Stockman still hears from parents who are unhappy about how little time their high-school students have after school, or who say they don’t get more sleep because they have to stay up later. Some coaches are still upset about how the late start has affected their teams’ practices and games. But “most people just make it work,” she said.

“I can’t say I’ve heard a lot of complaints. I think people have adapted to it,” the YMCA’s Angellatta said of Fort Wayne families.

That’s what Saint Paul’s Catherine Nolet, the mother of a pre-K student at J. J. Hill Montessori Magnet School, is expecting to do next fall when the school’s start time shifts earlier by one hour, to 7:30 a.m.

She isn’t looking forward to it. “We’re not morning people,” she said. But she and her husband chose not to move their son to an elementary school with a later start time, even though it would be closer to home. Saint Paul’s long transition period gave them enough time to get used to the idea and prepared for the logistics.

“We knew that the time was going to change when we chose the school,” she said. “For us, I feel the school itself is more important than the start time. We’ll adjust.”

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