



Not So Apolitical, After All

Sleep Time, Start Time Story Offers Wake-Up Call

IN 2011, with the Obama administration's Race to the Top program in full swing, an influential white paper from The Hamilton Project criticized education reformers' preoccupation with "systemic policy changes such as expanding charter schools, overhauling teacher tenure, or implementing more rigorous standards and accountability." The report authors, economists Brian Jacob of the University of Michigan and Jonah Rockoff of Columbia, worried that this emphasis had dissuaded school-district leaders from implementing managerial and organizational strategies that could improve student outcomes, such as changing high-school start times to align with adolescents' natural tendency to sleep late. Attending to mundane matters like start times "may not be sexy," the authors argued, but it offers an impressive return on investment and, moreover, is less likely to be "politically controversial."

Try telling that to former Boston Public Schools superintendent Tommy Chang. In December 2017, Chang announced an overhaul of start times aimed at having all high schools open their doors after 8 a.m. To contain transportation costs, elementary and K–8 schools, many of which opened after 9 a.m., would assume the early morning slots in the district's bus schedule. The new scheme would bring the district closer in line with recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics that high schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Yet it would also require elementary-school children to make their way to school in the dark for much of the year, not to mention asking families to alter their daily routines and childcare arrangements.

Boston parents reacted as if Chang had proposed moving the Red Sox to New York. An online petition opposing the change quickly garnered more than 8,000 signatures, and City Councilor Matt O'Malley told the *Boston Globe* that "he had never seen parents mobilize in such high numbers across the city in his seven years in office." Within two weeks, Chang had rescinded the plan. Six months later, he was gone. In December 2018, the City Council held a hearing on the possibility of abandoning Boston's long-standing tradition of mayoral control of the schools in favor of an elected school committee. Jane Miller, co-founder of a parents' organization that formed to oppose the new start times, told the *Globe* that "a lot of families feel like they are not being heard, and at this time it doesn't appear

the [mayor-appointed] School Committee is accountable to students and families in the Boston Public Schools."

The episode highlights a dilemma facing many school districts, where high schools have traditionally started near the crack of dawn, often to accommodate students' afterschool athletics, extracurriculars, and jobs. In this issue of *Education Next*, Jennifer Heissel and Samuel Norris provide the most definitive evidence to date that this arrangement hurts student learning (see "Rise and Shine," *research*). They examine the progress of students who move across a time-zone boundary in the Florida Panhandle, where schools start at similar times according to the clock but up to an hour earlier or later relative to sunrise. They find that moving from the eastern to the central time zone, and thereby gaining an hour of before-school sunlight, leads to a noticeable jump in students' performance on state tests. Importantly, these effects are only evident for students who have gone through puberty, strengthening the case that biological factors are at play. Changing school start times may be hard, but changing teenagers' sleep habits may well be impossible.

Yet a growing number of districts have successfully revised their school start schedules, and reporter Danielle Dreilinger investigates how they got it done (see "How to Make School Start Later," *features*). Her advice: anticipate and address parents' concerns, such as the safety of elementary-age children catching early buses, coordinate with community partners to help parents manage childcare, and give plenty of advance notice to allow families to adjust.

The larger point is that it is a mistake to imagine that school reforms can somehow be divided between those that are merely technocratic and those that are systemic and therefore politically controversial. The connections between schools, families, and communities simply run too deep. All education reform is political, and those who seek to improve our schools would do well to keep that in mind.

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
