Teens Snooze, Grade-School Students Lose --- Young start earlier; 'Why are you doing this to me?'

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Abstract
None available.

Full Text

Middle-school student Maria Pekarsky wakes up by 5:30 a.m. for school, knowing her older teen brother and sister are still sound asleep with about another hour of shut-eye to go.

"When I'm about to leave home, they're like finally starting to wake up," said the 12-year-old in Fairfax County, Va., who gets dropped off at her bus stop because it's too dark outside to walk. "I catch a bus at 6:30 a.m. The sun is rising!"

School districts across the country are flipping school start times, making younger students start earlier so teenagers can sleep longer. They cite research, including by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2014, saying teenagers should start school no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

The moves are creating huge transportation and logistical challenges for school districts, which have to stagger arrival times to deploy limited bus fleets. It's also causing upheaval at home. In some households, the change pits outraged younger kids against well-rested older ones. Parents remain sleep-deprived.

Fairfax County high school students have been getting up to an extra 50 minutes of sleep since 2015, when the district moved back the opening bell. For that, they have groggy youngsters to thank. Middle school, which includes grades seven and eight, starts up to 35 minutes earlier than before.

Twelve-year-old Maria's school day begins at 7:30 a.m. That's almost two hours earlier than last year, when she was in elementary school.

George Pekarsky, Maria's 17-year-old brother, said he feels for his sister, but his empathy only goes so far. He likes the extra sleep.

"I usually leave the house around 7:15, when she's probably arriving at school," he said. When he was in 7th grade, like his sister, he started school at 8:10 a.m.

He said middle school students can handle the earlier start easier than high school students.

"They're younger. They have more energy," he said. "We have a bigger workload."

In Seattle Public Schools in Washington, start times were pushed later three years ago by about an hour for most high schools and middle schools, while most elementary schools started 45 minutes earlier.

For elementary school students heading to the bus stop in the early morning dark, Seattle Public Schools hand out safety reflectors that snap onto their arms and ankles so drivers can see them.

Saint Paul Public Schools in Minnesota made the move to a later start time this month for high schools and middle schools, moving them back an hour to 8:30 a.m. That meant moving up the start time for most elementary schools by an hour, to 7:30 a.m.

The district says young learners take required classes such as math and reading in the morning, when they say research shows they learn best.
Some parents said their elementary children are getting up too early, especially if they catch the bus.

"I get my 5-year-old up at 6 a.m., and he cries and throws a fit and says, 'Why are you doing this to me?'" said Saint Paul parent Lindsay Dukes. Her son's bus arrives at 6:58 a.m.

"He's going to bed at 8 p.m., but that might not be early enough," she said.

Some studies say sleep-deprived teens have higher obesity rates, more absences and have attention problems. Some advocates predict higher test scores and better academic performance from the moves, although research is mixed.

In California, a bill on the governor's desk would be the first to mandate later start times in an entire state. It would require that high schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. and middle schools no earlier than 8 a.m., beginning in 2022. Rural school districts would be exempt.

Stella Pekarsky, the mother of Maria and George and four other children in Fairfax County, likes that her two teenagers get more time to sleep. An annual survey of Fairfax's 10th and 12th graders by the school district and county shows a greater percentage sleeping at least eight hours.

"I don't fight with my high schoolers to get up, and they're enjoying the later time," she said.

Some middle school students are getting less sleep, the survey shows, and Ms. Pekarsky sees that, too.

Fairfax officials acknowledge the start time isn't good for middle school students and plan to discuss the matter in the spring.

"I fight with my middle schooler, and literally had to push her out of bed on the first day of school," Ms. Pekarsky said. "It has been a disaster."

Credit: By Tawnell D. Hobbs

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