

More sleep-in time for teenage students? It's still just a dream in most districts

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Their students sometimes fall asleep in classes, they suffer from anxiety and they are not always doing all they're capable of academically.

For years, many educators in Ridgewood have believed there is at least a partial remedy right at hand: Starting the school day later for teens.

But after the Ridgewood school district — the largest in Bergen County with 5,705 students — tried to address the issue at two meetings Dec. 1 and 6, officials decided the complicated change needed to be better explained to parents, and postponed a survey on the topic.

"The Board of Education requested that we further educate the community about all aspects of this topic and continue to vet the preliminary survey questions," Superintendent Thomas Gorman said in a Dec. 7 letter to parents.

The goal remains clear, however: Starting middle- and high school classes at 8:30 a.m. or later.

Ridgewood is not alone in recognizing the need to adjust schedules to allow adolescents to sleep later in the morning.



California became the first state in the U.S. to mandate that the high school day begin no earlier than 8:30 a.m. In Michigan, multiple districts switched permanently to later starts when officials saw benefits after instituting later starts during the

pandemic.

PILOT PROGRAM:Pilot program to delay school start times, but will New Jersey high schools want to try?

Biology, not technology

Pediatricians say they've known it for years, but the benefits of later school start times for teenagers were formally articulated by the American Academy of Pediatrics in a September 2014 paper "School Start Times for Adolescents."

Their conclusion: "The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes insufficient sleep in adolescents as a public health issue, endorses the scientific rationale for later school start times, and acknowledged the potential benefits to students with regard to physical and mental health, safety and academic achievement."

Its policy statement said that school start times before 8:30 a.m. contributed to the disruption of circadian rhythm — the body's internal clock.

In other words, it's biology, not technology, that keeps teens up late, and schools need to respond with starting times of 8:30 a.m. or later, the pediatricians' group said.



Among the professional organizations that have added research and support for this position over the years have been the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 2015, the American Medical Association in 2016, the National Parent Teacher Association in 2017 and

the U.S Surgeon General in 2021.

The non-profit Start School Later estimates that 43% of public high schools still have starting times before 8 a.m. and that starting times have become progressively earlier since the 1950s.

Studies indicate teens do better scholastically, especially the poorest students, with later start times. Better sleep also promotes better athletic performance with fewer injuries, the studies suggest. More sleep makes new drivers less prone to accidents.

Conversely, disruptions to circadian rhythm are linked to mood disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Tenafly schools went to a later starting time three years ago. Communications Manager Christine Corliss said it took the district two years to get the scheduling approved, but teachers say students are now more alert and are less likely to be late for class.

Corliss said the response has been "extremely positive" from students and staff. Still, few other North Jersey districts have tried it.

The pediatric academy's New Jersey chapter has its own Task Force on Adolescent Sleep and School Start Times. Wayne Yankus, the past president of the New Jersey American Academy of Pediatrics and Ridgewood school district physician, is in full support.

"We know scientifically when this was tried out that the kids did better," Yankus said. "The biorhythms of adolescents are different; they fall asleep later. Yes, we all eventually recover and can usually deal with a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday. But not teenagers."

So it's not simply a matter of having teens go to sleep earlier, because they are biologically primed to fall asleep later than adults.

Pros and cons to later school start



But schools have been slow to respond. And parents, who must align work, school and child care schedules, are sometimes wary of schedule changes.

Then-Gov. Chris Christie ordered a study of the benefits of later start times in 2015, but found most districts were not considering any change. California is the only state to take a system-wide approach to the issue,

mandating middle schools to begin no earlier than 8:00 a.m. and high schools at 8:30 a.m. by next fall.

Ridgewood Education Association President Michael Yannone said last week that December's meetings were the latest in long-term discussions that stretch back at least 10 years.

"As a high school teacher, I would love for this to happen," Yannone said.

Yannone said the high school's schedule consists of a 7:45 a.m. start, three periods lasting 50 minutes, 80 minutes, and 50 minutes, a uniform lunch/club period 10:55 a.m. to 11:35 a.m., then three more periods before the last class 2:50 to 3:15 p.m.

The middle schools start at 8 a.m., and the end time is 2:53 p.m.

"But starting late and ending later is not an option because of after-school activities," Yannone said. "So the question is, how do you start later, finish at the same time, and provide the same education?"

The hurdles to later school start times



At least two long-standing issues complicate education scheduling: after-school activities and busing.

Traditionally, high schools have supported an earlier schedule to allow enough daylight to finish outdoor sports practice and games, especially in the fall as the days get shorter.

Lights extend the time that fields are usable if the

district can afford them. But what about a school that can't afford sports field lights, or has more sports teams than lighted fields? Districts want to avoid having student-athletes leave school early to get to games.

Busing is an additional challenge. Gorman estimated the district would have to add four additional routes at a cost of \$80,000 to \$100,000 to accommodate a later starting time. That is, Gorman says, unless parents can agree to bus middle and high school students together.

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