

US Schools Flunk the Start Time Test

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Opinion

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For most of the nation's adolescents, back-to-school season means back to chronic sleep deprivation.

Despite the harms of poor sleep on youth being well documented, school policies seem to completely ignore the science. This is a national disgrace.

Changes in the brain at puberty push adolescents to stay awake until 11 p.m. or later and sleep until 8 a.m. or later, if undisturbed. Adolescents need between 8.5 and 10 hours of sleep every night for optimal classroom performance, as well as mental and physical health.

Early school start times deny most U.S. adolescents the opportunity to get the sleep they need to function at their best.

U.S. public high schools start around 8 a.m. on average. Fewer than one in five public high schools nationwide starts at 8:30 a.m. or later. One in 10 high schools starts before 7:30 a.m. Those with the earliest start time, in Louisiana, begin their school day at 7:30 a.m., while those in Alaska and Washington, D.C., start at a healthier time closer to 8:40 a.m., according to a 2020 survey report from the [National Center for Education Statistics](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/ipedsdatacenter/datacenter/2020-survey-report).

In 2014, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) issued a landmark policy statement urging the nation's middle and high schools to start at 8:30 a.m. or later. The pediatricians said adolescents suffer from an “epidemic of delayed, insufficient, and erratic sleep.”

In recent years, adolescents' average amount of sleep on school nights has dropped even lower. In 2021, 79% of U.S. high school students [averaged less than eight hours of sleep on school nights](#), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports.

Sleep specialists regard eight hours of sleep as the bare minimum for teens. According to the [American Academy of Sleep Medicine](#), adolescents who average less than eight hours of sleep per night get lower grades, experience worse moods, have more frequent thoughts of suicide, more often come to school late or skip school and are less likely to graduate than their better-rested classmates. These outcomes are worse for underrepresented minorities and teens from low-income communities. Teens who average less than eight hours of sleep also more often use caffeine, alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. They have slower reflexes, a factor that contributes to their higher rates of sports injuries and car crashes. Accidental injuries, including car crashes, are the [leading cause of death in the nation's 15-19-year-olds](#).

The [American Medical Association](#), [American Psychological Association](#), [National Parent Teacher Association](#), [National Education Association](#) and other medical and education groups also call for an 8:30 a.m. or later start time for the nation's middle and high schools.

A 2017 report from the RAND Corporation shows that [starting school later would benefit the nation's economy](#) by enabling more students to graduate from high school, get better jobs and earn more money. RAND scientists found that a nationwide move to an 8:30 a.m. start time could contribute \$83 billion to the U.S. economy within a decade. Transportation costs may rise initially in some school districts, the researchers said, but long-term benefits outweigh those costs.

The parent-led nonprofit group [Start School Later](#) has enlisted parents, educators and health professionals to advocate for healthy start times in school systems nationwide. While some schools in virtually every state have adopted later start times, these schools comprise only a small fraction of the thousands of middle and high schools in the nation's more than 14,000 public school systems, says Terra Ziporyn Snider, the group's founder and executive director.

Two states have mandated later start times statewide. A [California](#) law requiring the state's high schools to start at 8:30 a.m. or later went into effect in fall 2022. In [Florida](#), a similar law goes into effect in the 2026-27 school year.

Florida's new law requires that school communities receive education on adolescent sleep health and why schools need to start later. Sleep health education resources, such as [Sleep 101](#) and [Let's Sleep!](#) from Start School Later, can help the public understand why this is so important.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) continues to reintroduce her [ZZZ's to A's Act](#) each new term in Congress. The act would direct the Department of Education to review scientific evidence for later school start times, compare student health and performance across districts with different schedules, evaluate factors that affect school start times, as well as make recommendations to benefit adolescent health.

Later school start times alone cannot guarantee adolescents get the sleep they need. Teens' efforts to achieve independence and keep up with peers via social media also influence their bedtimes. Later school start times, however, offer teens the opportunity to get more sleep.

Meanwhile, students across the U.S. have stepped up to advocate for healthier school start times. Some have spoken to or served on their local school boards. Others have used [social media and other public outreach methods](#) to call for later start times.

"My classmates are not happy with my school's 8:20 a.m. start time, and honestly, neither am I. I've missed that first bell so many times. I had 12 tardies and 4 detentions in the past quarter alone, just from being late. And I'm not just late, I'm *tired*," said Jose Santana, a junior at the [Dr. Richard Izquierdo Health and Science Charter School](#) in the Bronx, New York, addressing his own experiences and those of his classmates on the podcast [Miseducation](#) in June.

Madeline Lundquist, a student at Baltimore's City College High School, wrote a letter to the editor of [The Baltimore Sun](#) in June 2022, bemoaning her school's plans to start classes in the 2022-2023 school year at 7:30 a.m., 15 minutes earlier than in the previous school year. "By moving start times earlier and forcing us to wake up earlier," she asserted, "the city school system is blatantly disregarding our mental health." In September 2022, after the earlier start time went into effect, she wrote [another letter to the editor](#), reporting that "less than half the class arrives to my first period before 7:40 a.m."

In Montana, 16 youth plaintiffs recently [won their lawsuit](#) against the state for violating their constitutional rights to a clean and healthful environment. While we are not lawyers, we wonder if this landmark decision provides a precedent for student activists to similarly pursue legislation to require schools in their states to start classes at times that provide students the opportunity to get the sleep they need for their physical and mental health.

These are thoughts to sleep on.

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This piece has been updated.