

A photograph of a person sleeping in a bed, covered with a white blanket. In the foreground, a black alarm clock with a white face is visible, showing the time as approximately 6:00. The background is softly blurred, showing the person's head and shoulders under a white pillow.

# TIME AFTER TIME

The research is clear, but changing  
high school start times is hard

*Glenn Cook*

**T**hroughout her 33-year career in Seattle Public Schools, Pegi McEvoy has been focused on student health and safety, first as a school nurse, then as central office director, and finally as assistant superintendent of operations.

So, when community members, physicians, and school nurses urged the school board in 2014 to consider a change to start times for middle and high school students, McEvoy was a natural person to lead the initiative. Five years later, Seattle's move to start classes 55 minutes later for teens is a model other districts are considering.

Medical practitioners and researchers say moving start times back can't come soon enough. They point to a host of risk factors associated with adolescents who do not get the recommended eight to 10 hours of sleep per night. Among them: increased risk of obesity, high blood pressure, car accidents, anxiety, and depression.

"We celebrate the sleep-deprived in our culture," says Craig Canapari, director of the pediatric sleep center at Yale University. "We think it's great when our kids stay up late to get their work done or participate in activities, when in fact it is putting their health at risk. We have protections in place for contract hours for truck drivers, airline pilots, physicians, etc., but we don't have them in place for kids."

But, as McEvoy and others who've gone through the shift can tell you, making this type of move presents a host of challenges. All can be overcome, but the effort likely will take multiple years and you can expect some bumps in the road.

"It's such a heavy lift," says Terry Allen, senior director of community relations for California's San Juan Unified School District, which has been moving start times back gradually since 2016. "The question was whether the benefits were great enough to justify the cost and the amount of work it would take. You can see the science and the logic behind it, but of course the devil is in the details."

## LATER START TIMES WORK

The push to move back start times has gained steam over the past decade, but only 17 percent of public middle and high schools meet the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation to begin classes after 8:30 a.m. That recommendation, issued in 2014, is what prompted the Seattle school board to consider changing its start times.

"We had two major community engagements," McEvoy says. "The first was called the analysis phase and included a task force, surveys, and school community meetings.

During this phase, the community overwhelmingly stated that they wanted the district to change bell times. The second engagement was about implementation and mitigating impacts."

The process took more than two years, but ultimately was supported by the teachers union and the district's Parent-Teacher-Student Association. It also was endorsed by child care and community groups.

McEvoy says transportation costs were a concern, but that was alleviated when the city contributed \$2.3 million to offset the first-year cost of moving start times from 7:50 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. in most middle and high schools. While implementation has been relatively smooth, she says there have been some issues with athletics fields that have taken several years to iron out.

The change has produced results. In December 2018, University of Washington researchers published a study showing that Seattle's students are getting 34 minutes more sleep on average thanks to the shift. Grades have improved, while absences and tardiness have decreased, all because the start times are "more in line with the natural wake-up times of adolescents," says Horatio de la Iglesia, the study's senior author.

"Thirty-four minutes of extra sleep each night is a huge impact to see from a single intervention," says de la Iglesia.

Schools that have later start times will see these types of improvements, Canapari says. The reason is because "memory consolidation" occurs during REM, which does not happen until you've been asleep for at least four to five hours.

"The second half of the night is where the majority of REM sleep occurs, so they're actually losing some of the sleep that helps them to learn," he says. "The research is pretty clear. If you move start times later, kids do get more sleep. They don't just sleep later."

Canapari says educators need to wake up and look at the research about teen sleeping patterns.

"Teenagers are just as smart as you or me, but it's about their decision-making capacity," he says. "Because their frontal lobes are not as developed, they are not as good at making decisions as older people. When you don't get enough sleep, you're more likely to be impulsive and listen to the pleasure-seeking drive, whether its food, drugs, or earlier sexual activity."

## DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Connecticut has seen several of its districts move back or reconsider start times, thanks to the efforts of Canapari and

others. In Greenwich, the district shifted its high school start time by an hour in 2017-18, following two years of studies, surveys, and discussions. Students now start classes at 8:30 a.m., while middle schoolers begin five to 10 minutes later. The elementary grades were not affected.

Kim Eves, Greenwich's director of communications, says parents were surveyed twice. A study was conducted with students to garner information on their sleep and study habits. A committee then was appointed to review the surveys and the student study to develop recommendations for the school board.

"There was a lot of support for it in the community, and we tried to anticipate all the potential challenges we'd have to overcome," Eves says. "We did so to some degree and in a couple of areas underestimated the impact it might have."

The biggest challenges, Eves says, were traffic and "compression on the back end of the school day."

"It had a big impact on traffic for us, because we now have a much closer start and dismissal time for our schools," she says. "For people commuting into and out of our town on the main route, the traffic issue became quite a problem."

The district worked closely with the town to "make small fixes with traffic flow and quick fixes with the lights," but solving the end-of-day problem for students required some out-of-the-box thinking, Eves says.

"The extra hour for sleep in the morning is great, but it put pressure on our kids at the end of the school day because they now have one less hour for athletic practices, academic contests, and to get their homework done," she says.

For the 2018-19 year, administrators cut class times by three to five minutes and added a 30-minute "opportunity block" to the end of the school day. Now, students can remain in their last class period, start homework, get extra help from the teacher, go to another classroom, or participate in extracurricular activities.

"We have 90 to 100 different choices of noninstructional, non-credit-bearing activities that teachers are sponsoring or providing," Eves says. "Students also can get passes from their athletic coaches, so they can get on the bus early and not miss their contests. Even though we're just starting the second semester of it, the opportunity block seems to be working."

### CAUTIOUS APPROACH

While Seattle and Greenwich made their changes all at once, other districts have taken a more cautious approach.

In San Juan Unified, which has almost 40,000 students at 64 sites, the district has moved start times back five minutes a year for the past three years. Allen says he expects the board to approve three more years of changes.

"We've had a few tiny issues at some school sites, especially where we have two schools right next door to each other," Allen

says. "Their start times were only five minutes apart as is, so we let the elementary school stay at its time and moved the high school start time, which has made the traffic issues much, much less."

Allen says discussions around the change drew great interest from parents, students, and staff when the district first debated the move in 2015. San Juan used a two-way online engagement platform called Thoughtexchange that more than 7,000 people used to ask pointed questions, share thoughts, and assign rankings to various suggestions.

"It was the most who've participated in any process we've ever run in any format," Allen says. "It showed there was strong support for the idea and the concept, but the question was: How do we mitigate the impacts?"

The major concerns are common to any district considering this type of change: how moving the start times would impact athletics and extracurricular activities as well as working parents.

"Going very gradually seems to be adaptable for folks," Allen says. "Certainly, some would like for us to go faster,



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but I think we've found a nice middle ground to mitigate the impact, get started later, and still move in the right direction."

At some point, San Juan and other California districts may not have a choice on when school starts. In April 2018, the California Legislature passed a bill requiring most middle and high schools to begin classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m. by 2021. The bill was vetoed by former Gov. Jerry Brown, but Allen anticipates the legislation will be up for another vote this year.

As far as Canapari is concerned, the district-by-district approach is a primary challenge to what he considers a public health issue. He would not mind seeing changes to start times made at the state level, even though that would chafe advocates for local control.

"I understand that it can be a polarizing topic for schools, but the average high school student's working hours are as long as a medical resident these days," Canapari says. "At the end of the day, if what's done is in the best interest of children, then it's going to be sound."

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