



# PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATORS ARE SEEKING INFORMATION ABOUT **CHANGING SECONDARY SCHOOL START TIMES**

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The research is robust and irrefutable; adolescents experience a shift in circadian rhythms that delay their sleep cycles.

**T**he early school start times in most Pennsylvania school districts contradict teen biology. As a result, our adolescents suffer chronic sleep loss over time with negative consequences for their cognitive, emotional, and/or physical health. Studies show that teens are required to arrive at school excessively early, and subsequently experience significantly more drug and alcohol use/abuse, car crashes, athletic injuries, and suicidal ideation than those with later school start times. Also, they engage in significantly more risky behaviors when required to start school at 7:00 or 7:30 a.m. As the community is becoming more aware of these research findings, educators are beginning to seek resources to address the challenges for revamping their school schedules.

In November, 2019, an important workshop was offered in Exton, PA focusing on tactics to address the schedule change challenges related to school transportation and busing, athletics and extra-curricular activities, ramifications for elementary-aged children, day care concerns, and teacher/

staff issues. Entitled, "Adolescent Health and School Start Times: Science, Strategies, Tactics, and Logistics," this workshop was initiated by Start School Later, Inc. (SSL), a national nonprofit organization concerned about the problem of chronic teen sleep deprivation and public health. This organization advocates for later high school start times and have chapters across the United States. This group was instrumental in bringing an informational and interactive workshop to southeastern Pennsylvania for educators, mental health professionals, and other stakeholders in children's health and welfare.

A committee was formed from local and national SSL members to plan this event that included a review of the science of adolescent sleep and presentations from school superintendents who have spearheaded change in their districts. Researchers who presented on sleep science included Dr. Amy Wolfson from Loyola University and Dr. Indira Gurubhagavatula from the University of Pennsylvania. The school superintendents who spoke both days included Robert

O'Donnell from State College Area School District, John Sanville from the Unionville-Chaddsford School District, and Ken Batchelor from the Radnor School District. Additionally, there were student presenters who reported about their personal experiences with the early school start time.

Educators and school administrators were seeking information about a change in school start times. The responses for registrations were filled so quickly that a waiting list was formed and a second workshop date was scheduled for the next day. Over 50 school districts registered for the program. A plenary session provided an overview, information about the science of adolescent sleep needs, presentations from school superintendents who have made the change, and transportation experts who discussed the logistics of busing. The transportation experts reported that changing one's busing schedules does not necessarily increase costs.


Workshop sessions included two interactive panels, one for advocacy strategies, and the other for implementation tactics. We learned that there had been

a void for educators to come together to learn and discuss the challenges of implementation. A breakout session, "Lobbying, Leadership, and Communication Strategies," provided an extensive discussion of how to advocate for these needed changes. Examples of effective advocacy were provided from school districts in Pennsylvania and Virginia. Many techniques for persuasion were highlighted, including specifics such as providing a compelling rationale for change, identifying key opinion leaders, and advocacy at the state legislative level. The second interactive panel, "Opportunities, Challenges, Creative Solutions, and Best Practices" focused on the solutions for bell change challenges and was led by sleep experts, superintendents who had made a change, and transportation experts.

Parallel to these workshops, Pennsylvania 2018 Senate Resolution 417 (PA SR417) requested that the Joint State Government Commission form an Advisory Committee on Secondary School Start Times. That committee consisted of 27 appointed members representing school administrators and directors,

mental health professionals, and other stakeholders in children's health and welfare. The commission issued its study on "Adolescent Sleep Deprivation: The Case for Delaying Secondary School Start Times" on October 17, 2019. A 92-page report included an overview of the science and research findings, policy statements made by national organizations, current status of secondary school start times in Pennsylvania, and commonly perceived challenges with potential solutions for making a change. Among its findings the report concluded that "it would be advantageous for the Commonwealth to offer incentives and other assistance to school entities desiring to make such a change."

The time seems ripe. Pennsylvania is now on the move, district by district. School administrators are discussing the science and the application of the science to benefit our students. Dr. Mary Carskadon, Director of Sleep and Chronology Research Lab at Brown University wrote, "Given the primary focus of education is to maximize human potential, then a new task before us is to ensure that the conditions in which

learning takes place addresses the very biology of our learners." 

**Want to learn more? Register for "Adolescent Sleep Deprivation and Secondary School Start Times: The Science and Current Status in Pennsylvania" on Saturday, June 20 at 8:00 a.m.**

#### REFERENCES

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