

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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LIFE

## The Earliest and Latest School Starts

How families juggle start times that can be all over the map—some just past 7 a.m., others as late as 9:30 a.m.



Helena Petras, Ellie Pline and Julia Buan, left to right, arrive at Annapolis High School in time for the 7:17 a.m. bell. 'Most of the time I'm really groggy,' Ellie says of her first stretch at school. *PHOTO: APRIL GREER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANNE MARIE CHAKER**

Aug. 30, 2016 1:03 p.m. ET

Ellie Pline, a 17-year-old senior at Annapolis (Md.) High School, sets her alarm to ring three times starting at 5:30 a.m., with the last sounding at 6 a.m.

That is so she makes it to class by 7:17 a.m., one of the earliest school start times in the country. It is particularly challenging if she is up late the night before. She tries to be in bed by 11 p.m., having finished anywhere from two to four hours of homework. That means she might get 6½ hours of sleep—far less than the 8½ to 9½ hours recommended for teenagers by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

“My classmates all ogle at how early I go to bed,” she says. “Most of them go to bed closer to midnight or 1 a.m.”

The Pline family lives at one end of the spectrum of school start times. The early start requires an extra dose of planning and juggling to smooth out what is one of the most harried times of day for households across the country.

The average start time is 8:03 a.m. for public middle and high schools, according to a 2015 analysis of the U.S. Education Department's Schools and Staffing Survey. Many sleep experts and education researchers say that is too early.



Ellie Pline gives herself 10 minutes in bed after the last alarm rings at 6 a.m., and contemplates the day ahead. *PHOTO: APRIL GREER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Teenagers, due to their natural circadian rhythms, tend to fall asleep at night two to three hours later than at other stages in life, says Paul Kelley, a researcher at the Open University in England who studies adolescent sleep and its relationship to school schedules.

“This is why education start times requiring waking at 7 a.m. or earlier cause chronic sleep loss,” Dr. Kelley says. Two years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle and high schools “should aim for a starting time of no earlier than 8:30 a.m.” Only 17.7% of public middle and high schools start at 8:30 a.m. or later, according to the Education Department's data.

Some school districts have worked to push start times later. In Annapolis, the 7:17 high school start time is due largely to school bus schedules, says Anne Arundel County Public Schools spokesman Bob Mosier.

The same buses and drivers need the time to make multiple runs for different schools. Last April, superintendent George Arlotto proposed a plan that involves a \$600,000 increase to the district's budget that would buy about 10 additional buses—and move

high school start times to 7:30 or 7:35. The board is scheduled to discuss it this fall, Mr. Mosier says.

Some districts that have pushed start times still haven't resolved the disparity in the clock between different schools. For the 2015-16 school year, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland moved start times 10 to 20 minutes later in the morning. High schools now start at 7:45 a.m., middle schools at 8:15 a.m. and elementary schools between 9:15 a.m. and 9:25 a.m.



At 6:20 a.m., Ellie makes one last check in the bathroom mirror, left. By 6:40, Ellie's dad, Alex Pline, helps her tackle a calculus problem, right. *PHOTOS: APRIL GREER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(2)*

Lani Clyatt's family sits at the other end of the time spectrum. Her 12-year-old son Connor is a seventh-grader at Lyons Creek Middle School in Coconut Creek, Fla. Since classes for Connor start at 9:30 a.m.—one of the later start times in the country—Ms. Clyatt must return home to get him after dropping off her 10th-grader, Logan, at North Broward Preparatory School, where classes begin at 8:25 a.m.

What follows is an intense 40 minutes: She pulls her Ford Expedition into the driveway at 8:30 a.m., wakes up Connor, then takes the family's Labrador retriever, Cole, out for a quick walk. She feeds Cole before making coffee and a bagel for herself. Having showered the night before, Connor gets dressed in a Hollister T-shirt and shorts, brushes his teeth, gels his hair and grabs his backpack before heading out the door at 9:10 with his mom.

"I wake up refreshed," says Connor, who tries to be in bed by 9:45 p.m. on school nights.

Lyons Creek office manager Mary Alvarez says that the school's 9:30 start time is due in part to the Broward County district's busing schedule, which typically serves high school students first, then elementary and middle schoolers. She says the school



At 7 a.m., Ellie picks up her friend Helena Petras, who lives two streets away. *PHOTO: APRIL GREER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

provides a before-care program as early as 7:30 a.m. to help serve Lyons Creek parents who have to be at work before their child starts school.

In Annapolis, Ellie Pline gives herself 10 minutes under the blankets after her last alarm rings at 6 a.m. She then gets into the shower, brushes her teeth and quickly decides on an outfit before flicking on some mascara. On mornings when her father, Alex Pline, a 55-year old project manager at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, hurries to catch the bus to Washington, D.C., “we’re trying not to bump into each other,” he says. Ellie’s mother, Lisa Pline, a regional sales manager for a food-services company, usually packs her daughter lunch.

Ellie races out the door at 6:55 a.m. and takes the wheel of her dad’s Toyota Prius. Before pulling out of the driveway, she texts classmates Helena Petras and Julia Buan to alert them that she is coming to pick them up. Outside their school entrance, there is always a long backup of cars. Teens who are running late often try to cut in through the left lane. “It’s a lot of teenagers that are tired just trying to do what they can to get to school on time,” she says.

She is usually in the parking lot by 7:15—with two minutes to run before the bell rings at 7:17. First period—from 7:17 to 8:55—is AP Calculus or Band, depending on the day. “Most of the time I’m really groggy,” she says. About twice a week she brings coffee from home.

Her school day ends at 2:05 p.m., after which she might take a nap or do homework before soccer practice, which runs from 4 to 6. On most days, she says, “I get home at 6:15ish exhausted from practice and school.” If it’s a game night, she might get home as late as 9:45 p.m. That means on some nights, homework doesn’t get finished. “I have learned to value my sleep and my health more than my homework,” she says.



At 7:12 a.m., in the Annapolis High School parking lot, Ellie grabs two history books, coffee and her backpack. *PHOTO:*  
*APRIL GREER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

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