

# If later school start times are better, why aren't they more popular?

**USA TODAY NETWORK** Jennifer Pignolet and Linda A. Moore, The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal

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(Photo: Jim Weber, The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal)

GERMANTOWN, Tenn. — A year after this Memphis suburb decided to start middle- and high-school classes a bit later (<http://memne.ws/2w5OknG>) in the morning in hopes of improving student achievement, none of the seven other districts in the county have found the motivation to change.

## First day of school around the U.S.

As California considers a first-of-its kind bill to outlaw a school day starting before 8:30 a.m., school districts across 19 states have later start times this school year than last, according to the nonprofit advocacy group Schools Start Later.

Shelby County school leaders cite the cost, logistics and an overall lack of interest as factors why they're not changing. Some schools in each district start as early as 7 a.m. CT in spite of mountains of recent studies and

lobbying from medical groups on the benefits of starting school no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

► **April 18:** [Schools should start later to prevent accidents, depression, scientists say \(/story/news/nation-now/2017/04/18/schools-should-start-later-prevent-accidents-depression-scientists-say/100573390/\)](#)

► **2015:** [Expert says sleep deprivation is 'torture,' calls for later work day \(/story/news/nation-now/2015/09/09/expert-sleep-deprivation-torture-later-work-day/71936336/\)](#)

Germantown residents also aren't uniformly convinced their expensive change — \$500,000 for this school year — was for the better.

"I'm not seeing any bright, shiny, happy kids kicking their heels together," Houston High Principal Kyle Cherry said.

The change in Germantown came through grassroots efforts, driven by parents incensed that some children riding the bus had to wake up as early as 5:45.

Cole Bowden, 16, of Germantown and a student at Houston High, started school 45 minutes later this past year, shifting to a 7:45 bell and pushing the end of school from 2 p.m. to 2:45. The rising junior doesn't like that it pushes his wrestling practice further into the afternoon, leaving less time for homework or a job.

But his sister, 14-year-old Paige Bowden, loved being able to start eighth-grade classes at 8 a.m. at Houston Middle School.

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"A house divided," their mother Jodie Bowden said of her children's split feelings. The elder Bowden is Germantown Municipal Council Parent-Teacher Association president.

Dr. Merrill Wise sees the aftermath of schools' early starting times every day.

"They're excessively sleepy," Wise, a sleep medicine specialist, said of the adolescent patients who come to him at the Methodist Healthcare Sleep Disorder Center in Memphis.

► **2015:** [Most teens start school too early in day to get enough sleep, study shows \(/story/news/2015/08/06/teen-sleep-school-start/31212457/\)](#)

► **2014:** [Doctors urge delayed school start times for teens \(/story/news/nation/2014/08/25/pediatricians-late-school-start-time-good-for-teens/14338565/\)](#)

► **2013:** [Home-schoolers better rested than other students, study shows \(/story/news/nation/2013/03/14/home-school-sleep-study/1986781/\)](#)

The average high school student sleeps 6 to 6½ hours a night, he said. They need 8 to 10.

"We are living with a sleep deprivation epidemic," Wise said.



Students at Houston High School in Germantown, Tenn., settle in for their first period class before the bell rings at 7:45 a.m. Aug. 9, 2017. It's the latest start time in Shelby County. (Photo: Jim Weber, The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal)

That's why he co-authored the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's position paper on school start times, released in April. Wise served a six-year term on the academy's board and joined current board members in calling for school districts to start classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

The move would promote healthier physical safety — many high school students drive themselves to school — as well as better cognitive function and social behaviors, he said.

"I think it's one of the most modifiable factors that parents and school personnel could pursue," Wise said.

But a later start time isn't solely the answer, he said. Families have to be educated about healthy sleep schedules, prying electronic devices away from children at night and creating routines that lead to more sleep.

Without those factors, schools may not see much difference in their children, Wise said.

When residents in Germantown — along with the cities of Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Lakeland and Millington — voted to break away from Shelby County Schools and start their own districts, the ability to make decisions on a hyper-local level was a key point.

When Germantown's district took shape in early 2014, a number of parents saw the opportunity to change something that had long bothered them, the 7 a.m. start time at Houston middle and high schools.

► **Our view:** [More districts should wake up to the benefits of later bells \(/story/opinion/2016/08/25/schools-start-sleep-teenagers-editorials-debates/89205246/\)](/story/opinion/2016/08/25/schools-start-sleep-teenagers-editorials-debates/89205246/)

► **Opposing view:** [Later school start times disrupt families \(/story/opinion/2016/08/25/late-starts-disrupt-families-opposing-view/89344880/\)](/story/opinion/2016/08/25/late-starts-disrupt-families-opposing-view/89344880/)

Parents came in droves to speak at board meetings about pushing back the time. But that spurred others to speak out in favor of the early time, citing after-school activities and jobs that would be affected if school started later.

Linda Fisher, the current board chairwoman and one of the founding members of the board, said early concerns were over finances.

At the time, schools in the district started at 7, 8 and 9 a.m. Pushing them all back would make elementary schools start too late, so more schools would have to start at the same time, requiring more buses and bus drivers.

The district has a contract with Durham School Services for its transportation, and as part of that it shares buses with Collierville Schools. The contract included a clause that if one district altered its start times, affecting their ability to share buses, that district would have to cover the increased costs for both school systems.

The board balked at a price tag in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, voting 3-2 against changing the times. They promised to review the issue the following year.

Parental voices intensified, and the district held meetings for parents, teachers and school leaders. The second vote was unanimous: Starting in the 2016-17 year, no school started before 7:45 a.m.

"I think everybody definitely was in agreement that it was the best decision for our students," Fisher said. "It was the financial aspect that held it off a year."

► **#tellsatoday:** [Teens cope with early school start times \(/story/opinion/2015/08/11/school-start-times-teens-tellsatoday-your-say/31498389/\)](/story/opinion/2015/08/11/school-start-times-teens-tellsatoday-your-say/31498389/)

► **Column:** [Students lack school-life balance \(/story/opinion/2014/09/25/vicki-abeles-stressed-students-balance-column/16110085/\)](/story/opinion/2014/09/25/vicki-abeles-stressed-students-balance-column/16110085/)

The total cost was about \$1 million over the two remaining years of the contract with Durham and Collierville. That includes \$350,000 paid to Collierville for the effect on its bus schedule. While that part of the cost goes away after the contract terminates at the end of this school year, Germantown will still have \$200,000 to \$300,000 in extra transportation costs each year in a district with fewer than 6,000 students.

For parent Laura Meanwell, who led the charge to change the times, the expense was worth it.

"Last year it was wonderful sending our kids to school in daylight," she said. "They were rested. We were very grateful for the change."

► **Your Say interactive:** [Is it about school start times, or parenting? \(/story/opinion/2014/08/28/education-school-start-times-your-say/14757747/\)](/story/opinion/2014/08/28/education-school-start-times-your-say/14757747/)

Cherry, the principal, declined to comment on whether he thought the change was worth the money.

"It all depends upon who you ask," he said, noting that tardiness rates didn't drop and complaints of after-school activities pushed back were new.

The district made several changes last year that will make it hard to say for sure what variables worked or didn't, Superintendent Jason Manuel said. Test scores have not yet been released although the high school is one of the highest performing in the state.

► **Our view:** [High schools, wake up to later start times \(/story/opinion/2014/08/27/high-school-start-times-teenagers-sleep-editorials-debates/14708625/\)](/story/opinion/2014/08/27/high-school-start-times-teenagers-sleep-editorials-debates/14708625/)

St. George's Independent School, which has a high school in Collierville, Tenn., but offers shuttles for students from almost 15 miles away in East Memphis, changed last year from an 8 a.m. start time to 8:30.

Head of School Ross Peters said the move was a response to research saying the 8:30 time is healthier but was also a way to make the school as accessible as possible for students who live farther away.

Instead of pushing back the end of the day, the school made class periods during the day longer and fewer, removing transitional time between classes, Peters said.

► **Opposing view:** [Later start times cost too much, have unintended consequences \(/story/opinion/2014/08/27/high-school-start-times-fairfax-county-school-board-editorials-debates/14708879/\)](/story/opinion/2014/08/27/high-school-start-times-fairfax-county-school-board-editorials-debates/14708879/)

"We need kids who aren't just awake enough to absorb content, but they're rested enough to deeply engage the material in front of them," Peters said.

Collierville Schools is building a \$93 million high school, which may spur conversations about start times when it opens, Superintendent John Aitken said.

In Arlington Community Schools, Superintendent Tammy Mason said the district looked at a later start time, but \$300,000 in extra costs put a hold on that conversation.

"Over multiple years, that adds up," Mason said.

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