



US schools are pushing their start times back - and it looks like it's working



Solebury School, in New Hope, Pennsylvania has changed start times to 8:30am instead of 8:00am.
Image: REUTERS/Mike Blake

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Schools in 45 states have pushed their start times back to fall in line with research that looks at the biological clock of adolescents.

Administrators have found short-term roadblocks but long-term rewards for students, parents, and teachers.

A greater appreciation for the benefits, not the downsides, of starting school later could help more schools help their students.

Rick Tony teaches math at Solebury School, in New Hope, Pennsylvania, but he's well aware of the science of sleep.

For the 2016-2017 school year, Tony, who also works as the boarding and day school's director of studies, led the charge on moving Solebury's 8:00 a.m. start time half an hour later to 8:30 four days of the week.

On Wednesdays, the first bell doesn't ring until 9:00 a.m.

Now a year into the policy, Tony said, students are less stressed and performing just as well if not better in their classes. A survey he issued schoolwide showed students and teachers are widely in favor of the policy. He's gotten similar feedback from parents saying an 8:30 start time makes for a less hectic morning.

"It's a no-brainer," Tony told Business Insider of renewing the policy for this coming academic year. "We would do it again in a heartbeat."

Sleeping in and doing better

To date, [schools in 45 states](#) have adopted a policy similar to Solebury's. Each falls in line with the prevailing best practices proposed by organizations like the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The trend also reflects a change in attitude among administrators, who are now accepting the fact that obstacles like rejiggering athletics and transportation aren't impossibilities.

Tony sympathized with such concerns, but ultimately said the short-term investments of time are worth the long-term gains passed on to students. "It's not a matter of thinking about what you're going to lose," he said, "but look what you stand to gain by making a change like this."

Recent research [published by the RAND Corporation and RAND Europe](#) found 8:30 a.m. start times could add \$83 billion to the US economy over the next 10 years. Marco Hafner, lead author of the study, said the increase in high school graduation rates and decrease in health concerns, such as rates of obesity and car crashes due to sleeplessness, should more than make up for the hassles of putting the policy in place.

'The mornings were just less stressful'

Lisa Brady has seen those benefits firsthand for the past couple years. As the superintendent of Dobbs Ferry School District, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, Brady has observed students and parents alike remark on the many upsides to the extra time in the morning.

Following a survey issued at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, Brady told Business Insider "it was clear from both the parents and the kids, overwhelmingly, that the mornings were just less stressful."

Many of the kids reported having more time to eat breakfast and get ready for school, while parents said they didn't have to drag kids out of bed or yell at them to hurry up. Once students got to school, they felt more alert. At night, they tended to report going to bed at the same time, even though the new schedule freed up an extra 45 minutes.

In Seattle, 85% of middle and high schools in the 2016-2017 school year swapped start times with the elementary schools. Now the older kids start at 8:45 while the younger ones start at 7:55. In 2016, Kira Hoffman, a then-eighth-grader at Jane Addams Middle School, [told KUOW](#) that she no longer felt "super-rushed or worried about how much I've slept, or when I'm going to get to school, or if I'm going to be late."

Later start times aren't perfect

Schools that have followed through with delaying the first bell have run into challenges.

Tony conceded the bus schedule can still be difficult to manage. (Fortunately, he said, a number of students live on campus or have their parents drive them.) Brady said some parents actually feel more rushed in the mornings, since their routine for work used to come after their kids but now overlaps.

Both have tried to work around the problem by keeping the school open earlier, so kids can eat breakfast, finish up homework, or just hang out.

Brady has also found challenges with athletics and after-school clubs. In years prior, teams had no trouble getting to away games. Now they have less time to get there, and they have to deal with worse traffic. "The kids feel really rushed," she told Business Insider.

Once they finally get home, many say they have less time for all the homework they've been assigned. Solebury has overcome this challenge by coupling a delayed start time with fewer classes during the day. Instead of taking six 50-minute classes, students take four 80-minute classes. They end at the same time but get more done and have less homework.

"It's easy to see the obstacles to keep you from doing something like this," he said. "It's hard to see the gains sometimes. Maybe we're reaping some of those not even knowing about it."

A lack of empathy for kids

Delayed start times are growing in popularity, but they are still rare. Brady said it has to do with a lack of empathy for pre-teens and teens. "I get that years ago we all walked a hundred miles in the snow to school," she said. "But we know better now about the adolescent brain, and we know about their natural sleep rhythms being different than adults'."

Marco Hafner, of the RAND study, said he hopes schools will have more of an incentive if they know money could be on the line.

For all the good it does, Solebury isn't satisfied with its 8:30 a.m. start time, Tony said. Administrators are still looking into whether the 9:00 a.m. Wednesday start time would be feasible the other four days of the week. Tony recalled asking a visiting psychologist whether the extra half hour would even make a difference anyway.

"She said anything you can do is going to be a big gain," he said.

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