



Improving the Journey



The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the American Psychological Association recommend that middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Starting middle and high schools after 8:30 a.m. helps adolescents thrive.

Why is it important for middle and high school students to start later in the morning?

As children reach puberty, their body clocks shift. School start times need to align with this shift. Teens are more likely to be awake, alert, and ready to learn when schools start later in the morning. Teens need 8-10 hours of sleep each night. Research shows that 8:30 a.m. is the “tipping point” when most teens are able to get the minimum 8-hour requirement for health, development, and performance. In the US, 3 out of 4 high school students don't get the minimum recommended amount of sleep.

What about younger children?

Most children in elementary schools are able to fall asleep and wake earlier than they will once they reach puberty. Starting elementary schools before middle and high schools aligns with the daily rhythm of students as they grow. A recent study looking at sleep in a district that moved elementary schedules 60 minutes earlier supports this idea showing that bedtimes for young children moved earlier resulting in a minimal impact on elementary students' sleep or daytime sleepiness.

What about daycare?

Since the school day is shorter than the workday, parents of young children will continue to need daycare before or after school or on both ends of the day. With elementary schools starting first, some children may be able to go straight to school and reduce the need for morning daycare.

What happens when school districts implement healthy bell times?

- Attendance improves, tardiness decreases, and more students graduate on time.
- Students are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol or drug use.
- Mood improves. Every extra hour makes a difference. In one large study, for every hour of sleep gained, there was a 38 percent decrease in feeling sad or hopeless, and a 58 percent decrease in teen suicide attempts.
- Teen car crashes decrease (drowsy driving is like driving drunk). Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens—more than 1 in 3 deaths in this age group.
- Teens gain sleep and are sleeping and waking at the right time for their brains and bodies.
- Students are more likely to eat breakfast before school.

What do families in other districts say after making the change?

- Students report improved mood and homework efficiency.
- Parents mention improved relationships with their teens. “I’m happy to have my kid back.”
- Teachers notice that students are smiling and engaged during the first period and throughout the day.
- Principals report fewer visits to the school nurse and fewer discipline referrals.
- Superintendents say it’s transformative and the best decision of their careers.

Can Healthy Start Times Improve Student Performance?

Yes, especially in students who are struggling or at-risk. Economists compare the performance boost for middle and high school students as equivalent to two extra months in school. Disadvantaged students benefit the most, with performance gains about twice as large as advantaged students. Looking at it in another way, early school start times does as much harm to disadvantaged student performance as having an ineffective teacher.