

Later start time benefits middle and high school students

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<P> As an advocate for the health and safety for children, I propose later school start times for middle and high school students.<P> Some students in Calvert County now start school at 7:20 a.m. and end at 2:20 p.m.<P> Numerous studies on teen and school start times have been done.<P> Studies show that teens require an average of 9.25 hours of sleep to be alert the next day, yet most teens get less than seven hours of sleep each night. Most teens are sleep deprived. There is a biological clock in the brain that is reset to a later time during puberty. This biological clock controls when you feel sleepy and are alert. It controls when the body releases melatonin and many other important hormones.<P> All of these body activities are reset to occur at later times during puberty and through the teen years. These changes happen around the age of 11 or 12 years.<P> The result of this biological change is that teens are not sleepy until 11 p.m. or later. They are most alert in the evening. To get 9.25 hours of sleep, a teen would need uninterrupted sleep from 11 p.m. until 8:15 a.m. Sleeping only from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. explains why most teens are sleepy during the day.<P> Falling asleep later and having to get up early for school leads to chronic sleep deprivation, which can cause numerous health problems. There are also safety issues for students waiting for a bus in the dark.<P> I sent a letter as well as an e-mail to the president of Calvert County Board of Education and copied it to the superintendent of schools. After several telecom follow-ups, I received a response a month later from the executive director of school operations in which she said, "moving the start times would have an impact on all of our schools in regard to transportation as well as school activities."<P> I met with her several days later for further discussion, but to no avail.<P> If other schools in the county like Plum Point and Windy Hill middle schools start at 8:10 a.m., why can't all middle schools in Calvert County start an hour later?<P> Later school start times show students have fewer absences, arrive on time, eat regular breakfast, do more homework, are more alert in class, have fewer nurse visits and behavioral problems, fewer car crashes, better grades, etc.<P> Moving the opening of school from 7:20 a.m. to a more humane 8:30 a.m. is just common sense.

Changing to a later start time can be cost neutral. There should be no need for extra buses or drivers. Are we doing what's right for the kids?<P> Parents have said for centuries "adolescents simply aren't at their best in the morning." Are we interfering with parents' and teachers' schedules?<P> Marie Moeller, <I>Dunkirk</I><P> <I>The writer is the president of the Maryland Association for Family and Community Education, a nonprofit organization.</I><P> <P>