

Status quo for high school day start times

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The National PTA has recommended a later start to high school students' school days. Here, freshmen at Queen Anne's County High School pick up their schedules on the first day of school last year.

PHOTO BY HANNAH COMBS

EASTON — Mid-Shore school districts will continue their same bell schedules for the 2017-2018 school year despite recommendations for a later start time for teens.

The latest group to call for later start times is the National PTA, which adopted a Resolution on Healthy Sleep for Adolescents at its national conference in June.

The resolution acknowledges research linking deficient sleep with threats to teen "health, safety and well-being" and identifies early school start times as a "key but modifiable contributor to insufficient sleep."

But on the Mid-Shore, practical and logistical concerns determine when the secondary school day begins.

Buses usually make two runs: picking up and dropping off high school students first, then heading back out for elementary and middle school students.

“We are not able to consider changing start times because our elementary, middle and high schools share buses,” Talbot County Public Schools Superintendent Kelly Griffith said.

“Currently, we have secondary schools, including the St. Michaels campus, start at 7:45 a.m., and some elementary students do not arrive home until 5 p.m. If we switched, it would create multiple concerns for our families,” Griffith said.

The start time is 8 a.m. for both North Dorchester and Kent Island high schools.

“I think 8 a.m. is appropriate, and it’s close to the time recommended by the National PTA,” Kent Island High School Principal John Schrecongost said.

“The farther you push the start time, the more it interferes with athletics and extracurricular activities in the afternoon, but those things are all secondary,” Schrecongost said. “Academics are more important.”

The National PTA resolution stated, “Research shows that adolescents require between 8.5 and 9.5 hours of sleep per night, yet more than two-thirds of U.S. teens average fewer than 8 hours of sleep on school nights.”

At North Caroline High School (NCHS), the first bell is 7:40 a.m. with class starting at 7:50 a.m.

“I know what the research says,” NCHS Principal Michael Smith said. “It’s a movement a lot of people are behind, and it has its benefits. Both sides have a case.”

Smith thinks that the issue comes down to parenting and teens being allowed access to social media and cell phones which have “changed sleep patterns,” Smith said. “I have four of my own kids. Families are not the same; parenting is not the same.”

One of the factors influencing start times in all five Mid-Shore districts is bus scheduling and limiting the number of bus runs. The latest bus runs are elementary schools.

“Right now, our high school students are ready to be picked up at 6 a.m.,” Smith said. “Somebody has to start early, and somebody has to start late.”

Queen Anne’s County and Kent County high schools have the same start times. Students arrive at 7:25 and the first class begins at 7:35. Dismissal is 2:20 p.m. at both schools.

After school activities also affect start times. “Our secondary student athletes would be impacted by later practice times and would miss more classes when they travel for competitions,” Griffith said.

The National PTA resolution claims that “(n)atural sleep rhythms change as children grow into adolescence, such that adolescents require an increased amount of sleep, have difficulty falling asleep before 11 p.m., and function optimally if permitted to remain asleep until 8 a.m. or later.”

“What place of work do you roll into at 9 a.m.?” Smith said. “My first class at college started at 8 a.m. We’re teaching life skills, and sometimes you’re going to have to ready early.”

A later start time “is not the only fix we need in education right now,” Smith said. “Assessments, new graduation requirements, college and career federal requirements (are all priorities).”

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