

The early bird rules on school start times

Early start

Research indicates teens do better with more sleep, yet many leave for school while it's still dark outside

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As far as adolescents' evening activities go, Linden Burack's were fairly tame. The 12-year-old plays chess competitively, and he used to go once a week to the Rochester Chess Center to play mini-tournaments with adult competitors.

When the games went long, he'd be home about 9 p.m., which doesn't seem like it would be a problem. But when Linden started at School of the Arts this fall, he got a rude awakening regarding his awakening.

His alarm clock goes off at 5:40 a.m., in time for him to catch a 6:23 a.m. bus from his home in the Corn Hill neighborhood to arrive at school before 7 a.m. Experience has taught him he needs to go to sleep about 7:45 or 8 p.m.

"At first when I heard that, I was like, 'No way,' " Linden said. "You get used to it. ... But still, the sound of my alarm clock in the morning is the most annoying sound in the world."

With a bedtime that early, getting home from chess at 9 p.m. is out of the question. Forget staying up to watch the World Series; he could barely make it through the pregame show.

"There's just no way he's going to be able to sign up for evening extracurricular activities," said his mother, Mi-

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Linden Burack gets his pass ready as the bus starts to pull up to the stop on Ford Street.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Linden Burack, 12, hangs out with his father, Richard, before leaving the house to catch the bus in the pre-dawn hours.

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LINDEN BURACK, TALKING ABOUT HIS 5:40 A.M. WAKE-UP TIME

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chelle Burack, who is a neurologist. “When he doesn’t get enough sleep, he’s just really cranky and dragging the next day. ... And the biggest thing is that we lost an hour of face-to-face time with him, when we barely get enough of that as it is.”

Linden’s schedule — going to sleep before the sun is down and waking before it’s up again — is familiar to teenagers across Monroe County. Despite compelling research showing that high school students need more sleep than younger children or adults, local high schools have repeatedly hit the snooze button on later start times.

The consequences are particularly dire for poor students, who are more likely to need that extra hour of sleep due to the pernicious effects of toxic stress.

» Rochester’s School of the Arts actually moved the start time earlier this year, for nonacademic reasons. There were complicated and contentious contract negotiations with the Rochester-Genesee Regional Transit Authority, which buses secondary students in the city; and a clause in the new contract with the Rochester Teachers Association that gave teachers 15 minutes of independent planning time at the beginning of the day. On the other hand, the Rochester City School District has several high schools that don’t begin until 8:30 a.m.

» The Pittsford Central School District had a committee of almost 50 people spend nearly two years studying the schedule, including alternate secondary school times. Its recommendation in May 2016 would have moved high school start times up 15 minutes, from 7:40 to 7:25 a.m. The district decided to make no change at the high school level.

» The Fairport Central School District last spring heard from a similar committee, recommending the high school start time be pushed back. The district said then that the changes would be implemented in 2017-18, but Superintendent Brett Provenzano announced this month it will require at least another year of planning.

» The Brighton Central School District is weighing four alternatives to its current schedule, including one that would push the high school start time back to 9 a.m.

Research shows need for sleep

For students anywhere, the research is definitive. It is clear that teenagers do better, academically and emotionally, with more sleep.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends at least eight hours of sleep for teenagers, but surveys indicate that fewer than a third of teenagers achieve that on school nights.

In 2016, the American Medical Association issued a new policy encouraging middle schools and high schools to start no sooner than 8:30 a.m.

“Sleep deprivation is a growing public health issue affecting our nation’s adolescents, putting them at risk for mental, physical and emotional distress and disorders,” AMA Board Member William Kobler said in a statement. “Scientific evidence strongly suggests that allowing adolescents more time for sleep at the appropriate hours results in improvements in health, academic performance, behavior and general well-being.”

The only local public high schools to start at 8:30 a.m. are in the city of Rochester: Integrated Arts and Technology, Vanguard, Monroe, Northeast/Northwest high schools and the Leadership Academy for Young Men in the Rochester City School District, and also Vertus Charter School.

Jack Peltz is a psychologist at Hobart and William Smith Colleges who is using a grant from the National Sleep Foundation to study effects on teenagers’ sleep. He pointed to a number of factors, including use of electronic devices and over-scheduling; but said early wake-up calls are also a major contributor.

The problem, he said, is that teenage brains operate on a longer circadian rhythm than adults’ brains. Seven hours of sound sleep doesn’t have the same refreshing effect for a 15-year-old as for a 50-year-old.

“The big issue is, adolescents are going through ... physiological and biological changes that literally push them to want to stay up later and wake up later,” he said. “You can think of teenagers as living in a different time zone with the nature of their sleep, but they’re forced to go to school in this time zone.”

The damage is not limited to first-period drowsiness. A review of national data from 2007 showed that rates of depression, sexual activity and drug, tobacco and alcohol use were all higher among students who slept less than eight hours a day.

When Minneapolis schools moved their start times back from 7:15 to 8:40 a.m., there was a significant increase in attendance and graduation rates.

As a neurologist, Linden’s mother, Michelle Burack, recognizes the effects of insufficient sleep when she sees them.

“I think of all of this in terms of frontal- lobe function, and sleep is an essential ingredient in that,” she said. “We (should) just honor the physiology of brains of that age and reverse the order of when younger and older kids start school.”

Wilson Magnet High School 10thgrader Mohamed Nasser said he wakes up about 5:45 a.m. He tries to get to school in time to eat breakfast before class begins at 7:30 a.m., but sometimes he’s running late and misses it.

“It would be wonderful for school to start a little later so we can get the sleep we need,” he said. “Sometimes by the time you get home, do your

chores, do your homework and eat dinner, you don't have any time to yourself.”

Of course, some teenagers do better in the morning than others. Eastridge High School 11th-grader Brittany Flynn said she wakes up at 6 a.m. every day and doesn't find it too difficult.

“I've been getting up this early for a long time, so it doesn't bother me,” she said. “A lot of kids at our school get really good grades, so it's not like we're doing poorly.”

Logistical obstacles remain

The primary concerns are transportation costs and effects on after-school activities. They thus far have proven intractable; most districts have not even formally addressed the issue in the last several years.

In Brighton, for instance, the district estimates it would require a 1.1 percent tax increase to move secondary start times to 8:30 a.m. without changing the elementary school times. That's largely because it would need to hire extra bus drivers to get children of all ages to school on time.

Two other options, including switching the elementary and secondary start times, would be cost-neutral.

“It's certainly cost-dependent,” Brighton Superintendent Kevin McGowan said. “The no-cost options have a better chance of happening. ... Above all else, we're trying to figure out what will be best for kids.”

When students begin and end the school day later, it cuts down on the time between school and bedtime. Besides school-affiliated activities, that can mean less time for work, babysitting or other in-home responsibilities.

Some parents worry that students will be put at a disadvantage if they're forced to trim after-school activities. Others see that effect as a benefit.

“This starting-school-late thing isn't just about the start time — it's the whole environment of expectations from (parents) and colleges and teachers,” said Seema Khaneja, a pediatrician with a ninth-grader at Brighton High School. “For them to be given so much stimulus and then asked to show up every day so early — I feel we're asking something that's not possible.”

Where some families worry about enrichment, others struggle for equity.

City students take public transportation to school rather than yellow buses, which usually means a longer commute and an earlier wake-up call. Their parents less often are able to drive them if they miss the bus, and it's harder to get home in the evening.

What is more, the physiological effects of sleep deprivation manifest most seriously in children who are already facing other stressors. Things such as poverty, abuse and exposure to violence already impair the executive function of a developing brain, so when the child doesn't get enough sleep, the consequences are compounded.

“If you go to SOTA (School of the Arts) in the morning, there are a million parents dropping off their kids, and it’s all the middle-class kids,” said Sarah Hooper, whose son is a student there. “People who are busy working or don’t have a car or don’t have that luxury — those kids are even more sleep-deprived.”

The Monroe County School Boards Association hosted an information session on school start times last October, where two University of Rochester pediatricians echoed the national recommendations.

Still, only Brighton and Fairport are actively looking into changes. Pittsford said it would continue studying the schedule, but has placed greater emphasis on extending the school day at the high school level than on pushing back start times (Brighton extended its day by 30 minutes this year).

Mike Mallaber teaches U.S. history at Fairport High School and was on the district committee that recommended later start times. He sees students every day in his first-period class who would benefit from a few hours’ more sleep, especially if they had a sporting event or other activity the night before.

“The students really do try hard, and they want to do well in the class,” he said. “But I can’t tell you they’re going to be at their best at 7:20 in the morning. They’re tired, for sure.”

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Linden Burack, 12, heads down Atkinson Street to catch the 6:30 a.m. bus on Ford Street to get to school.

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