EARLY TO RISE MAKES TEENS...LESS ATTENTIVE?
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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

- High Schools Consider Starting Classes Later to Better Fit Students' Sleep Patterns

Crystal Irwin has a hard time concentrating in her first period class at school. Not because she isn't interested, but because she's too tired to keep her eyes open.

"It's like I'm half asleep," says the junior at Haverford High School in suburban Philadelphia. "All I can think is, 'I want to go home to sleep.'"

Lawmakers in several states and one on Capitol Hill want to throw Crystal a pillow: They're trying to let teens like her sleep in. Some school districts in Kentucky and Minnesota have already pushed back the starting times, while others--including one here in Philadelphia--are considering such moves.

It's a decision that can change the rhythms of daily life for schools and families, often giving teens and parents more time to linger over their pancakes and eggs, but also complicating schedules.

The first district to change was in Edina, Minn. In 1996, it moved the start time of the senior high school from 7:25 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., and closing time from 2:05 p.m. to 3:10 p.m.

EFFECT ON TEENS

Since then, educators have studied the impact of these changes on teachers and students. "Teachers reported having kids who were more awake in class, counselors said there was less disruptive behavior in the halls, and there is a better overall temperament throughout the building," says Kyla Wahlsstrom, associate director at the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota.

Also, she found that parents felt their children were easier to live with and enjoyed having extra time at home with their children. "If you have a high school starting at 7:15," Ms. Wahlsstrom says, "the students are getting on the bus just when most of their parents are getting up. Now, parents and kids are able to actually have breakfast together. That extra hour seems to make all the difference."

In many districts across the United States, though, high-schoolers get less sleep than younger students, at least in part because high schools generally start classes an hour earlier than junior high or elementary schools. And according to a growing number of studies, the lack of sleep can sometimes leave adolescents less than chipper.
"I've seen loads and loads of kids who are failing at school and sleeping through school," says Ronald Dahl, associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

The problem, he says, is not only inattention but controlling emotions. "When people are sleep-deprived, they get cranky," he adds.

Saying she sees many of these same issues in her family, US Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D) of California last month introduced a bill in Congress that would grant up to $25,000 for every school district that starts high school classes after 9 a.m. The money would be used to cover operating costs related to making the change.

Still, despite the research, many educators and parents are reluctant to shift the school clock. There are logistical issues to work out such as synchronizing school buses and adjusting the start times of after-school events and games. But there are also students who say they prefer the early-morning schedule.

"I think that having her get up early and go to school makes her go to bed earlier," says Jennifer Moore, whose oldest daughter, Emily, is a junior at Lower Merion High School in suburban Philadelphia. "If classes started later, I think she would stay up later at night...[Besides] Emily would be starting soccer practice and games an hour later. That seems awfully late."

AN AGRARIAN ETHIC

But Wahlstrom says much of the resistance to moving school times is a throwback to an agrarian ethic where "people had farm chores and it was believed that the early risers were somehow more motivated, while those who rise late are slovenly."

The positive results achieved in Edina, however, encouraged the Minneapolis school system to push back its start time this year. Meanwhile, districts in Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts are debating the topic.

Indeed, Gregor Feige says the changes in Edina helped make him a better student. He was a sophomore when Edina High School shifted its start time, and he says he immediately noticed the difference in his own attention and in the atmosphere of the class.

"The biggest thing for me was attentiveness," he remembers. "Everyone was more alert and sharp. Having kids around you who are in tune with what the teacher is doing makes it better in school for everyone."