

Sleep

-Paige Kelloway

Studies have shown that teenagers require 8 ½ to 9 ½ hours of sleep each night. But studies have also shown that most teenagers shortchange this requirement, sleeping a mere 6 ½ to 7 ½ hours. Delaying the high school schedule, even if only by half an hour, would be beneficial to the sleep needs of all of us.

Although society often views sleep as a luxury that many can't afford, getting enough sleep is actually a biological necessity – as important to good health as exercising and eating well. So, Marblehead High School should shift its start time by 30 minutes to 8:30 am. Allowing students an additional half hour of sleep creates teenagers who are safe, emotionally stable, and physically ready to learn.

About 100,000 car accidents each year are because of drowsy drivers and among drivers age 15-24, more than 1,500 deaths each year are associated with these crashes. Many high school students drive themselves to school in the morning – essentially asleep at the wheel. Imagine if school started at 8:30 instead of 8 o'clock. This would result in drivers who are more alert and awake with fewer accidents.

In addition to keeping students safe, a later start time makes for happier learners. Studies have shown that when teenagers get more sleep they are less likely to experience depressed moods and more likely to have energy for the day. According to the Journal of American Medicine, students who were allowed to start school at 8:30 instead of 8:00 showed a large improvement in alertness, mood, and health. Fewer students reported feeling unhappy, depressed, irritated, or annoyed and fewer visited the nurse's office for fatigue-related concerns. With these new and more positive attitudes, students are also bound to get better grades because they will have more focus and be able to perform better.

It's easy to believe that more sleep results in happier teenagers. What is not common knowledge, however, is that the brain of a teen is different than that of an adult – when it comes to sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, the biological changes that occur during adolescence cause kids to fall asleep later on in the night. So when a parent tells their child to go to bed and they argue "I'm not tired," they are actually telling the truth.

During puberty, teenagers' internal clocks shift due to the hormonal changes happening in the body, specifically the release of the sleep hormone melatonin. Melatonin helps to regulate the sleep cycle and is released later at night in teens than in adults. The secretions are also turned off later in the morning, which makes it harder to wake up early.

If school started later, late night teenagers wouldn't suffer as much in the morning because they would have the opportunity to sleep longer, leading to a decrease in absenteeism and tardiness.

St. George's, a private high school in Rhode Island, conducted their own sleep study with their students a couple of years ago. They pushed the start time of class from 8:00 to 8:30 for two months, and the results were staggering proof that this change is extremely valuable. The portion of students who got 8 hours or more of sleep on a school night jumped from 16% to about 55%, reports of daytime sleepiness dropped from 49% to 20%, and first period tardiness decreased by almost half. What started as one instructor's personal research project has resulted in campus-wide change: all St. George's students now get an extra half hour of sleep.

Some school districts worry that changing the school day would cause a host of problems like rearranging transportation or athletic schedules. But changing these schedules will actually contribute to the overall well-being of both students and teachers. While some coaches may not like the idea of changing practices or games at first, they will come to realize that it is for the best because their athletes will be less tired and more mentally alert to play. Students are going to work more efficiently in their sports or other extracurricular activities because they have more energy after a good night sleep.

Starting the day later is worth the trouble if it means making our school and students more successful. It doesn't even require any more work or money out of the budget, like hiring more teachers or changing the learning atmosphere would, because it's simply a slight shift in habit.

As teenagers, we spend a lot of our day in school; however, we are unable to maximize our learning opportunities since sleep deprivation impairs our ability to be alert, pay attention, solve problems, deal with stress, and retain information. The primary focus of education is to increase human potential, yet as students are not able to reach anywhere near this potential if we do not get enough sleep.

Move the school day to 8:30 and make a positive change for students because it's clear, we learn best with enough rest.