

A Later Start

- Darby Neuss

The importance of getting enough sleep is undisputed. Teenagers, especially, “need even more sleep than most people and are particularly susceptible to the detriments of sleep deprivation,” according to the Livestrong Foundation. Unfortunately, most teens do not get as much shut-eye as they should. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends 8.5-9.25 hours of sleep each night for children ages ten to seventeen; however, the National Sleep Foundation found less than 15% of teens get 8.5 hours of sleep each night. It does not take a mathematician to realize what a miniscule percentage 15% is. And sleep deprivation is no small matter. Not getting enough sleep can result in a number of serious consequences, including: limiting one’s abilities to learn, listen, solve problems, and concentrate; worsening athletic performance; causing aggressive, impatient, and/or irritable behavior; illness; and drowsy driving. Consequences such as these are not uncommon. Now what, exactly, should be done about the issue of teen sleep deprivation, at least here in Marblehead? The answer is simple. To give Marblehead High School students more time to sleep, school should begin an hour later.

To determine the effectiveness of such a change, one must first play the role of devil’s advocate. Starting school an hour later? Really? How much of a difference will just one hour make in the grand scheme of things? And, more importantly, would a later start to the school encourage students to go to bed even later? Actually, studies have shown this is not the case. Later start times have, in fact, proven effective in getting teens to sleep more. In 2010, a study was conducted at a school in Rhode Island, in which teens started school 30 minutes later than usual. “The results were stunning. There’s no other word to use,” said Patricia Moss, academic dean at the school where the study was performed. Teens were more alert in class and were in better moods, there was less tardiness, and teens consumed healthier breakfasts. Even a mere 30 minutes can make a big difference, according to researchers. Why? Teens tend to be in their deepest sleep around dawn, which is when they typically need to get up for school. Since teens biologically have trouble falling asleep before 11 p.m., interrupting their sleep at such an early hour leaves them feeling groggy and disoriented. The results of the survey were so positive the administration officially changed the school’s start time from 8 a.m. to 8:30. If starting school 30 minutes later had such an overwhelmingly positive effect on the student body in the study conducted, imagine the possible results of pushing the start of school back a full hour!

What about the end of school? How would a later start time affect when students could leave school? School could end at 3:30 in the afternoon, instead of 2:30, since it would be starting at 8:55 in the morning rather than 7:55. Or, class times could be cut 5 to 10 minutes to avoid a longer school day, as was done at a school in Rhode Island. The school’s dean said improvements in the alertness of students made up for lost instruction time. Therefore, a later start time would not have a negative impact on the amount of time spent learning.

The schedules of most teens are jam-packed. Between spending six hours a day in school, after school sports, extracurricular activities, jobs, and hours of homework each night, sleep is not a

priority for most teenagers during their busy school week. The sleep patterns of adolescents are different than those of adults and young children. During the teen years, the body's circadian rhythm, almost like an internal biological clock, is temporary. It tells the body to fall asleep later and to wake up later. In turn, teens have difficulty falling asleep early, which is problematic on school nights.

The students' learning is what is most important. The very purpose of high school is to educate students and train them for the future. As indicated in the student handbook, "the mission of Marblehead High School is to provide a safe, respectful environment in which all students are challenged to achieve their fullest intellectual, physical, and social development and to accept responsibility for their learning." A later start time would give students more time to sleep. In turn, less sleep deprivation improves the cognitive functions of students. Students will perform better academically than they would after getting less sleep. Additionally, student athletes would perform better, as well, after getting more sleep. To improve the academic and athletic performance of students at Marblehead High School, the start of classes should be pushed back an hour.

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