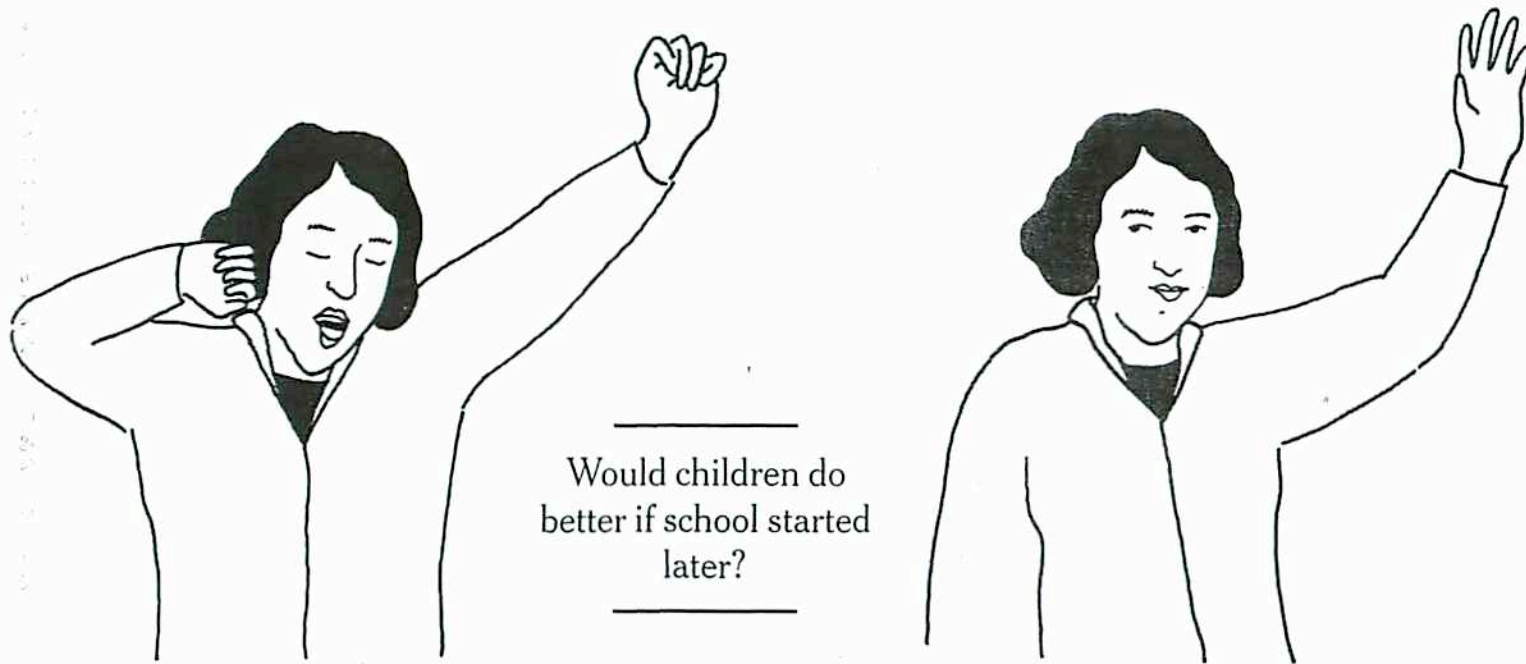


The Early Bird Gets the Bad Grade



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By Nancy Kalish

IT'S Monday morning, and you're having trouble waking your teenagers. You're not alone. Indeed, each morning, few of the country's 17 million high school students are awake enough to get much out of their first class, particularly if it starts before 8 a.m. Sure, many of them stayed up too late the night before, but not because they wanted to.

Research shows that teenagers' body clocks are set to a schedule that is different from that of younger children or adults. This prevents adolescents from dropping off until around 11 p.m., when they produce the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, and waking up much before 8 a.m. when their bodies stop producing melatonin. The result is that the first class of the morning is often a waste, with as many as 28 percent of students falling asleep, according to a National Sleep Foundation poll. Some are so sleepy they don't even show up, contributing to failure and dropout rates.

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Would children do
better if school started
later?

Many of our presidential candidates have been relatively silent on how they plan to save our troubled education system. For those still searching for a policy that might have a positive impact, here's an idea: stop focusing on testing and instead support changing the hours of the school day, starting it later for teenagers and ending it later for all children.

Indeed, no one does well when they're sleep-deprived, but insufficient sleep among children has been linked to obesity and to learning issues like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. You'd think this would spur educators to take action, and a handful have.

In 2002, high schools in Jessamine County in Kentucky pushed back the first bell to 8:40 a.m., from 7:30 a.m. Attendance immediately went up, as did scores on standardized tests, which have continued to rise each year. Districts in Virginia and Connecticut have achieved similar success. In Minneapolis and Edina, Minn., which instituted high school start times of 8:40 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. respectively in 1997, students' grades rose slightly and lateness, behavioral problems and dropout rates decreased.

Later is also safer. When high schools in Fayette County in Kentucky delayed their start times to 8:30 a.m., the number of teenagers involved in car crashes

dropped, even as they rose in the state.

So why hasn't every school board moved back that first bell? Well, it seems that improving teenagers' performance takes a back seat to more pressing concerns: the cost of additional bus service, the difficulty of adjusting after-school activity schedules and the inconvenience to teachers and parents.

But few of these problems actually come to pass, according to the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota. In Kentucky and Minnesota, simply flipping the starting times for the elementary and high schools meant no extra cost for buses. Nor have after-school jobs and activities been affected as anticipated. And though team practices and matches might have to start a bit later, student participation has usually stayed the same. Some districts have even witnessed improved performance from better-rested athletes.

Of course, when school starts later, it has to end later. But instead of viewing this as a liability, we should see it as an opportunity to extend the day even further until 5 p.m. or later, not just for high school students but for those in elementary and middle school as well. It would help working parents if their children were on the same basic schedule.

But there are other reasons to start and end school at a later time. According to Paul Reville, a professor of education policy at Harvard and chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, "Trying to cram everything our 21st-century students need into a 19th-century six-and-a-half-hour day just isn't working." He says that children learn more at a less frantic pace, and that lengthening the school day would help "close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their better-off peers."

Massachusetts has opened more than a dozen "expanded learning time" schools, which add about three hours to the school day. Students spend additional time on subjects like math and English, but also enjoy plentiful art, music, physical education and recess — all of which are being slashed at many schools.

Also, why not make sure there's built-in time for doing homework? That way, children could get their work done at school where professionals can help them, freeing them to spend time with their families when they do get home.

So if candidates want the parent vote, here's a wake-up call. Stand up for an educational policy that allows students' real needs — rather than outdated time constraints — to dictate how and when our children learn best. □