

Opinion

Editorial: School districts shouldn't sleep on later start time recommendations

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The school bus that takes students to Central Bucks West arrives at the corner of East Court and East streets in Doylestown at 6:47 a.m.

If we assume it takes a high school student 30 minutes to get ready for school in the morning and two minutes to walk to the bus stop, then the alarm has to go off at 6:15 a.m. at the latest if that student is going to make the bus.

Johns Hopkins pediatrician Michael Crocetti says teens need 9 to 9½ hours of sleep per night. So to get the 9-hour minimum he recommends, our hypothetical teen will have to be asleep by 9:15 on weeknights. Any parent of a high school student will tell you that's simply not going to happen, so what can we do?

The Central Bucks School District is one of a few local districts trying to figure that out. It's also on the radar of officials in the Centennial, Hatboro-Horsham, Bensalem, Pennsbury and Bristol Township school districts.

Sleep deprivation has been hindering students in their studies for ages and this is not the first time the issue has surfaced here. Two years ago the Bucks County Intermediate Unit paid for a study, Council Rock School District discussed it at a school board committee meeting and local state representatives on both sides of the aisle began pushing legislation that would prod the Department of Education to look at later start times at secondary schools. Then very little seemed to happen.

We hope it's different this time. There's a mountain of evidence from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, the American Medical Association and other organizations that says sleep deprivation has a hand in everything from poor academic performance to obesity and drug abuse. We also believe later start times would help attendance rates and reduce student tardiness.

A 2017 study by the RAND Corporation, a public policy research organization, claimed that a nationwide move to start school at 8:30 a.m. would add \$8.6 billion to the U.S. economy in just two years. The study figured the change would reduce car crashes related to drowsiness that result in injuries and deaths, which remove people from the labor force. It also attempted to quantify how improved academic performance can set students on a path to higher earnings.

We understand how difficult shifting high schools to later start times will be. It probably isn't feasible for districts to simply flip-flop the high school and elementary school start times — most local high schools start at about 7:30 a.m. and elementary schools start closer to, or shortly after, 9 a.m. That is partly because working parents often want their older children to get home first to care for their younger siblings.

Other significant obstacles are the effect on extra-curricular activities, the headache of re-doing bus schedules and managing the impact on local private and charter schools that rely on public school buses.

We like that Central Bucks School District is involving the community early in the process via an online survey. We encourage parents to take it. We also like that the district is forming a committee to study later start times and the obstacles we mentioned. These moves show that the district understands the gravity of these changes. We hope they also reflect a commitment to do something when the survey results are tabulated and the committee's recommendations are in.