

The Impact of School Start Time on Family Life

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Introduction

When asked, most parents can provide vivid descriptions of what they believe to be a cause and effect relationship between their child's disrupted sleep and subsequent deficits in mood, behavior and performance. Even young children can readily report a clear connection between their sleep and how they feel, relate and meet the challenges of the day.

Despite a common awareness of the importance of sleep, little formal study has been done to document factors affecting the reciprocal relationship between sleep and the family milieu. "There are surprisingly few data addressing specific effects of inadequate sleep and sleepiness on daytime functioning in children" (Dahl, 1996, p. 45). However, there is a growing literature that points to the need for children, and especially adolescents, to be getting more sleep (Carskadon, 1990).

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that issues related to sleep and the family routine have received little or no consideration in the educational policy process. The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota (CAREI) has been engaged in a line of research that is attempting to examine the impact of changes in school start across the school, community and family contexts. While not initially a primary focus of the CAREI study, the impact of changing school start times upon the family has emerged as an important factor deserving of more careful examination.

Why is Sleep Important to the Education Policy Process

While there is a growing medical literature investigating the effects of sleep on the health and performance of children and youth, there has been little cross-over between the fields of sleep medicine and primary and secondary education (Lawton, 1995; Dement, 1994). Consequently, the consideration of sleep as an important factor impacting the educational process is typically not considered by educational policy makers. This fact is remarkable given the clearly substantiated connection between sleep and educational performance (Wahlstrom & Freeman, 1997; Frederickson & Wrobel, 1997).

There is a growing concern that adolescents are simply not getting the sleep they require to be at their best in school, at work, or in the community (Carskadon, 1990). Some school districts who have been alerted to this concern have responded by adjusting the school start time to provide later start times for adolescents. Some educational policy makers have forged ahead with sometimes sweeping changes in school start time without the benefit of well thought out plans for policy development and implementation (see Wahlstrom, Wrobel, & Kubow, 1998). The current CAREI study suggests that there are but a handful of formal studies which examine the actual impact of changes in school start time upon student learning and behavior. CAREI has found no study of sleep which has focused on the family milieu as a primary factor in this process. Yet, common experience suggests that the family context plays a critical role in how students present themselves at school.

Preliminary results of the current CAREI study suggest that changes in school start time can and do have a profound impact on families. Impact has been reported in nearly all facets of family life; school, work, leisure time, and even family traditions. There appears to be a rather complex interaction between the family milieu and changes in school start time. Clearly, not all families are impacted by such schedule changes in the same way or to the same degree. For some families a change in school start time results in

dramatic positive changes, while the very same change for another family may be devastating.

This article summarizes the qualitative data collected and analyzed from individual and focus group interviews regarding the impact of school schedules on the family context. Illuminating quotations from participants in the CAREI study are provided to help support and illustrate the points being made. Finally, a proposed set of guidelines will be offered aimed to assist educational policy makers and communities in developing and implementing school start time changes.

Examination of the Impact of Changes in School Start Time on the Family

It should be remembered that the family context was not a primary focus of the CAREI study. Concerns relative to the family emerged from the research process and the data. Consequently, the impressions developed here should only be seen as a guide for further formal study. Despite this, the dramatic reports that surfaced suggest that educational policy makers and communities may benefit from consideration of the factors relative to families that surfaced.

The study of sleep necessitates an examination of the family context, if for no other reason than this is where the event of interest, sleep, most frequently occurs. The family milieu presents a number of challenges for the researcher. Key variables such as the quantity and quality of sleep are difficult to control. Parents are typically reluctant to volunteer their children for research regardless of the nature of the study. Additionally, children are particularly resistant to sleeping outside of their home often eliminating the opportunity for controlled observation of the subject's sleep process. Children and youth often have privacy concerns relative to self-reporting of the details of their sleep, such as with the time they go to bed and the quality of their sleep. It has also been our experience that many children and youth have a difficult time accurately maintaining even simple recordings of sleep patterns. Also, parents have been shown to be particularly poor

reporters of their children's sleep habits. Taken as a whole, these complications can result in compromises to even the best laid research design, especially when attempting to relate sleep to measures of daytime performance.

Given the complications with accessing accurate data regarding sleep and wake patterns of children and youth, CAREI developed a research design that utilized multiple data sources in an effort to begin to examine the relationship between sleep and daytime student performance. The current study has four primary data sources: 1) focus group interviews with students, parents and school staff; 2) administration of the School Sleep Habits Survey completed by students; 3) telephone interviews with parents and key stakeholders; and, 4) written surveys of teachers.

Some 20 urban and suburban school districts have been involved in the CAREI study. Over 10,000 participants have included students, parents, school staff, and key stakeholders in the community. In addition to the self-report data offered by students and parents, school staff were asked to comment on what they had heard from parents. School staff who were also parents offered their own experiences as well.

Two overarching themes relative to families emerged from this data set. First, the impact of changes in school start time is profound for many families. Families experience a wide range of positive and negative effects as a result of changes in the school schedule. While some families reported little difficulty in adjusting to the new schedule, others were devastated by the stress of attempting to meet the new demands on their time. Even in families who had reported having little difficulty adjusting to the schedule changes there were reports of advantages and disadvantages relative to the change in school start time.

The second theme that emerged concerned how the policy decisions were developed and implemented. It was apparent that how the policy process played out in each community had a substantial impact upon how the changes were received by families. Some school districts and individual schools took great pains to involve and

inform the school community of the anticipated changes in school start time. Other districts and schools had as little as one week to implement the change in start time. Clearly, those districts and school communities who had ample warning reported less difficulty making the necessary adjustments.

“We did work up front involving the community. Talking about it. Talking to our staff and having the staff vote on when they wanted to start. Do they want their meetings on the front end or the back end? And it happened. There was a lot of preparation.”

The CAREI study found that students and parents were keenly aware of the policy process. How these stakeholders perceived their value and involvement in the policy process was seen to affect their ability to engage the change process. Those who described the policy process as open and sensitive to their needs reported being better able to make informed decisions about which school to attend, which schedule options to choose, and how to best meet their needs. Those families who reported feeling devalued in the process were often vocal in their distrust of the justifications for making the schedule change.

“I was in agreement with the change because I had been able to read the literature. But I also know that staff and students were very cynical about how the decision was made. And there was a lot of feeling that people were not consulted or talked to and it was just decided.”

Several variables operating in the school context also complicated attempts to isolate the impact of changing the school start time as a single variable. Most of the schools in this study were engaged in a number of significant systems change initiatives making it difficult to sort out the impact of the change in start time from all of the other influences. For example, some schools had implemented a school attendance program independent of the change in start time. Despite this, participants in the CAREI study readily offered opinions about the impact of school schedule on school attendance. Also,

most of the schools involved in the study did not begin collecting data relative to the change in school start time until after the changes had been made.

Time Demands Relative to Family and Community Norms

There was a great deal of variability in the expectations of families and communities relative to the involvement of students in activities outside of the school day. While the CAREI study did not focus on community, family and cultural differences, there emerged a clear indication that changes in school schedules differentially impacted families and communities. There were indications of community, family and cultural norms that created a myth about what is appropriate behavior. These biases were often based on the experiences of the particular reporter, without consideration for the spectrum of needs relative to the amount and schedule of sleep. As an example, persons who were raised in an agricultural setting, where early waking schedules were the norm, they saw early start times for school as not only normal but preferred and valued. People who were late risers were seen as lazy and unmotivated. In focus group interviews, an “owl's” self-disclosure of a preference for a later schedule often brought self-deprecating comments and laughter from the others in the group.

Consistent across all schools were the common complaints by parents and students that there were simply too many demands on their time. The nature of the demands was qualitatively different in the various school communities. Some communities had expectations for their children to be involved in numerous extracurricular and volunteer activities. Many students reported having virtually no personal time to unwind or relax. They suggested they were being driven to fill their days with activities as a means of “getting ahead” in life. They reported experiencing the deleterious effects of excessive commitments and time demands. It was not uncommon

for students to report extreme fatigue and associated health problems. For the most part, students were making the choices to be committed to these activities, but in some instances there was an expectation from the student's social milieu to accept and encourage this over-extension as the norm. Students commonly reported that success as an adult was directly related to overextending themselves with activities while in high school. The belief was that this effort would somehow be rewarded in adult life.

“There's a lot of times I'm sitting in school and I'm saying, 'Geez, I just want to go home, and then I realize I get to step off my bus, put on my work shirt, and run to my work because I've got to be down there.’”

“Since I like to do a lot of stuff after school, it's how much it [the later start] conflicts with that. I get home late, and I want to do stuff [extra-curricular activities] after school. They [the school district] think that you have just as much time because you can stay up later. But, after 9 or 10 PM, ... for me, it doesn't feel right to do homework anymore. So, that just really limits my time, and it limits what I can do because I get home so late.’”

It was apparent when looking at the data across communities that not all schools were equally supported in making the schedule changes. In some communities substantial effort was expended to assure that schedules for before and after school activities were accommodating. In other communities, respondents suggested that the school was the only schedule to change and that they felt out of synch with the rest of the world. This included opportunities for recreation and sports, doctor's appointments, and jobs for teens.

One teacher noted, “When these start times were changed many people, especially school administrators in [school district] asked, ‘What is going to happen with regard to the community, and the theater and sports?’ And the answer we were given [was], ‘The rest of the world will adjust to accommodate us. [But] no one has adjusted to accommodate us. Our transportation department hasn't even accommodated us. We can only schedule field trips during certain hours of the day.’”

Said another, “Nothing meshes as well as it should. The learning doesn’t mesh, the social skills that go on the rest of the day, they just don’t mesh, my family life doesn’t mesh, everything is off. So, that affects my attitude and affects the kids’ attitudes and their abilities in school.”

One could easily be lead to believe that the best possible school schedule would be the one that would most closely match the schedule of the family. Certainly the family routine is of great importance. However, we know very little about the impact of family routines and priorities for time management on the education of children and youth. Yet, simply matching a family's schedule may not be in the best educational interests of the students. It is clear from the findings that families differ substantially in their ability to adjust to schedule demands and changes. Participants readily identified themselves and their children as "morning" or "evening" people. They were quick to point out preferred personal schedules and the problems associated with mismatches between time demands and one’s natural rhythm.

Impact of School Schedule Changes for Students

The student participants in the CAREI study were generally very aware of policy discussions regarding school start time. Some schools had gone to great lengths to inform and involve students in the decision process. Some students reported having discussed the impact of sleep on student performance as part of their curriculum. In those schools, it was not uncommon to hear students quote research they had read or to relate discussions they had had with their peers and teachers. Students were aware that sleep plays an important role in their school performance. These students had been empowered to make informed decisions about their sleep habits and they often articulated concern over the difficult decisions they needed to make regarding personal time management.

Students generally reported being overwhelmed by the demands on their time. Students spoke in great detail about the impact of changing the school start time. One might be inclined to make the generalization that all youth would certainly opt for the later start time if given the opportunity. We did not find this to be the case. There were some students who experienced a change to a later start time that reported a desire to have an earlier start time. For these students the earlier start times were seen to provide more opportunity to participate in activities after school, for work, and for time to socialize.

There was also a concern relative to the beginning of the day. School staff reported that many of the elementary students on the late schedule had viewed as much as two or three hours of television in the morning before coming to school. This programming, although cartoon oriented, often contained violent themes which were replayed in the classroom much to the chagrin of the teacher.

For some elementary students, a late school start schedule necessitated an early morning day care transition. Staff felt that this was hard on many of the students and left them fatigued at the end of the day. In addition, elementary school staff reported that the prime learning time for this age group of students was in the morning and that later elementary schedules afforded less of this prime learning time. Clearly, the earlier starting elementary schedules were preferred.

Other Considerations

Ethnic and cultural variables were not specifically examined in this study. However, concerns were raised about how students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds may have been differentially affected by the change in school start time. As an example, it was reported that students who practice fasting as a religious custom often had difficulty maintaining their fast because of either an early start or late dismissal from school.

While the intention of moving to a later start time for adolescents was to increase the available time for sleep, some students found themselves actually getting no

additional sleep because of the time demands within the family. Some families have traditions requiring adolescents to assist with meal preparation, child care and other household duties. For these students this meant they still needed to get up early to complete their family duties. Thus, for some of these students, there was a net loss of time available for activities and sleep.

For other families, the change in school start time meant that on the whole the family schedule was now more in sync. Parents and children in these families reported having more quality time together. They now had time to prepare for the day together, eat meals together and could enjoy a family activity after school because of the lack of conflicting commitments in their respective schedules. Yet, other parents and students reported that same changes in the school schedule resulted in lost opportunities to be together as a family. “[I] only see my mom for three hours at night because she is ready to go to bed, because she doesn’t get home until 6 or 7 PM herself, so I only see my mom about three hours a day.”

Nutrition surfaced as an important issue needing consideration. Students, parents and school staff provided concerns regarding certain school schedules and nutrition. Schedules that demanded that meal times be at odd hours were seen to put some students at a disadvantage. Students of all ages complained of being hungry and not being able to concentrate on their work or do their best because of being hungry. Teachers in reported concern over needing to provide snacks to older elementary students to accommodate their significant hunger.

Several parents commented that they had noticed differences in their children’s attitude about school as a result of the change in start time. For some parents who reported struggling to get compliance with an early start schedule, this source of conflict had strained the interactions between parent and child. These struggles were reported to set in place a negative attitude for the student and it was clearly stated that this negative outlook often carried over into the school day. Seemingly insignificant concerns such as

access to the bathroom in the morning took on greater significance in homes where children and parents were feeling rushed. Most parents in late start high schools reported fewer behavioral concerns and an improved attitude toward school. “It [a change to a later school start time] has made for a happier family. The kids are more rested and there is less fighting in the house.”

There were other parents who suggested that the changes had little impact. They simply adjusted their schedules to provide ample time for sleep and morning preparation. In fact, several stated that the process of adapting to the change in school start time provided a valuable learning experience for their children. “Ours [children] were pretty disciplined. They went to bed earlier to get up earlier. It was a bit awkward with the extra time in the morning. It taught them how to use their time. It was just utilizing our time.”

Guidelines For Family-Friendly Policies

The following guidelines are meant to aid policy makers in crafting a process for developing and implementing changes in school start time. These suggested are based on the experience of schools participating in the CAREI study. Certainly other components in the policy change process will be needed such as fiscal planning. Particular attention is given to components of a process that will aid families in participating in the process and in making the needed changes within the family routine.

1. Inform and involve all stakeholders. This suggestion may seem all too obvious. However, policy makers need to understand that changes in school start time affect virtually every aspect of family and community life. The sooner stakeholders are involved in the decision, the sooner problems can be anticipated, adaptations created and solutions implemented.

2. Allow ample time. A significant change in a family's schedule will take time to resolve. A year of planning before implementation of changes in school start time

would not be unreasonable. Adequate time will give stakeholders adequate time to become informed and to make reasoned decisions about what is best for their situation.

3. Provide justifications for decisions based on research data. Families and students will utilize information if it is made available. Families want to know that changes are being made in the best interests of their children. They want to be able to weigh the decision and have alternatives defined.

4. Support families in the decision process. If your goal is to have students and families make good decisions about their schedule, understand that some may need to be supported in the process. This may require multiple methods of delivery of the information and certainly will demand culturally sensitive approaches to providing assistance. This change may well intrude on the customs of the family and, as such, could serve to alienate the school and families.

5. Involve the community. Thought should be given to who in the community will be affected by a change in start time. Also, community members who can assist with the change should be enlisted. Examples would be churches, park boards, police, field trip sites and employers.

6. Don't forget the school staff. Many school staff are also parents. Changes in start time will likely be difficult for many of the school staff. Ample time and options need to be made available in order to support staff in making decisions about their personal and professional lives.

7. Commit to providing follow-up regarding the change. As the process moves forward there are likely to be difficulties that will surface. Have in place a process to monitor the change. Ultimately such changes in school policy will likely impact educational outcomes. It would be wise to monitor the impact so that the best interests of students can remain a priority.

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