

WAKING UP TO A MAJOR BUT NECESSARY DECISION: AN OPEN LETTER TO LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

By Brendan Duffy, RST, RPSGT

Dear School Board Members:

Another summer winds down and we prepare for another school year filled with many discussions and many important and possibly life altering decisions to be made.

First of all, thank you for your service in your community school district. Your time and talent is greatly appreciated by the many parents and community members that you serve. You are entrusted each year to do your very best for the students and schools that you serve.

I have something important to discuss with you with regard to an important decision that must be made. For some students, the decision you make can literally be life saving. Their health and well-being depend on you taking a look at one critical factor that is often overlooked. Or, it is discussed briefly, but the logistics involved in making a change are waved away as being “too cumbersome” or “too much trouble” for a school board member to get involved with. So the topic becomes the elephant in the room that board members avoid. But how much trouble is too much trouble when we are talking about preventing teen car crashes, reducing disciplinary incidents and improving student grades?

If I had a presentation that would bring about all of the positive results noted above, as in less crashes, less disciplinary incidents, great student performance, more focus, and better student attitudes many of you would be happy to have me present this valuable information to your school community. Many would ask me to explain my premise so you could reduce accidents, improve student focus, show better student performance on the athletic field and reduce athletic injuries.

I am going to give you the answer and it is up to you to implement this as it is you that holds the key. The answer is later school start times. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended that middle and high schools delay the start of school until at least 8:30 a.m.

How does your school fit with that start time?

The lead author of the policy statement, Judith Owens MD, FAAP, said “Chronic sleep loss in children and adolescents is one of the most common — and easily fixable — public health issues in the U.S. today.”

Students not getting enough sleep have an increased risk for being overweight or for suffering from depression. And those that get more sleep are less likely to be involved in automobile accidents, have better grades and achieve higher standardized test scores.

Let’s just look at a few examples.

In a study in 2014 from Old Dominion University, auto crashes were compared over two years for two counties and a correlation was made between crashes involving teen drivers and early school start times. The two central Virginia counties in the study began classes about an hour and a half apart. Chesterfield County, which started high school classes at 7:20 a.m., had a significantly higher rate of crashes among teens than their neighboring county, Henrico, which started classes at 8:45 a.m. This difference between the counties was only applicable to teen drivers, not adults, which suggests the early start time could be a preventable contributor. It is fairly obvious that young drivers, with little driving experience, and even less knowledge of the dangers of microsleep or driving sleep deprived, are put in precarious situations that they are ill prepared to handle. The other take away from the study was that there were significantly more instances where the teen driver “ran off the road to the right — a common finding in crashes where inadequate sleep is suspected.”

In 2013, the Rock Bridge High School Board in Columbia Mo., after much debate, voted to change the start time from 7:20 a.m. to 8:55 a.m. The result? It was reported that students seemed to be more awake and more eager to learn. In addition, the out of school suspensions since 2012 have dropped by 1,000! And graduation rates went from 82.7 percent to over 90 percent.

Whether you look at the clock to improve the life, health, and well-being of your students, or perhaps you become the brave board member that rolled up their sleeves on behalf of making a simple, yet vital change a reality in your district, you truly can be a lifesaver.



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Please don't "kick the can" down the hall for the next board member to address. Be the one that "puts the brakes" on those cars full of young people that we all too often hear about that just "ran off the road." Be the one that helps stem the mood disorders, the ever-growing obesity problem, and the disciplinary distractions and risky behaviors that are seen too often in sleep-deprived students. Be the one that refused to be told it could not be done because of bus schedules or sports schedules etc. Other board members nationwide have navigated this change and met those challenges head on. They are enjoying the satisfaction of knowing they have truly changed the lives and the health of the students they represent. Make this school year the year you make the time to move the time!

Have a great school year!

Sleep Well - Live Better!

REFERENCES

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