
The Prickly Politics Of School Starting Times

BY KYLA L. WAHLSTROM

There are many questions yet to be answered about the consequences of a change in school starting time. But one thing is certain: as the transition is being planned and implemented, all the stakeholders who will be affected need to be consulted and kept informed.

SOME SCHOOL districts have responded to recent research findings on adolescent sleep patterns and needs by significantly changing high school starting times. Other districts are considering such a move. But tinkering with the school-day schedule is not without its risks.

Aware of those risks, in the fall of 1996 several superintendents of suburban Minnesota school districts asked the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota to assess the attitudes of stakeholders toward such a venture. Seventeen school districts agreed to participate in the study, which soon focused not only on high schools but also on elementary and middle/junior high schools, since the schedules of all buildings in a district are inextricably linked.¹

Of the 17 districts, only one of them — Edina — had already made the decision to start the high school day 70 minutes later in 1996-97 than in the previous school year. At the start of the study, then, only the stakeholders in Edina were actually experiencing the change. A year later, the Minneapolis School District pushed back the starting time of its seven comprehensive high schools by an hour and 25 minutes, from 7:15 to 8:40 a.m., enabling CAREI to study the actual impact of a later starting time in that district as well.²

The CAREI researchers discovered that changing a school's starting time provokes the same kind of emotional reaction from stakeholders as closing a school or changing a school's attendance area. A school's starting time sets the rhythm of the day for teachers, parents, students, and members of the community at large. The impact of changing that starting time is felt individually, and the individuals who are affected need to have their views heard and legitimized so that the discussion can move forward in search of common ground.

Another striking finding from the first year of the CAREI study had to do with the role that assumptions play in discussions of changing school starting times. Informal conversations on the topic seemed invariably to include a comment such as "The transportation department rules the district, and this change cannot take place because of bus problems" or "The coaches will never go along with this idea — there's no use in even approaching them."

To assess the accuracy of these and similar assumptions, we conducted individual interviews during the first year of the study with each participating district's transportation director, with 51 coaches and co-curricular faculty advisors, with all 17 district directors of community education, with several food service directors, with sever-

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al district personnel directors, with all elementary and secondary curriculum directors, and with local employers who provide after-school jobs for students. Surprisingly, none of the interviewees suggested that a change in school starting time — especially at the high school level — would be out of the question. Indeed, though coaches and transportation directors did voice some concerns, most respondents in all categories were willing to discuss at length ways of implementing such a change, since it would be beneficial for students and their learning. To allow untested assumptions to forestall debate on the issue is to close the door prematurely (and possibly wrongly) to later starting times for high school students.

The CAREI study showed, too, that advocates for later school starting times tended to use in their lobbying efforts both hard data (e.g., the findings of sleep research on adolescents) and testimonials (e.g., positive outcomes from districts that had already made such a change). In both Edina and Minneapolis, a small number of advocates had a positive impact on the decision-making process.

It's important to remember, however, that strident advocacy can squelch debate. And without thorough discussion of the issues surrounding a proposed change in school starting time, any decision will be shallow and may have to be revisited.

In both Edina and Minneapolis, shifts in high school starting times affected the starting times of elementary and middle schools as well. Had the school board members in either of those districts focused solely on the logistics of the change, it is very unlikely that a later high school starting time would have been implemented. But the school boards in both districts first considered the research data on adolescent sleep needs. To their credit, they posed the question, Are the data of sufficient quality and relevance to merit consideration?

With that question answered affirmatively, the next questions became: What do we hope to gain by shifting our high school starting time? And what might we lose in the process? The answers to these two questions had to be based on fact, not on emotion or on potential logistical problems.

Eventually, however, both school boards arrived at the point where concerns about logistics appropriately entered the debate. Then the question became, What will it take to bring our school schedules into line with

what the research tells us about adolescent sleep needs? The boards formed several subcommittees to investigate logistical problems and to come up with possible scenarios. Throughout the decision-making process, though, factual evidence took precedence, and students' best interests held sway. As a result, the discussions involved much less wrangling than has been seen in other districts embroiled in the same debate. From a school board's perspective, keeping a potentially divisive debate focused on student needs is good politics.

If altering high school starting times is risky for school boards, it is equally risky for superintendents. In an open forum, the 17 superintendents whose districts took part in the CAREI study discussed the dissension that community debate on the topic had caused in some locales. Three superintendents, in whose districts the topic had not surfaced, said they did not plan to bring it up. Two of the three noted that their contracts were up for renewal, and they did not want their boards split over this potentially divisive issue (on which they would be forced to take a stand). They elected instead to remain publicly silent and privately neutral on the topic.

In Minneapolis, the decision to move to a later starting time for the high schools was made under an interim superintendent. When the new superintendent took over, she "inherited" that decision, and any perceived negatives related to its implementation were not associated with her.

If altering school starting times is risky for school boards and superintendents, it is no less so for high school principals. In Edina and Minneapolis, the high school principals served on the committees that made the decision to push back high school starting times. Like other committee members, these principals had access to the sleep research data and to information on outcomes from districts that had already taken such action. Armed with the facts, the principals were able to refute unsubstantiated claims and to respond to the concerns of students, parents, and teachers. Participation in the committees' debates also helped the high school principals identify potential sources of resistance to the change and learn to deal with them before opposition escalated.

It was equally important to have the elementary and middle/junior high school principals involved in the discussions, since changing the high school starting time inevitably affects other buildings as well. In

large districts, however, it is impractical to have as many principals take part in the deliberations as might be optimal. Minneapolis compensated by providing regular briefings on the committees' discussions to all principals in the district.

Clearly, schools at all levels whose own schedules will be affected by a change in the high school starting time must be given sufficient advance notice. In Minneapolis, schools that were told in the spring that their starting times would be changed in the fall encountered much less resistance from parents and staff members than did schools that learned about the change shortly before the fall term began. Staff members and parents need time to adjust their personal and family schedules, and providing such time is one key to a smooth transition.

All the findings of the CAREI study that I have mentioned so far apply to both urban and suburban schools and school districts. But a few factors emerged that seem more pertinent to one setting than to the other.

The reactions of high school teachers to a later starting time differed by setting, for example. A clear majority of the suburban teachers said that they liked the change, for reasons that ranged from "more time to incorporate the news of the day into my lessons" and "more students are awake and fully participating in my first- and second-hour classes" to "more time to talk with fellow teachers about sharing materials and team teaching." The suburban teachers were still arriving at an early hour — but, because of the later dismissal time, they were working a longer day.

Urban high school teachers, by contrast, were evenly split between liking (45.2%) and not liking (45.7%) the later starting time. Those who responded positively to the change cited many of the same reasons listed by their suburban counterparts. But two-thirds of the urban teachers who did not like the change mentioned the negative impact that a later dismissal time had on their personal lives. Their comments ranged from "I feel I have no 'down time' before I go home" and "I have lost at least an hour that I would otherwise spend at my second job" to "I now have to face rush-hour traffic." Only one-third of the teachers who disliked the change mentioned the needs of students in their listings of negative concerns.

These sharp differences in teachers' attitudes deserve further study. Perhaps

urban teachers are simply reflecting the stresses of teaching under less than ideal conditions. The personal toll of having to make accommodations for a later starting time may be the final straw that makes this change feel overwhelming.

The preferred dismissal time for elementary and middle/junior high schools is another factor that differs by locale. Parents in both suburban and urban areas worry about young children walking along roads or waiting for a bus at a road's edge in winter darkness. But urban parents worry too that "there's a different kind of predator out there in the late afternoon." Thus urban parents prefer an earlier school dismissal time to a later one.

A third issue that differs by locale is "zero hour" classes — those that meet an hour before the regular school day begins. Such classes are usually limited in enrollment, since they serve accelerated students or youngsters in work/study programs. The CAREI study reveals that more suburban students than urban ones take zero hour classes, because transportation to school is less of a problem in suburban areas. This equity issue merits further study.

Moreover, zero hour classes negate for

participants the beneficial effects of a later school starting time. Districts may wish to consider the wisdom of offering such options.

Obviously, changing a high school's starting time produces a complex array of benefits and tensions. Just as clearly, districts must challenge the assumptions before a genuine dialogue can take place on the topic.

Meanwhile, we still do not know the effect of a later high school starting time on student achievement. In an effort to provide that information, CAREI is now looking at longitudinal achievement data from districts that implemented a later starting time several years ago.

CAREI will also seek to answer the question of whether a later high school starting time reduces the incidence of juvenile misbehavior by keeping youngsters in school until later in the afternoon. To date, there is no evidence to suggest that crime rates have dropped as a result of pushing back school starting times.

CAREI has studied most extensively the two Minnesota districts that have pushed back their high school starting times by an hour or more. Other districts in the

state have implemented a 30- to 40-minute delay in the start of school. Still other districts have accepted the value of a later starting time but are struggling in committees over how to deal with the logistical problems. Meanwhile, CAREI researchers are looking for an answer to the question, How late is late enough to help address the sleep needs of adolescents without changing school schedules more than is necessary?

High school starting time is a seemingly simple issue with prickly political dimensions, and there is no single solution that will fit all districts. Only through open discussion of their concerns can stakeholders develop a shared understanding of the facts that will lead to a reasonable — but purely local — decision. And that's as it should be, since those stakeholders are the ones who will have to live with the consequences.

1. Kyla Wahlstrom and Carol Freeman, "Executive Summary of Findings from SchoolStart Time Study," 1997, available from <http://carei.coled.umn.edu>.

2. Kyla Wahlstrom, Gordon Wrobel, and Patricia Kubow, "Executive Summary of Findings from Minneapolis School District School Start Time Study," 1998, available from <http://carei.coled.umn.edu>. **K**

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