

EDUCATION

New Jersey high schools could start later in the day if this bill passes

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An extra half-hour or more of sleep in the morning is a possibility for New Jersey's high school students if legislation introduced last week gains enough support.

The bill calls for a later start time for the school day to boost mental health and wellness among teenagers, said its sponsors, Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, and Sen. Vin Gopal, D-Monmouth, chair of the Education Committee.

The bill calls for a start time of 8:30 a.m. or later. Currently, most state high schools have a starting time between 7:20 and 7:40 a.m.

Research shows teenagers tend to fall asleep around 11 p.m. and are more likely to suffer depression and anxiety if they do not get enough sleep.

Some districts have already made the change to start the school day later in the morning.

Tenaflly High School made the change in 2019 and begins four out of the five days per week at 8:10 a.m. and the fifth day at 8:30 a.m. The Millburn district pushed its start time later by 20 and 25 minutes for an 8 a.m. start for the middle and high schools last September. Last month, Chatham school officials decided to push the start time for their high school and elementary schools to later in the morning starting next school year.

Ridgewood High School considered switching to a later start, but it has held off making a decision. Princeton and South Orange/Maplewood high schools switched to later start times in 2018 and 2017 respectively. A spokesperson for Tenaflly school district said West Caldwell district had consulted with them three years ago and shifted their start times.

The legislation comes on the heels of the pandemic, whose impact on students' social and emotional health has become a concern. The New Jersey Department of Children and Families' hotline received more than 14,000 calls from parents and youth seeking help in

February, the highest number recorded in its history, with more calls expected in March. The state run Children's System of Care sent 4,201 mobile dispatch units to families and youth needing urgent care to address mental health needs, compared to 2,582 dispatches during the same period last year. The youth mental health crisis is a "parallel pandemic," Christine Breyer, commissioner of the department, said at a hearing in the Senate in March.

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The spotlight on mental health, and previous research that proves teenagers tend to feel sleepy two to three hours later than adults, and that late school starts resulted in better grades and improved wellness, paved the way for lawmakers to introduce the legislation.

"This has been suggested for a while, but what really brought it to the forefront is the fact that we have a growing crisis of young people who face mental health challenges in part because of the pandemic," Coughlin told *The Record/NorthJersey.com*.

State lawmakers have been aware of the need for later start times for years, Coughlin said. In 2019, districts were invited to participate in a later start time pilot study. When the pandemic hit in early 2020, schools switched to remote learning and the pilot study was not implemented.

However, remote learning and adjusted school schedules during the pandemic gave staff and students a taste of what it would be like to have a late start, adding impetus to the effort of making those schedule changes permanent.

"Nothing has proven school districts are capable of making rapid changes to adapt and optimize student learning more than the pandemic," Coughlin said, noting that this moment in time was also the best window to propose a law that would apply to all public high schools, which have already demonstrated flexibility in the face of change.

"There is that biological shift in teenagers' circadian rhythms that are very different from kids or adults. They have a two- to three-hour phased-in delay when they fall asleep and when they wake up," said Dr. Bert Mandelbaum, chair of the New Jersey branch of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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Making teenagers wake up at 6 a.m. to be in school by 7:20 a.m. for seven or eight years of their lives makes them sleep-deprived, Mandelbaum said. He runs a voluntary, grassroots task force on school and sleep start times, and has been advocating for later high school start times in the state for five years.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have all made policy statements recommending start times of 8:30 a.m. or later for teenagers.

Mandelbaum said he has been invited to school districts to make presentations that demonstrate the science behind later start times, but logistical and cost issues often got in the way of decision-makers. He welcomed the legislation proposed by Coughlin and Gopal because it would require all schools to change and make necessary adjustments such as tightening bus routes in districts that share buses for elementary schools and higher.

Transportation obstacles were the most serious logistical problem faced by districts interested in a later start time. After-school conflicts arose especially for athletic events between schools with different start and end times. Mandelbaum said these problems created the need for legislation to smooth things out.

"We are hearing from our middle and high school students that even this half-hour change has been a great benefit to them," said Millburn High School's spokesperson, Nancy Dries. The school moved start times back by about a half-hour to start middle and high school at 8 a.m. when school reopened in September after the pandemic. Dries said the 8 a.m. shift is not as ideal as 8:30, and that the school is "very interested to see what comes out of Trenton."

Nobody has argued the science behind changing start times, said Mandelbaum, meaning that implementing this change is the real hurdle. He said the state's largest teachers' union, the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), has a representative on the task force, as does the New Jersey School Boards Association and the New Jersey School Nurses Association. He said Gopal will be meeting with the task force next week.

The NJEA said it has not reviewed the bill or issued a formal statement about it, but is open to the idea.

"We are well aware of a large body of research that indicates that later start times would be physiologically and academically beneficial to many teenagers. We believe that any reform

that might benefit students is well worth considering and implementing," NJEA spokesperson Steven Baker said in a statement.

Mary Ann Koruth covers education for NorthJersey.com. To get unlimited access to the latest news about New Jersey's schools and how it affects your children, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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