



Sleep Health Advisory Committee Responses to Frequently Asked Questions Presented to the School Committee on January 4, 2023

After reviewing feedback from students, families, and staff provided through surveys on the proposed options for changing school start and end times next school year, members of the Sleep Health Advisory Committee identified issues that were commonly raised and then created this FAQ document to provide helpful information regarding the proposed changes to school schedules next year.

Q: Why is changing the school start times even being considered?

A: The topic of sleep health and school start times has been researched for over 30 years, and given the consensus of a large body of evidence that shows sleep deprivation is linked to a number of physical, academic, social, and emotional issues, school districts across the country, including in Massachusetts, are responding. The American Academy for Sleep Medicine, The American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Sleep Foundation all recommend 8 - 10 hours of sleep for youth aged 13 - 18, but our high schoolers are not getting those needed hours with the existing schedule. A compelling body of evidence shows that teenagers are sleep deprived, and the national response of shifting school start times later has become a successful countermeasure. For this age group, the natural biological shift in the body's circadian rhythm makes it physically challenging for them to simply go to sleep earlier to resolve their sleep deficit, but they have the earliest start times with the current schedule. Some of the issues that teens' sleep deprivation is linked to include:

- Student self-reports of drowsiness
- Motor vehicle crashes

- Sports injuries
- Increased depression
- Reports of suicidal ideation
- Increased susceptibility to addiction
- Increased risk for obesity
- Impaired academic performance

(See [Sleep Health Committee Research Report](#), pages 3 - 15)

Q: Do our Shrewsbury High School students really experience sleep deprivation?

A: While the current situation may seem fine to some, it may not be as healthy as previously believed. Administration of the [Shrewsbury High School Regional Youth Health Survey](#) in 2021 revealed that only 20% of SPS high school students report getting the recommended 8 - 10 hours of sleep per night, and nearly **50% of students report getting 6 or fewer hours of sleep per night**. Research shows that 40% of teens who get fewer than 6 hours of sleep report symptoms of depression (see [Dr. Judith Owens' slides](#)). The same SHS survey also included measures of mental health, and revealed 17% of high school respondents reporting serious consideration of suicide, 11% of high school respondents reporting a suicide plan, and 38% of high school respondents reporting feeling very sad or hopeless in the past 12 months. This information can be viewed in graph form [here](#). While direct causation between our students' sleep amounts and mental health status cannot be concluded from this data, it is consistent with the research. It feels important to recognize that both issues do exist and that research strongly suggests that there is a correlation between lack of sleep and mental health challenges for a significant number of our adolescent students.

(See [Sleep Health Committee Research Report](#), pages 8 - 10)

Q: Will changing start times solve the problem of high school students being sleep deprived, and will other ways to improve sleep health, such as homework and technology use, be addressed to improve student physical and mental health?

A: We recognize that changing start times is only one piece of this complex problem, and not a complete solution. We are looking at start times because we want to provide our children with an environment in which it is possible to get enough sleep.

Ensuring that adolescents get the recommended amount of sleep requires a multi-faceted approach including choices about activities, jobs, course workload, homework, and technology use. Our main mission so far has been to research the topic of delayed school start times, make recommendations based on the literature, and consider practical changes that support sleep health that might be implemented in our school district. This is a topic that will require education and collaboration among all members of the school community, including families, students, and educators.

It is also important to note that the current district-wide “no homework” days and weekends has been implemented in order to minimize stress and disruption for families around religious holidays and to promote more balance. The School Committee will be revisiting its homework policy in the spring, which will further examine homework volume and impact.

Q: Does this proposed change make enough of an impact on students’ sleep to be worthwhile?

A: Yes. In previous studies investigating impacts on students’ sleep deprivation in school districts where delayed start time changes were made, it is clear that as school starts later, the population of students who get enough sleep increases. Even in studies where only a modest delay was made (> 10 minutes), longer sleep durations were seen (see [Sleep Health Committee Research Report](#), p. 6). In addition to the added sleep time provided by a later start, a change in interval length between high school and middle school start times will allow for bus pick-ups to begin later in the morning, thereby providing further sleep opportunities for many students (as much as 35 minutes under Option A and 1 hour and 15 minutes under Option B).

Q: Won’t students just stay up later if school starts later?

A: Research shows that student bedtimes are not significantly or proportionately delayed with later start times, yet weekday wake times are significantly later. An extensive study of over 28,000 students in a large suburban Colorado district that changed high school and middle school start times later indicated that after the change, **students stayed up a short amount of time later but slept much later, gaining significantly more sleep.** (See [Sleep Health Committee Research Report](#) pages 4 - 5).

Q: Will having later start times leave our high school students unprepared for college and workplace start times in the “real world?”

A: Research clearly shows that adolescents’ internal biological sleep clock causes most to start sleep later and wake up later, with healthy REM sleep occurring later in the sleep cycle (see Dr. Owens’ presentation slides [here](#)). This is not a case of just “toughening up,” as it is how most teens’ bodies function, and not getting enough sleep causes many negative effects on physical and mental health. Requiring a child to adopt sleep patterns that are not biologically or developmentally age-appropriate does not necessarily help prepare them for their future. For example, making a 3-year old stop the afternoon nap in order to “prepare” him or her to be a 6-year-old, first-grade student does not eliminate the biological need for the nap, nor improve functioning as a first-grader. Getting adequate sleep, developing healthier habits, and being more ready to learn seem to be better ways to prepare students for college (where it is rare for classes to begin before 8:00am) and the workplace.

Q: Why can’t all the schools start at the same time, around 8:30am?

A: While this may sound like an ideal solution, the reality is more complicated. Schools currently start and dismiss at staggered times so that:

- Parents and caregivers with children at different schools within the district are able to drop off/pick up students from their respective schools.
- SPS is able to transport students to and from school within the allotted transportation budget.
- SPS can maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the 48 bus/driver fleet by operating a 3-tiered busing system to serve our district.
- Starting/dismissing older students earlier than younger students allows the older students to provide childcare to younger siblings in families where this is necessary.

Starting and dismissing all schools at the same time would not allow parents and caregivers with students who attend multiple schools (e.g., a 3rd grader and a 5th grader) in a timely manner, and would necessitate tripling the number of buses and drivers, as well as requiring an estimated *additional* \$6+ million per year expenditure for in-district bus transportation. Similarly, even having two levels of start times instead of three would be prohibitively expensive, requiring \$3+ million more per year.

Q: Elementary aged students wake up early and are ready to go in the morning. I am concerned that my elementary aged student will be too tired to learn in the afternoon. Was starting the elementary aged students in the earliest time slot considered?

A: Yes. The options that the Sleep Health Advisory Committee have presented take into consideration recommended sleep requirements that are healthy for all age groups, not just for the high school students. We want all students to succeed. While we recognize that school schedule changes can impact families, in the ThoughtExchange survey stakeholders communicated their concerns regarding our youngest students waiting for and/or getting off buses in the dark, and we agree. The Practices in Other Districts Task Group found some districts that explored a change in start times who proposed flipping elementary schools abandoned their plan due to significant family opposition to that change due to childcare issues with older students not being available to watch younger siblings. For more than two decades, Beal Early Childhood Center began at 9:15am and ended at 3:30pm, while the other elementary schools began at 9:00am and ended at 3:15pm, and our students have been very successful. The Sleep Health Advisory Committee is reviewing the questions and concerns from elementary families and staff about the proposed dismissal time of 3:40pm and will take them into consideration in its final recommendation.

Q: Neither of the new options presented work well for me or my family. What can we do?

A: You are not alone in this perspective. We recognize that no option, including maintaining the current start time schedule, will meet everyone's needs completely. We appreciate the participation of all students, staff, and parents/caregivers who completed the surveys and provided feedback. With approximately 6,000 students and their families and 1,000 staff in our school community, for every person that opposes a change in school start times, there are many who agree with them. There are possibly an equal (or greater) number of people who have expressed support for this change. Some students participate in after-school athletics, clubs, classes, therapies, jobs, or sibling childcare, and others participate in none due to cost, work schedules, or the need for sibling care. Some staff have after school commitments including secondary employment and family responsibilities of their own. With so much diversity in our community, we ask that while acknowledging your family's own needs and preferences, you are also sensitive to and respectful of those of other

families who may be different. Please continue to thoroughly review all the work and considerations that have been put forth by the Sleep Health Advisory Committee, watch School Committee meetings, provide honest and constructive feedback as needed, and be willing to be flexible in how we as a community approach this important health topic.

It is important to note that other districts have made similar changes, including our neighbors in Northborough, Southborough, and Westborough, and they report that they have adapted and feel the change has been a positive one.

Q: How will students, faculty, and staff attend after-school commitments such as appointments, therapies, sports, performances, and arts classes?

A: Many districts across the country and right here in Massachusetts have implemented these start time changes successfully (see the [Practices in Other Districts Task Force report](#)); families and children in all age groups have adjusted accordingly. That being said, we recognize the logistical challenges this change may impose, especially on the elementary students and staff who would be getting out of school the latest, possibly impacting their time for after school activities. The earliest that a change to start times can be made in our District would be for the 2023-2024 school year, giving families time to plan and prepare in advance.

Q: How will some school staff attend to their own personal appointments if they are getting out of school later?

A: This is an issue to which most working individuals and those with considerable caregiving responsibilities can relate, as it can be challenging to obtain personal appointments within the constraints of work and caregiving schedules. It is possible that with the delayed start times, some staff members may be able to make an early morning appointment. Others may still need to schedule in the high-demand, after-work hours, or take personal time during the workday. While the latter is not usually preferred, it is an issue that is not unique to school personnel and something with which most adults need to approach flexibly. The Sleep Health Advisory Committee examined this issue carefully, and its recommendations considered the trade-offs between strong research indicating improved health for students and the impact on staff members' personal needs.

Q: How will this change impact families who rely on child care and care provided by older siblings?

A: As they do currently, the child care needs required by each family will vary greatly. The shift in school start/end times may correlate with a shift in child care needs such that staff might experience lower child care needs in the mornings and greater needs in the afternoons, while district families may need more child care in the mornings and less care in the afternoons. This is a general prediction and individual circumstances will vary. The [Child Care Task Group's report](#) surveyed more than 250 child care facilities in the area, and their findings indicated that in almost all cases, their hours would be able to accommodate the options presented. Lead times for schedule changes to existing child care range from two days to a month, and more lead time is sometimes needed for initial enrollment (up to several months), which is why seven months' lead time is being provided by this process. The options presented, especially Option A, offer minimal impact to the ability of older students to care for younger siblings. In both Options A and B, high school students are dismissed prior to the elementary aged students. This was a significant consideration when determining start time options.

Q: What time will the Extended School Care (ESC) program begin and end under these options?

A: The elementary school ESC program would maintain the same hours, from 7:00am until school opens in the mornings and then open until 6:00pm after school (currently, most families drop off after 7:30am and pick up by 5:30pm). The Sherwood Middle School ESC program would most likely add a morning session under Option A, where middle schools would begin at 8:35am, if there is enough family demand. ESC staffing hours would be affected as the programs would be open for less time with later dismissals, with some offset for mornings in some cases depending on the staff member's schedule.

Q: Will the proposed changes to school start and end times create more traffic issues?

A: The Logistics Task Force (see the [Report on School Start Time Options](#), pp. 6 - 12) has presented options that take into account challenges that delaying school start times might present to families and staff. While we recognize the impact of any significant schedule change, the options presented are those that we consider to be highly feasible and will maintain the current three-busing-tier pattern without adding

the cost and traffic issues of additional buses. The options we propose were developed under the guiding principles of increasing students' necessary sleep opportunities while increasing the time between busing tiers to allow for necessary time for buses to complete their routes. While it's not possible to project all potential impacts on traffic in town by shifting the start times, we expect campus traffic to be similar to what it is now.

Q: Instead of changing all the school start times, why not just give teens education in healthy sleep practices and take their electronics from them so they can get to bed earlier?

A: This is a logical question; however, research on teens' circadian rhythm shows that this is not a matter of simply getting to bed earlier (and this research existed before cell phones and smartphones). Youth aged 13-18 experience a shift in their biological circadian rhythm, making it virtually impossible for most to fall asleep any earlier than 11:00pm, while awakening early cuts into the most important part of their sleep cycle, REM sleep ([see Dr. Judith Owens' slide deck](#)). Yet, they are the population of students who start the earliest, some of them boarding the bus as early as 6:19am. Extant data from the peer reviewed literature show clear signals that sleep debt coupled with the shift to evening chronotype adversely impact high school students':

- Mental well being
- Physical disease
- Behavioral disorders
- Academic performance
- General safety

(for more detailed information, see the full [Sleep Health Committee Research Report](#)).