

FCPS High School Start Times Could Change for 2014: Rested Students Are Ready Students!

By: Elizabeth Ende (with source material from [SLEEP](#))

School has started. You and your teenagers are already exhausted. Sleep deprivation affects students caught in a squeeze between early school start times and changing adolescent sleep cycles. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has declared that later high school start times are common sense. He's encouraging local school boards to [shift to later bell times](#) and he's not alone! The Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Medical Society of Northern Virginia as well as parents, teachers, administrators and many other organizations also support bell schedules that are in sync with adolescent body clocks.

Requirements for Sleep Change During Adolescence! While school start times force your kids to get up early, biology is keeping them up late at night since daily sleep cycles change with age. Many teenagers find it extremely difficult to fall asleep much before 11 pm. Adolescents need between 8.5 and 9.5 hours of sleep, but most get less than seven hours per night^{1/}.

Sleep Debt Causes Many Problems! Research shows that later start times improve health, safety, mood, quality of life, and school performance. Sleep is critical to learning, especially the last REM sleep (which is cut short by early alarms). Drowsy students have more difficulty absorbing new information and can't help falling asleep in class (even when class material is fascinating). Over a matter of days, sleep debt can disrupt hormone levels, impair metabolism, and contribute to obesity. Unfortunately, it also leads to tardiness, increased absenteeism, increased sports injuries and potentially fatal car crashes.

- More than 1,000 Fairfax students dropped out of high school in 2011-12.^{2/}
- One in 4 teens in Fairfax suffer from symptoms of depression.^{1/}
- More than 1,000 Fairfax students reported a suicide attempt in the previous year.^{1/}

Counties with Later Start Times Still Have Competitive Sports and Extra-Curricular Activities (Including Arlington, Loudoun and 72 other Virginia Counties!)

Later Start Times Are a Great Investment! Brookings Institute economists report that changing high school start times more than pays for itself and is a great investment to improve performance.

- **Change is cost-effective:** \$9 or more of benefit for every \$1 spent, if using the most expensive approach to busing (single tier).^{3/}
- **Increased lifetime earnings for students** with later middle and high school start times.^{3/}
- Early school start times reduce performance among disadvantaged students by an amount equivalent to having a highly ineffective teacher. **Starting school even an hour later boosts performance.**^{3/}

Momentum is quickly building for Fairfax County to change to later high school start times! FCPS is partnering with [Children's National Medical Center's Division of Sleep Medicine \(CNMC\)](#) to develop several workable scenarios to start FCPS high schools after 8 am to improve students' mental and physical health, academic performance, and safety. CNMC will report on the strategies employed by school districts already using delayed start times and work with key community stakeholders, and FCPS leadership (in transportation, athletics, curriculum and extracurricular activities) to assess costs and feasibility of school start change scenarios. CNMC and FCPS will provide opportunities for community members to voice concerns and contribute to the development of the "Blueprint for Change." CNMC will outline final recommendations for the School Board's consideration early in 2014. The goal is for the School Board to review and vote on a proposal to allow new school start times in the fall of 2014.

What can you do to help FCPS change to healthy high school start times?

1. Encourage your friends to go with you to one of CNMC's "Blueprint for Change" presentations. [Click here for the calendar.](#) You'll learn firsthand how important this change is for Fairfax County students!
2. You and your teens should sign [the SLEEP petition](#) for start times that provide for basic teen sleep needs.
3. Tell your [School Board representatives](#) that you support healthy schedules.
4. Share your ideas with CNMC: www.smartschoolstart.org/

^{1/}Fairfax County Youth Survey 2011-2012, <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/ncs/news/ni2012/2011youthsurvey.htm>

^{2/}Virginia Department of Education 2011-2012 Dropout Rate Report, http://bi.vita.virginia.gov/doe_bi/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Main&subRptName=Dropout

^{3/}[Organizing Schools to Student Achievement: Start Times, Grade Configurations, and Teacher Assignments](#), The Brookings Institute, September 2011, www.hamiltonproject.org