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Raw Fisher

By Marc Fisher

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## Sleeping In: Sanity For High Schoolers

Anyone who has ever been a teenager knows well the horror of early awakenings during those heady years. For years, school administrators have known about research that bolsters the argument of teens who sleep till noon, yet most school systems insist that bus schedules and the convenience of parents and staff make it imperative to cling to school hours created when we were a nation of farmers and factory hands.

Now, after many months of rigorous study by a task force of parents, teachers, students and others, the Fairfax County school board is poised today to decide whether to overhaul school starting times and let teenagers sleep an hour or two later each morning. As someone who has never quite gotten past his teenage predilection for sleeping from 3 a.m. to 11 a.m., I can only stand and cheer at the mere possibility of such a reform.

But don't start the celebration quite yet: Despite a call by the [Transportation Task Force](#)--the [sleep squad](#)--for a [wholesale shift in start times](#) that would have high schools open at 8:45 a.m. and go to 3:45 p.m., and let middle schools have an even more civilized and productive day, from 9:20 to 4:30 (that's my ideal school day, both as a parent and a former student), Fairfax administrators are already balking at such change.

In a [memo to school board members](#), chief operating officer Dean Tistadt says the system has three choices:

1. "Thank the task force for its great work but shelve the issue for the time being due to the enormous budget difficulties facing the school system over the next several years."
2. Put the task force's report out to parents and seek a broader public discussion. (In other words, punt.)
3. Accept the recommendation for later start times, direct the staff to put together bus schedules that would accommodate such a change, and then see how the public reacts.

Tistadt ends up recommending some version of the third option, while expressing his skepticism by noting that the county has gone down this road at least a couple of times before, only to pull back from any real change. And he is quick to note that changing bus schedules as the task force envisions--basically sending elementary school kids to school earlier so older kids can sleep later--would be expensive, and added expenses are not in the cards given the current economic state of affairs.

There are school systems that have moved to a more humane schedule with good results. Arlington did it a few years ago and that system's study of the impact of later start times for teenagers [impressively confirms that many students are just not capable of paying full attention at the preposterously early time](#) when many local schools open for business.

"Research on the impact of school start times and adolescent behavior guided the decisions about changing the schedules, and this study concludes that the change had its desired impact on the main beneficiaries, high school students," the Arlington study says.

The study found that teachers and students agreed: Kids pay more attention and perform better when school starts at a rational hour. The downside to the change, Arlington found, came at the middle school level, because those kids' start time had to be moved earlier to allow high school kids to come in later--there are only so many buses and bus drivers and when routes have to be run in shifts, someone has to go first.

The Fairfax proposal would put that burden in the most logical place, on elementary school kids, who by and large tend to get up earlier anyway. But opponents of the change argue that little kids ought not run the risk of having to stand outside in the early morning darkness while waiting for a bus. Granted, no one wants little kids standing on street corners in the dark, but especially in winter, there are only so many hours of daylight, and if the wait in the dark isn't in the morning, it's bound to be in the afternoon, when more drivers are drunk, speeding or otherwise endangering kids.

And the Fairfax proposal would only move elementary start times back to 7:50 a.m., when even in December the sun is already blazing into action. The task force approved its call for new, later start times by a vote of 22-5, with 13 abstentions, which goes to show you that some people are early people and some people are late people.

One good sign of consensus: 79 percent of the task force members agreed that the official start of twilight should not be a strict cutoff time by which all students must be picked up and taken home. Isn't that encouraging: A consensus for flexibility. Will wonders never cease?

More smart stuff: The Fairfax proposal wisely puts middle schoolers in the schedule that runs latest in the day. Yes, high school kids probably have the toughest time getting rolling in the morning, so logically they should get the latest start. But task force members were good to recall that middle school kids are the ones who generally get into the most mischief in those hours after school when parents may be at work, unable to supervise their kids. The task force's solution is to keep middle school kids at school as

late as possible, assuring that they be occupied during that prime time for getting into all the wrong habits and places.

All that's left now is for the school board to stand up to bus schedulers and give young people the chance to show their best. Let's see how willing the board is to reconsider structures invented for an agrarian society that no longer exists.

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