

COVID-19 and School Start Times

Interview by Hannah Durnas

As we see some light at the end of the tunnel with the U.S. advancing the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, we also are seeing many school districts having students return to in-person or hybrid learning. The debate around what time school should start has always been a point of discussion for sleep professionals, physicians and parents.

AAST, in support of and alignment with [Start School Later Inc.](#), has advocated that schools require no child of any age to be in class before 8 a.m. and no adolescent be in class before 8:30 a.m.

AAST Marketing Manager Hannah Durnas recently had the opportunity to further explore this topic, as well as how the pandemic has changed the recommendations and future thinking with Terra Ziporyn Snider, PhD, executive director and co-founder of Start School Later Inc.

Before the pandemic, what was the recommendation for school start times by Start School Later (SSL)?

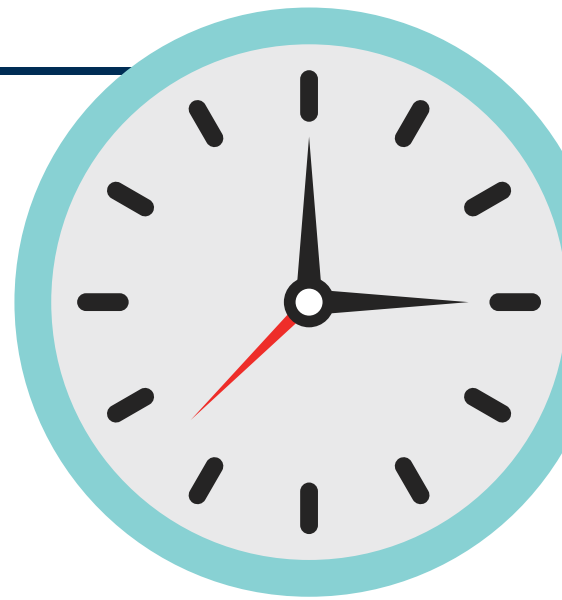
SSL's recommendation from its very beginning has been that no child of any age should be required to attend school at unsafe, unhealthy hours. Based on current research, that means we recommend that schools require no child of any age to be in class before 8 a.m. and no adolescent before 8:30 a.m. That latter position reflects the overwhelming consensus of research, including recommendations by the American Pediatrics Association, American Medical Association and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

We also recommend that any comprehensive assessment of factors involved in setting school schedules should include a rigorous examination of the impact of school start times on elementary students. While there is an overwhelmingly clear evidence base for the harm of early start times across multiple domains in middle/high school students (e.g., depression, academic failure, lower graduation rates and increased motor vehicle crashes), existing evidence is still too limited to determine the impact of any particular bell time on the sleep of elementary school students.

We strongly encourage more research about the impact of school hours on younger children, particularly more impact studies in districts that move middle and high school start times later by moving elementary start times earlier (the so-called "flip" strategy). At the same time, the lack of studies of elementary students should not serve as an automatic deterrent to implementing a measure (i.e., a later middle/high school start time) that we already know significantly reduces significant and active harm. Finally, we urge school districts to consider start time strategies that are likely to achieve equity for all students of every age, recognizing that this will require some degree of compromise among all stakeholders.

Has the pandemic changed SSL's recommendations for school start times? If yes, how so?

In short, no. In fact, if anything, the pandemic has provided even more evidence that starting school no earlier than 8:30 a.m. is better for adolescents. COVID-19 school shutdowns have provided an unprecedented, populationwide experiment confirming what sleep researchers already predicted about how teenagers would sleep when allowed to do what their bodies need, rather than constrained by artificial school schedules.



Shortly after virtual schooling began last spring, families told us their lives were transformed because their teenagers no longer had to wake at dawn or deprive themselves of sleep to attend class. Subsequent survey data have borne out these observations, showing that although virtual school and COVID-19 are taking a predictable toll on mental health, the increased and better-timed sleep during the pandemic have helped compensate for these challenges in many adolescents.

What other impacts to sleep recommendations have you witnessed because of the pandemic?

The most exciting impact is the decision by more and more school districts to keep the later hours they have been using during the pandemic when in-person schooling begins.

COVID-19 made it obvious that most American middle and high schools needed to start later. All the excuses for not changing schedules vanished overnight. There was no more busing to worry about, no more after-school sports or other extracurricular activities. The truth is that these and other logistical concerns about

the difficulty of changing schedules were never unresolvable — and many turned out to be overblown.

When COVID-19 closed down school (and life) as we knew it, all kinds of changes that previously seemed unimaginable or impossible suddenly became imaginable and possible. Suddenly everyone could see that it was indeed possible to run schools at times that gave students a chance for healthy sleep. That is why many school communities that had been

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trying to find ways to delay bell times for years at last began realizing that this was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change.

In a post-pandemic world, what permanent changes to school start times do you hope come from this time?

As mentioned earlier, our hope at Start School Later is that schools establish hours that allow for healthy sleep and that they value sleep-friendly schedules as a nonnegotiable requirement as fundamental as providing students with clean air and water.

For schools switching back to 100% in-person schooling but still planning on having early start times, what hurdles do you foresee children having to overcome after working remotely for over a year and being on schedules that are more conducive to daily remote learning?

If schools go back to the very early hours they used before the pandemic — and we believe that many of them unfortunately will — students and families will face the same hurdles they faced before the pandemic. We know from experience that when schools start too early in the morning, most adolescents simply cannot get enough sleep at the times their growing brains and bodies most need it, putting them at risk for both acute and long-term physical and mental health problems, car crashes, substance misuse and subpar performance at school, on the playing field and elsewhere.

What can sleep professionals do to help support SSL's efforts during this time?

The role of sleep professionals in helping schools ensure sleep-friendly school hours cannot be overestimated. Sleep professionals can play a major role in building this public understanding of sleep in their professional role by talking to patients about the importance of sleep-friendly school start times, encouraging them to become advocates for sleep-friendly school hours and distributing SSL sleep education materials in their offices. Even more helpful is stepping out of their clinical role and modeling healthy sleep — which can be critical in changing public beliefs and behaviors — and becoming community advocates for sleep-friendly school start times. For example, sleep professionals can make a huge difference by joining with other community advocates to meet with school leaders, speaking at community events and testifying at legislative hearings about how and why sleep matters. They can also join, start or even lead a local

Start School Later chapter, which connects them to other advocacy efforts and resources from around the country and the world.

Additionally, any efforts by sleep professionals to educate communities about sleep creates a win-win situation for both students and for the sleep profession, because when communities understand that sleep matters, they are more likely to value later school start times and the services of sleep professionals.

What changes or messages should sleep professionals be sharing with their patients and patients' families about school start times during the pandemic? Under normal school conditions for those that are back to in-person schooling every day?

Education and advocacy efforts by sleep professionals can play a critical role in helping communities establish and retain school hours that allow for healthy sleep. The most important message they can share — and that often is overlooked — involves explaining why sleep matters to the health, safety and well-being of everyone in the community.

Getting this message across boils down to a few simple statements:

- When school starts too early in the morning, it is nearly impossible for most adolescents to get enough sleep at times their growing brains and bodies most need it.
- This takes a toll on their growth and development, physical and mental health, safety and overall well-being.
- It also takes a toll on families, who have to struggle with sleep-deprived adolescents every day, and on the public at large. 🌙



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