

Later Start Time Subcommittee Report

November 12, 2008

Background

In the Spring of 2007, the Canton League of Women Voters hosted a public meeting on the topic of implementing later start times for adolescents at the high school level. As a follow-up to this meeting the Board of Education established a subcommittee to study this issue and to make a recommendation to the Board of Education on the feasibility of implementation. Volunteers were solicited to serve on this subcommittee. The subcommittee met on several occasions beginning in the Spring of 2008 to review the research on this topic, to identify the pros and cons and to determine the feasibility of implementing a later start time at our middle school/high school. It was decided that a later start time could be implemented only if it did not have a significant budgetary increase.

Research

The subcommittee reviewed the research on this topic. The National Institutes of Health have identified adolescents and young adults as a population at high risk for problem sleepiness based upon evidence that the prevalence of problem sleepiness is high and increasing with particularly serious consequences. There is a growing body of research that supports the notion that after puberty, teens' daily waking and sleep cycles or circadian rhythms shift into a delayed phase. Teens' body clocks make them go to sleep later and wake later than younger children. To accommodate teen sleep needs, school districts from across the country are adjusting middle and high school start times to later in the morning. According to James B. Maas, MD, of Cornell University, a leading expert on the topic, "Sleep, in essence, is food for the brain. Sleep deficit is hampering high school achievement." Some research indicates an association between sleep deprivation and poorer grades. Sleep deprivation, in both adults and children, has been linked to cognition problems, information-processing and memory deficit, decreased creativity, and vulnerability to fall-asleep motor vehicle accidents. Besides the extensive amount of research on adolescent sleep patterns, there is also research specifically related to later school start times. In these research studies it was found that: fewer students reported falling asleep in class, arriving late to school, and feeling tired during the school day in the later starting school than in other schools; students who reported less sleep overall were the sleepest in the school and were the ones who reported receiving the lowest grades; the students at the later-starting school reported higher grades overall than those in districts with earlier start times.

Surveys

The subcommittee felt it was important to survey parents, teachers and the high school students to determine their feelings on this topic and to identify the pros and cons of implementing a later start time in our community.

The high school students were given a survey during their CHAT period. 453 high schoolers completed the survey. If school began 30 minutes later, 57% of the students responded that they would get 30 minutes more sleep, 32% would get the same amount of sleep, and 11% responded they would get less sleep. Some student comments included: *It would affect sports; decrease time to complete homework; decrease time spent with family; would affect jobs after school; it would cause more problems than it's worth.* Thirty-one students explicitly stated that they are opposed to a later starting time.

Parents were asked to respond to a series of questions based upon the schools their children attended. 404 parents responded. 43% of the parents have children attending Canton High School. 51% of the respondents felt their children get the right amount of sleep while 47% felt their children get too little sleep. If the high school and middle school started and dismissed later, increased sleep was cited as the greatest advantage. Impact on sports, activities, and jobs was cited as the greatest disadvantage. If Canton Intermediate School were to start and dismiss earlier, decreased childcare needs in the morning more free time in the afternoons were cited as the greatest advantages. Sleepier students and unsupervised children in the afternoon were cited as the greatest disadvantages. 58% of the parents responding felt that the starting and dismissal times at the schools should remain as is. 37% of the parents felt that the optimal starting time would be later.

Teachers at Canton Intermediate School, Canton Middle School, and Canton High School were also given the opportunity to complete a survey. Teachers at Cherry Brook Primary School did not take the survey since it was determined early in the study that the time at Cherry Brook Primary School would not be affected. 47% of the respondents teach at Canton High School, 23% at Canton Middle School, and 29% at Canton Intermediate School. 51% of the respondents felt their students get too little sleep, while 47% felt their students get the right amount of sleep. Increased sleep for students and more time in the morning for clubs and less tardiness and absenteeism were cited as the greatest advantages if Canton High School and Middle School started school later. The greatest disadvantages cited were the impact on sports and activities in the afternoon and less time for make-up work and after school help. If Canton Intermediate School were to start and dismiss earlier, the greatest advantage cited was more opportunity after school to meet with both parents and students. Sleepier students in the morning were cited as the greatest disadvantage. 70% of the teachers responding would like to see the starting and dismissal times remain unchanged, while 24% believe a later start time would be beneficial.

Findings

Only one school district in the state has implemented a later start time effectively. This district switched the starting and dismissal times of its middle/high school and intermediate school. Other districts that have explored this concept were unable to make it work due to budgetary constraints and the constraints that athletic contests after school pose.

As the subcommittee reviewed the research, studied what other districts have done, and reviewed the survey results there was much discussion about what could be done in Canton. The following Pros and Cons were discussed: Pros: *less automobile accidents involving teens; increased attendance; less tardiness; correlation with increased achievement; additional time for younger students to play outside; less time for students to be home alone* Cons: *after school work time would be affected; timing of athletic events; less time after school for sports, private lessons, volunteer work; childcare issues for younger students; later family dinner time; loss of sleep for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders*

It was determined that in order for later start times to be implemented at Canton Middle School/High School:

- The time at Cherry Brook Primary School should remain unchanged due to the fact that dismissal time at 3:20 PM is already later. Many K-3 students do not get home until after 4:00 PM presently.
- The starting and dismissal time at Canton Intermediate School (Grades 4-6) would be moved up by 30 minutes (7:30 AM – 2:20 PM).
- The starting and dismissal time at Canton Middle/High School could be moved back by 30 minutes only in order for the buses to transport Cherry Brook students to school on time.
- The other school districts in our athletic conference would need to be willing to delay the starting time of athletic contests.

Much discussion took place regarding the challenges of implementing a later start time. Regarding athletics, with away games held in Ellington, Tolland, Bolton, and Coventry the games would not be able to begin until 4:30 PM or 4:45 PM. There are concerns about making the other teams wait for our teams to arrive and also about how late our students would arrive back in Canton. As discussion took place with other school districts in our athletic conference, some school districts may be willing to make accommodations for us, however Mr. Gula, Canton High School Principal, reported that the districts that make up our athletic conference may change in the near future. This is an issue that is currently being discussed among Principals and Athletic Directors in our conference.

Equally important to the committee members include concerns regarding the impact on the Canton Intermediate School students if the school were to start and dismiss earlier. Students would be arriving home alone in many cases and would be going to the public

library unsupervised. Some members of the subcommittee expressed concern that research shows that students at this age level require 10 to 11 hours worth of sleep. With regards to transportation, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders would be required to be at their bus stops as early as 6:40 AM. Subcommittee members were uncomfortable about having younger students waiting for their bus in the dark. In order to change this, additional buses would need to be added to the bus runs, requiring increased costs to our budget.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that the research that has been conducted in the school districts that have implemented later start times across the country demonstrates positive benefits for middle and high school students.

There are however, challenges and concerns regarding the implementation of a later start time for our middle and high schoolers here in Canton. Many of the concerns discussed above can be addressed. Two of the major challenges, however, are the scheduling of athletic games after school and the time that Canton Intermediate students would need to be at their bus stop in the morning. The issue of the scheduling of athletic events requires the cooperation of the other school districts that are part of our athletic conference. As stated above, we do not currently know which districts will be part of our conference in the near future. Additional buses would be required to address the early pick-up time of our fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

The Later Start Time Subcommittee is recommending to the Board of Education that the starting and dismissal times of each of our schools remain unchanged at this time. This concept can be re-visited once it is determined who will make up our athletic conference. The Board of Education would also need to devote additional funds in the budget for the additional buses required in order for Canton Intermediate School students to be picked up by their buses after 7:00 AM. if the starting time were moved up by 30 minutes. The issue of offering after school programs for Canton Intermediate School students would also need to be addressed.

