

Why School Should Start Later

By the time the first bell rings, I am already behind. My eyes are open, sure, but my mind is still foggy. I am trying to take notes in algebra while half my mind is wondering how I got to school at all. And here is the thing: I am not alone. You would be hard-pressed to find a high schooler who is fully alert at 8:00 a.m. We are not unmotivated. We are sleep-deprived. And we should not be punished for something our biology cannot help.

Teenagers go through a natural shift in their sleep cycles during adolescence. Our bodies start releasing melatonin, the hormone that signals it is time to sleep, much later than they did when we were younger. So when we are told to go to bed earlier, it is like telling someone to fall asleep at 6 p.m. on command. It simply does not work that way.

Sleep is not just about rest. It is connected to memory, mood regulation, and even immune health. According to the CDC, most teens are not getting the recommended 8–10 hours of sleep. That means we are showing up to school half-functioning, trying to learn new material while our brains are still in recovery mode. No wonder so many of us struggle with focus, anxiety, and burnout.

Some adults argue that later start times would interfere with after-school activities or parents' work schedules. But there is already evidence that this idea works. When Seattle's public schools pushed their start time to 8:45, attendance increased and grades improved. Students even reported feeling less depressed. Imagine what would happen if more districts gave us the sleep our brains are asking for.

This is not about making life easier. It is about making school make sense. We are expected to perform, to stay sharp, to be 'college ready,' yet we are asked to do it while running on fumes. If schools truly want students to thrive, they have to create an environment where learning can actually happen. That begins with giving us the basic building block of all learning: rest.

Later start times will not solve every problem in education, but they are a concrete, research-backed step toward helping students show up for the day ahead. It is time we stop treating exhaustion like a rite of passage and start treating sleep like the essential tool it is.