Study: School bell rings too early in La.

Activists say lack of sleep for teens leads to health issues

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Parents in Louisiana are having to roust their kids out of bed far too early for school, a new study says, and it could be hampering their ability to learn.

The 7 a.m. start times most middle and high school students throughout the Baton Rouge metro area must adhere to on weekdays means getting up at the crack of dawn to get dressed, eat breakfast and make it to the bus stop by as early as 6 a.m.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report says Louisiana’s public middle and high schools have school start times that are, on average, at least an hour earlier than the 8:30 a.m. start time experts suggest.

Researchers and advocates for later start times say forcing teenagers to wake up too early can lead to teens being overweight, depressed, performing poorly in school and engaging in unhealthy behavior, such as drug use.

Most local school officials find merit in the data but aren’t keen on pushing back school start times.

They say other factors have to be weighed in making decisions on school start time — among them bus routes, extracurricular activities held after classes end for the day and the strain it could place on the households of working parents.

“Whatever is best for the kids, we’re going to try do,” East Baton Rouge Parish Superintendent Warren Drake said. “But whenever you make changes geared toward one group, you have to make sure it’s not going to create more...
problems for another group.”

"It's a complex issue," Lafayette Parish School Superintendent Donald Aguillard adds. "Research shows high school students need more sleep, but our times are often based on buses. And, if you put the buses on the road later, it causes more congestion, which could lead to more accidents. Then, at the end of the school day, students have practice and other activities, so if you start later, you have to push that back."

But Debbie Moore, chapter coordinator for the national advocacy group Start School Later, argues that local school districts spend more time making excuses about why it's burdensome to delay school start times than actually trying to address the issue.

"I believe that communities adjust to school district times, not the other way around," Moore said. "Experts say the sleep habits they develop as teenagers will stay with them all their lives. And we've become a society that thinks it's a badge of honor if you can brag about how little sleep you can get — means you're working harder."

The CDC report states Louisiana has the largest percentage — 29.9 percent — of middle and high schools starting class before 7:30 a.m. when compared with the more than 39,700 public middle, high and combined schools across the country that CDC and the U.S. Department of Education analyzed in a 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey.

The CDC report, released Aug. 7, says fewer than 1 in 5 middle and high schools in the country started the school day at the recommended 8:30 a.m. start time, or later, during the 2011-12 school year.

Much of the latest CDC report highlights research from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which stressed teenagers should be getting between 8½ to 9½ hours of sleep each day.

The report asserts that few get that much sleep, with 2 out of 3 high school students in the country getting less than 8 hours of shuteye on school nights.

Students who don't get enough sleep are more likely to be overweight, less physically active, depressed and too tired to perform well in school and more likely to smoke, drink alcohol and use illicit drugs, the report states.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, the first bell summoning middle and high schoolers to class sounds at 7:10 a.m. with elementary students shuffling in an hour and 15 minutes later each day.

Many other school districts do the same because it gives districts, like East Baton Rouge Parish, the ability to lower their transportation costs by having buses haul the older students in first and then doubling back to pick up the younger kids.

This summer, the district revamped its bus routes so that buses no longer had to cross the Intracoastal bridge, which gets snarled with traffic during peak travel times on weekdays.

The parish's elementary schools now begin at 7:35 a.m. while its middle and high school students start class at 8:05 a.m.

Prior to the change, students on the north end of the parish typically start later, but we need to consider how does it impact athletics and after-school activities," she said.

The parish's Early College Academy begins class much later, at 11 a.m., and lets out at 5:50 p.m., but that choice had to do with the location of the high school — on the campus of South Louisiana Community College, where morning time classroom space is at a premium.

Students at ECA have adjusted well to the later schedule, but the school isn't a comprehensive high school and has no athletic programs, Billeaudeau said.

This year in West Baton Rouge Parish, school start times were pushed up due to growing traffic problems on the west side of the Mississippi River. Officials said severe traffic congestion was causing the district to lose qualified teachers.

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The parish's elementary schools now begin at 7:35 a.m. while its middle and high school students start class at 8:05 a.m.

Prior to the change, students on the north end of the parish started class at 7:40 a.m. while kids on the south end didn't have to report to school until 8:30 a.m.

"Because the older kids do better starting late, we had the younger kids start first," School Superintendent Wesley Watts said. "It's too early to tell right now, but I think it's going to benefit the kids and the teachers."

Start School Later, the nationwide advocacy group dedicated to increasing public awareness regarding sleep times and school start times, says school districts that have delayed start times have seen improved attendance and graduation rates and standardized test scores.

Which is why Moore, who leads the organization's chapter in Arlington, Texas, scratches her head at the resistance from local school districts to making it happen. She said they seem to find every reason they can not to make the adjustment.

"They'll say it's too expensive. The teens can handle it better, so we'll have them start first; it will teach them responsibility," she said. "Telling a teenager he should not have enough sleep so he can be prepared for the real world is like telling a toddler he should skip his nap so he can be prepared for the fifth grade."

Moore said it's important that parents and community leaders who are opposed to the early start times challenge school districts on the decision and force school leaders to prove it's really too expensive or would adversely affect extracurricular activities.

"There is no research showing a correlation between successful extracurricular programs and school start times," she said. "And until the school day is equal to the traditional workday, there will always be child care issues."