



**Sleep Health Advisory Committee
Responses to Frequently Asked Questions
Presented to the School Committee on
January 4, 2023**

Objective

Members of the Sleep Health Advisory Committee identified issues that were commonly raised by students, families, and staff on the proposed options for changing school start and end times for the next school year. This FAQ document, summarized in this slide deck, is intended to provide helpful information regarding themes found in the survey feedback.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why is changing the school start times even being considered?

A: This is an important health issue for our students

- Three-plus decades of research that clearly show the benefits of later start times for adolescents
- Major medical organizations recommend 8-10 hours of sleep per night, and when students don't get enough there are impacts on their physical and mental health and academic performance

Q: Do our Shrewsbury High School students really experience sleep deprivation?

A: Yes!

- 50% of Shrewsbury High School students report getting 6 or fewer hours of sleep per night
- Only 20% report getting the recommended 8-10 hours of sleep
- Sleep deprivation has multiple negative impacts on students, including mental health. Research shows 40% of students who get fewer than 6 hours of sleep report symptoms of depression

Q: Will changing start times solve the problem of high school students being sleep deprived, and will other ways to improve sleep health, such as homework and technology use, be addressed to improve student physical and mental health?

A: Changing start times is a proven approach for students to get more sleep, which is an important part of the solution, but not the only part

- Decisions about activities, jobs, course workload, homework, and technology use are other factors affecting sleep hygiene that must also be considered and addressed
- However, given that teens' biology makes it difficult for most to fall asleep before 11:00pm, school start times that require students to wake up before they can get the recommended 8-10 hours of sleep compromise students' sleep health, even if all the other factors are addressed

Q: Does this proposed change make enough of an impact on students' sleep to be worthwhile?

A: Yes!

- Studies show that even a modest delay in school start times (greater than 10 minutes) increases student sleep durations
- Because of the short time frame between the SHS start at 7:35 and the middle schools' start at 8:00, SHS buses run very early; under Option A SHS bus students' increased sleep opportunity will be as much as 35 minutes longer and under Option B as much as 1 hour and 15 minutes

Q: Won't students just stay up later if school starts later?

A: Studies consistently indicate that students get more sleep when school starts later

- This includes an extensive study of over 28,000 suburban students in Colorado, which showed that on average students stayed up a little bit later but slept much later, gaining significantly more sleep

Q: Will having later start times leave our high school students unprepared for college and workplace start times in the “real world?”

A: The research clearly shows that this issue is tied to the biology of teens’ internal “sleep clocks,” where they naturally fall asleep later and experience the healthiest REM sleep later in their sleep cycle.

- This is not a case of simply “toughening up,” as it is how most adolescents’ bodies function
- One wouldn’t stop allowing a 3-year-old to nap to get them ready for first grade when they are 6. Providing better opportunities for teens to get more sleep to help them be more successful in high school is better preparation for college (where it is rare for classes to begin prior to 8:00am) and the workplace

Q: Why can't all the schools start at the same time, around 8:30am?

A: This is logistically not possible without massive increases in cost

- This would require tripling the number of buses, at a cost of \$6+ million per year (or \$3+million per year if we changed from a three tiers of bus schedule to only two tiers)
- Many families have students at different levels and strongly desire staggered arrival and dismissal times for childcare or other family logistics

Q. Elementary aged students wake up early and are ready to go in the morning. I am concerned that my elementary aged student will be too tired to learn in the afternoon. Was starting the elementary aged students in the earliest time slot considered?

A. Yes

- The Sleep Health Advisory Committee considered models that flipped the elementary level with other levels, as is the case in some other districts.
- Feedback from the ThoughtExchange survey indicated concerns about elementary students waiting for buses in the dark in the early morning
- Some districts who explored changing start times who proposed moving elementary schedules earlier abandoned their efforts due to significant family opposition to that change, due to morning darkness and the need for older siblings to provide childcare in the afternoons
- For over two decades, Beal Early Childhood Center started at 9:15am and ended at 3:30pm, with strong student success
- The Sleep Health Advisory Committee is reviewing concerns about the proposed later K-4 dismissal time and will take them into consideration in its final recommendation

Q: Neither of the new options presented work well for me or my family. What can we do?

A: The Sleep Health Advisory Committee recognizes that no schedule, including the current schedule, meets everyone's needs or preferences

- Any change in school schedules will affect every student, family, and staff member
- The Advisory Committee has attempted to weigh the trade-offs between providing more sleep opportunity for students to gain proven health and well-being benefits on the one hand, with the level of disruption to family and staff schedules and childcare, impact on student jobs and staff second jobs, activities, athletics, etc. on the other
- Other districts have made similar changes, including our neighbors in Northborough, Southborough, and Westborough, and they report that they have adapted and feel the change has been a positive one

Q: How will students, faculty, and staff attend after-school commitments such as appointments, therapies, sports, performances, and arts classes?

A: The Sleep Health Committee recognizes that this can be a logistical challenge for many families and staff

- Many other Massachusetts districts have made changes to start and end times, and their school communities have adapted and have stuck with their decision to change due to the benefits they have experienced, but this had not been without some disruption to after school activities
- The Sleep Health Advisory Committee is reviewing concerns about the proposed later K-4 dismissal time and will take them into consideration in its final recommendation

Q: How will some school staff attend to their own personal appointments if they are getting out of school later?

A: The Sleep Health Committee recognizes that this can be a logistical challenge for some school staff

- Everyone in the community can relate to the issues faced by working individuals and those with caregiving responsibilities to obtain personal appointments within the constraints of work and caregiving schedules
- Shifts in start times may allow some staff to make appointments early in the day before school; other appointments may require taking personal time during the workday
- It is important to acknowledge that flexing to meet both work and personal commitments is an issue that is not unique to school personnel

Q: How will this change impact families who rely on child care and care provided by older siblings?

A: The impact will vary according to each family's needs; our process has given great consideration to this issue

- Neither change option affects the ability for older siblings to care for younger siblings in the afternoons
- The Child Care Task Group surveyed more than 250 area child care facilities, and their findings indicate that in almost all cases their hours would be able to accommodate the options presented
- Lead times for schedule changes for existing child care range from two days to one month; more lead time is needed for initial enrollment (sometimes months), which is why this process will provide seven months' lead time

Q: What time will the Extended School Care (ESC) program begin and end under these options?

A: The elementary school ESC program would maintain the same hours, and under Option A a morning program might be added at Sherwood due to its later start time

- The elementary ESC would continue to be available from 7:00am until school opens in the mornings, and then will remain open until 6:00pm after school
- ESC staffing hours would be affected, as programs would be open for less time in the afternoons, with some offset with more time in the mornings for certain staff members

Q: Will the proposed changes to school start and end times create more traffic issues?

A: While it's not possible to project all potential impacts to traffic, it is expected that campus traffic will be similar to what it is now

- Both options maintain the 3-tier busing model, so no additional buses would be added to the roads
- Increasing the length of time between tiers is proposed to allow for the necessary time for buses to complete their routes

Q: Instead of changing all the school start times, why not just give teens education in healthy sleep practices and take their electronics from them so they can get to bed earlier?

A: While setting an earlier bedtime would be a simple solution, for most adolescents their sleep cycle is a function of their biology

- Research on teens' circadian rhythms and sleep needs makes it clear that it is not simply a matter of getting to bed earlier or putting devices down (in fact, lots of this research predates cell phones and smartphones)
- Restricting technology use at night is a good sleep hygiene practice, and should be part of what families and students are urged to do, but even with good practices most teens will have trouble falling asleep before 11:00pm, which does not allow for the recommended 8-10 hours of sleep when school begins early, with some buses picking up as early as 6:19am

Timeline

January 4, 2023: Public hearing at the School Committee meeting to listen to feedback from stakeholders

January 18, 2023: Recommendation for preferred option presented by Sleep Health Advisory Committee; discussion of options by the School Committee and potential vote

January 25, 2023: Potential additional School Committee meeting for discussion/vote (if necessary)

February 1, 2023: Last recommended School Committee meeting for discussion/vote to implement any change for the start of the 2023-2024 school year (if necessary)

Comments and Questions

