**If later school start times are better, why aren't they more popular?**

Jennifer Pignolet and Linda A. Moore - *The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal –* August 2017

GERMANTOWN, Tenn. — A year after this Memphis suburb decided to start [middle- and high-school classes a bit later](http://memne.ws/2w5OknG) in the morning in hopes of improving student achievement, none of the seven other districts in the county have found the motivation to change. As California considers a first-of-its kind bill to outlaw a school day starting before 8:30 a.m., school districts across 19 states have later start times this school year than last, according to the nonprofit advocacy group Schools Start Later.

Shelby County school leaders cite the cost, logistics and an overall lack of interest as factors why they're not changing. Some schools in each district start as early as 7 a.m. CT in spite of mountains of recent studies and lobbying from medical groups on the benefits of starting school no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Germantown residents also aren't uniformly convinced their expensive change — $500,000 for this school year — was for the better . "I’m not seeing any bright, shiny, happy kids kicking their heels together," Houston High Principal Kyle Cherry said. The change in Germantown came through grassroots efforts, driven by parents incensed that some children riding the bus had to wake up as early as 5:45.

Cole Bowden, 16, of Germantown and a student at Houston High, started school 45 minutes later this past year, shifting to a 7:45 bell and pushing the end of school from 2 p.m. to 2:45. The rising junior doesn't like that it pushes his wrestling practlce further into the afternoon, leaving less time for homework or a job. But his sister, 14-year-old Paige Bowden, loved being able to start eighth-grade classes at 8 a.m. at Houston Middle School. "A house divided," their mother Jodie Bowden said of her children's split feelings. The elder Bowden is Germantown Municipal Council Parent-Teacher Association president.

Dr. Merrill Wise sees the aftermath of schools' early starting times every day. "They’re excessively sleepy," Wise, a sleep medicine specialist, said of the adolescent patients who come to him at the Methodist Healthcare Sleep Disorder Center in Memphis. The average high school student sleeps 6 to 6½ hours a night, he said. They need 8 to 10. "We are living with a sleep deprivation epidemic," Wise said.

That's why he co-authored the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's position paper on school start times, released in April. Wise served a six-year term on the academy's board and joined current board members in calling for school districts to start classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

The move would promote healthier physical safety — many high school students drive themselves to school — as well as better cognitive function and social behaviors, he said.

"I think it’s one of the most modifiable factors that parents and school personnel could pursue," Wise said. But a later start time isn't solely the answer, he said. Families have to be educated about healthy sleep schedules, prying electronic devices away from children at night and creating routines that lead to more sleep.

Without those factors, schools may not see much difference in their children, Wise said.

When residents in Germantown — along with the cities of Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Lakeland and Millington — voted to break away from Shelby County Schools and start their own districts, the ability to make decisions on a hyper-local level was a key point.

When Germantown's district took shape in early 2014, a number of parents saw the opportunity to change something that had long bothered them, the 7 a.m. start time at Houston middle and high schools. Parents came in droves to speak at board meetings about pushing back the time. But that spurred others to speak out in favor of the early time, citing after-school activities and jobs that would be affected if school started later. Linda Fisher, the current board chairwoman and one of the founding members of the board, said early concerns were over finances.

At the time, schools in the district started at 7, 8 and 9 a.m. Pushing them all back would make elementary schools start too late, so more schools would have to start at the same time, requiring more buses and bus drivers. The district has a contract with Durham School Services for its transportation, and as part of that it shares buses with Collierville Schools. The contract included a clause that if one district altered its start times, affecting their ability to share buses, that district would have to cover the increased costs for both school systems. The board balked at a price tag in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, voting 3-2 against changing the times. They promised to review the issue the following year.

Parental voices intensified, and the district held meetings for parents, teachers and school leaders. The second vote was unanimous: Starting in the 2016-17 year, no school started before 7:45 a.m. "I think everybody definitely was in agreement that it was the best decision for our students," Fisher said. "It was the financial aspect that held it off a year." The total cost was about $1 million over the two remaining years of the contract with Durham and Collierville. That includes $350,000 paid to Collierville for the effect on its bus schedule. While that part of the cost goes away after the contract terminates at the end of this school year, Germantown will still have $200,000 to $300,000 in extra transportation costs each year in a district with fewer than 6,000 students.

For parent Laura Meanwell, who led the charge to change the times, the expense was worth it.

“Last year it was wonderful sending our kids to school in daylight," she said. "They were rested. We were very grateful for the change.” Cherry, the principal, declined to comment on whether he thought the change was worth the money. "It all depends upon who you ask," he said, noting that tardiness rates didn't drop and complaints of after-school activities pushed back were new.

The district made several changes last year that will make it hard to say for sure what variables worked or didn't, Superintendent Jason Manuel said. Test scores have not yet been released although the high school is one of the highest performing in the state.

St. George's Independent School, which has a high school in Collierville, Tenn., but offers shuttles for students from almost 15 miles away in East Memphis, changed last year from an 8 a.m. start time to 8:30.  Head of School Ross Peters said the move was a response to research saying the 8:30 time is healthier but was also a way to make the school as accessible as possible for students who live farther away. Instead of pushing back the end of the day, the school made class periods during the day longer and fewer, removing transitional time between classes, Peters said.

"We need kids who aren’t just awake enough to absorb content, but they’re rested enough to deeply engage the material in front of them," Peters said. Collierville Schools is building a $93 million high school, which may spur conversations about start times when it opens, Superintendent John Aitken said. In Arlington Community Schools, Superintendent Tammy Mason said the district looked at a later start time, but $300,000 in extra costs put a hold on that conversation. "Over multiple years, that adds up," Mason said.

**Later school start times in the U.S. - An economic analysis**

The Rand Corporation - [Marco Hafner](https://www.rand.org/about/people/h/hafner_marco.html), [Martin Stepanek](https://www.rand.org/about/people/s/stepanek_martin.html), [Wendy M. Troxel](https://www.rand.org/about/people/t/troxel_wendy_m.html) -

Numerous studies have shown that later school start times are associated with positive student outcomes, including improvements in academic performance, mental and physical health, and public safety. While the benefits are well-documented in the literature, there is opposition against delaying school times across the U.S. A major argument is the claim that delaying school start times will result in significant additional costs due to changes in transportation, such as rescheduling bus routes. This study investigates the economic implications of later school start times by examining a policy experiment and its subsequent state-wide economic effects of a state-wide universal shift in school start times to 8:30 a.m.

Using a novel macroeconomic modelling approach, the study estimates changes in the economic performance of 47 U.S. states following a delayed school start time, which includes the benefits of higher academic performance of students and reduced car crash rates. The benefit-cost projections of this study suggest that delaying school start times is a cost-effective, population-level strategy which could have a significant impact on public health and the U.S. economy. From a policy perspective, the study's findings demonstrate the significant economic gains resulting from the delay in school start times over a relatively short period of time following the adoption of the policy change.

**Key Findings**

* The study suggested that delaying school start times to 8:30 a.m. is a cost-effective, population-level strategy which could have a significant impact on public health and the U.S. economy.
* The study suggested that the benefits of later start times far out-weigh the immediate costs. Even after just two years, the study projects an economic gain of $8.6 billion to the U.S. economy, which would already outweigh the costs per student from delaying school start times to 8:30 a.m.
* After a decade, the study showed that delaying schools start times would contribute $83 billion to the U.S. economy, with this increasing to $140 billion after 15 years. During the 15 year period examined by the study, the average annual gain to the U.S. economy would about $9.3 billion each year.
* Throughout the study's cost-benefit projections, a conservative approach was undertaken which did not include other effects from insufficient sleep, such as higher suicide rates, increased obesity and mental health issues — all of which are difficult to quantify precisely. Therefore, it is likely that the reported economic benefits from delaying school start times could be even higher across many U.S. states.

**Schools around the US are finally pushing back their start times — and it's working**

*Front Gate -* [*Tech Insider*](http://www.businessinsider.com/sai) - [Chris Weller](http://www.businessinsider.com/author/chris-weller) - Sep 4, 2017

* Schools in 45 states have pushed their start times back to fall in line with research that looks at the biological clock of adolescents.
* Administrators have found short-term roadblocks but long-term rewards for students, parents, and teachers.
* A greater appreciation for the benefits, not the downsides, of starting school later could help more schools help their students.

Rick Tony teaches math at Solebury School, in New Hope, Pennsylvania, but he's well aware of the science of sleep. For the 2016-2017 school year, Tony, who also works as the boarding and day school's director of studies, led the charge on moving Solebury's 8:00 a.m. start time half an hour later to 8:30 four days of the week. On Wednesdays, the first bell doesn't ring until 9:00 a.m.

Now a year into the policy, Tony said, students are less stressed and performing just as well if not better in their classes. A survey he issued schoolwide showed students and teachers are widely in favor of the policy. He's gotten similar feedback from parents saying an 8:30 start time makes for a less hectic morning. "It's a no-brainer," Tony told Business Insider of renewing the policy for this coming academic year. "We would do it again in a heartbeat."

**Sleeping in and doing better**

To date, [schools in 45 states](http://www.startschoollater.net/success-stories.html) have adopted a policy similar to Solebury's. Each falls in line with the prevailing best practices proposed by organizations like the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The trend also reflects a change in attitude among administrators, who are now accepting the fact that obstacles like rejiggering athletics and transportation aren't impossibilities.

Tony sympathized with such concerns, but ultimately said the short-term investments of time are worth the long-term gains passed on to students. "It's not a matter of thinking about what you're going to lose," he said, "but look what you stand to gain by making a change like this."

Recent research [published by the RAND Corporation and RAND Europe](http://www.businessinsider.com/later-school-start-times-could-add-billions-to-economy-2017-8) found 8:30 a.m. start times could add $83 billion to the US economy over the next 10 years. Marco Hafner, lead author of the study, said the increase in high school graduation rates and decrease in health concerns, such as rates of obesity and car crashes due to sleeplessness, should more than make up for the hassles of putting the policy in place.

**'The mornings were just less stressful'**

Lisa Brady has seen those benefits firsthand for the past couple years. As the superintendent of Dobbs Ferry School District, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, Brady has observed students and parents alike remark on the many upsides to the extra time in the morning. Following a survey issued at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, Brady told Business Insider "it was clear from both the parents and the kids, overwhelmingly, that the mornings were just less stressful."

Many of the kids reported having more time to eat breakfast and get ready for school, while parents said they didn't have to drag kids out of bed or yell at them to hurry up. Once students got to school, they felt more alert. At night, they tended to report going to bed at the same time, even though the new schedule freed up an extra 45 minutes.

In Seattle, 85% of middle and high schools in the 2016-2017 school year swapped start times with the elementary schools. Now the older kids start at 8:45 while the younger ones start at 7:55. In 2016, Kira Hoffman, a then-eighth-grader at Jane Addams Middle School, [told KUOW](http://kuow.org/post/seattle-changed-school-bell-times-let-teens-sleep-heres-what-happened) that she no longer felt "super-rushed or worried about how much I've slept, or when I'm going to get to school, or if I'm going to be late."

**Later start times aren't perfect**

Schools that have followed through with delaying the first bell have run into challenges. Tony conceded the bus schedule can still be difficult to manage. (Fortunately, he said, a number of students live on campus or have their parents drive them.) Brady said some parents actually feel *more* rushed in the mornings, since their routine for work used to come after their kids but now overlaps.

Both have tried to work around the problem by keeping the school open earlier, so kids can eat breakfast, finish up homework, or just hang out. Brady has also found challenges with athletics and after-school clubs. In years prior, teams had no trouble getting to away games. Now they have less time to get there, and they have to deal with worse traffic. "The kids feel really rushed," she told Business Insider.

Once they finally get home, many say they have less time for all the homework they've been assigned. Solebury has overcome this challenge by coupling a delayed start time with fewer classes during the day. Instead of taking six 50-minute classes, students take four 80-minute classes. They end at the same time but get more done and have less homework.

"It's easy to see the obstacles to keep you from doing something like this," he said. "It's hard to see the gains sometimes. Maybe we're reaping some of those not even knowing about it."

**A lack of empathy for kids**

Delayed start times are growing in popularity, but they are still rare. Brady said it has to do with a lack of empathy for pre-teens and teens. "I get that years ago we all walked a hundred miles in the snow to school," she said. "But we know better now about the adolescent brain, and we know about their natural sleep rhythms being different than adults'." Marco Hafner, of the RAND study, said he hopes schools will have more of an incentive if they know money could be on the line.

For all the good it does, Solebury isn't satisfied with its 8:30 a.m. start time, Tony said. Administrators are still looking into whether the 9:00 a.m. Wednesday start time would be feasible the other four days of the week. Tony recalled asking a visiting psychologist whether the extra half hour would even make a difference anyway. "She said anything you can do is going to be a big gain," he said.