

# The early bird gets the worm; but teens are getting too tired

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Michelle Pindrik, a junior, rubs her face to stay awake during teacher Rich Schram's eighth period honors physics class, Aug. 28, 2014, at Buffalo Grove High School in Buffalo Grove, Illinois. The American Academy of Pediatrics says school start times should be pushed to 8:30 a.m. or later, as many students aren't getting enough sleep. Photo: Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune/MCT

CHICAGO — Nicole Bankowski only gets five hours of sleep most nights. She takes difficult AP classes, edits the school newspaper, sings in the choir, and is treasurer of the student council.

She rarely starts her homework before 10:30 p.m.

"It's probably not the healthiest way to live, but it's the only way to get everything done," said Bankowski, a senior in high school.

The new school year has just started, but students are already sleep-deprived. They aren't getting the 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep each night they need to grow and learn.

## **Not Enough Sleep**

Last week, an organization of pediatricians — doctors who treat children and young adults — called on schools to start later so students can get more sleep.

Young people not getting enough sleep is “a national public health crisis,” according to Judith Owens, a sleep expert at a children's medical center in Washington, D.C.

Owens said starting school later is a simple and effective way to make sure young people are getting enough sleep and avoiding the negative consequences of too little sleep.

The pediatricians recommended that schools start at 8:30 a.m. or later. Today, more than eight out of 10 schools start earlier than that.

Most Chicago-area high schools start at 8 a.m., though some start as early as 7 a.m. Many student athletes have early practices at 6 a.m. For all these students, fatigue, or exhaustion, is a way of life.

## **"The Perfect Storm"**

Being busy is one reason high school students don't get enough sleep. But it's not the only reason, researchers say. As young people start puberty, their internal clocks change, and it can be harder for them to get to bed early.

“The 10-year-old who went to bed at 9 p.m. becomes the 13-year-old who can't get to sleep until 11,” Owens said.

Young people start sleeping differently at the same time their minds and bodies are changing and school is becoming more intense. Owens called it “the perfect storm” — many negative things coming together at once.

Students may need more sleep, but school administrators say there are many reasons why changing school start times would be difficult. They range from bus schedules to parents' commutes.

David Schuler, superintendent of a Chicago school district, explained that starting school later means ending school later. That could cause problems for after-school activities like softball, soccer, golf and football.

“I can't change when the sun sets,” he said. “Even band practice would be affected.”

## **Up Late And Up Early**

At one school district in the Chicago area, classes start earlier as students get older. Elementary schools start at 8:15 a.m., middle schools at 8 a.m. and high schools at 7:45 a.m.

The issue of student sleep “is on our radar screen,” according to a district spokeswoman. The district is studying how to best manage students’ time for their learning and well-being, she said.

Studies from the past 20 years have shown that a good night’s sleep is key for both emotional and physical health. Children who regularly don’t get enough sleep have a higher risk of serious diseases later in life.

Students today face serious competition, though. For them it’s “you snooze, you lose.”

Bankowski is taking a full class schedule — including AP calculus, economics, environmental science and literature. She’s often burning the candle at both ends — staying up late and waking up early. Sometimes she doesn’t get to bed until 3 a.m.

College applications are starting this month, and Bankowski expects to be even busier.

“I have to take my future into consideration,” she said. “It’s more important than going out or taking a nap.”

## **Two More Early Birds**

Matt Shapiro is another student who doesn’t get enough sleep. He’s president of the student council and captain of his school’s speech and debate team. Shapiro is up at 6 every morning, but he always fights off the sleepiness when it hits him in class.

He said he fell asleep in school once in third grade, and never wants to let it happen again.

For Lauren Ward, a high school senior who plays soccer and is on the student council, there’s no space in her day. Her mother takes her and her brother, a sophomore, to school at 6 a.m. because he has a football conditioning class at that hour.

Even snacking on candy all day isn’t enough to keep Ward awake and alert all the time.

“Really, it’s usually third period before I start feeling like a human,” she said.