

EDUCATION

Why So Early?: What's the Relationship Between School Starting Times and Student Engagement?

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High school students are in school for roughly 35 hours per week, continuously trying to strengthen their minds. Schools begin their day between 7:30 and 8:30 in the morning. After visiting a local school that started at 7:30 a.m., I discovered that students were unresponsive to even the most interesting lessons for the first periods of the day. I wanted to ascertain the reason for this early morning lethargy; was it due to the time school started? Through teacher interviews, student surveys, and classroom observations, I noticed that students in the first period class were less responsive to any stimuli than the second period students. Fifty-four percent of students surveyed supported the early starting times due to factors such as after-school sports and jobs. Compared to the 38% of students surveyed that cited lack of sleep and breakfast, it appears that the majority of students favor the after-school activities. While there is not substantial research on the topic, according to some studies pushing school starting times back one-half hour makes a difference in students' alertness and thinking capabilities. While students defended starting school at 7:30 a.m. for financial and extracurricular reasons, most admitted that they do not accomplish much during the first periods of the day due to lack of sleep. I believe that a trial period of later

school starting times could be implemented, as deemed appropriate, based on evidence showing that starting school at 7:30 a.m. is not conducive to student learning.

Research advisor Janet Alsup says, "Jim's project demonstrates that a young teacher can conduct critical inquiry into educational policy. How the secondary school class day is organized may seem a mundane topic; however, research shows that starting times can affect student learning. Jim's research provides evidence that school starting times may need to be reconsidered."



Herman teaching a class during a typical first period of the day.

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