



## The Case for Starting School Later: Addressing Adolescent Sleep and Later School Start Times in New Jersey

Over the last two decades, hundreds of school districts nationwide have shifted their school start times and seen results such as increased student sleep, improved educational outcomes, and improved mental health. Research has shown that insufficient sleep is a major public health concern for adolescents, impacting not only their academic performance but also their mental health, physical health, and overall well-being. In NJ, the vast majority of schools (86%) start their days before 8:30 am. Because adolescents experience a circadian rhythm or “sleep phase shift” that inhibits them from falling asleep before 11 pm and keep their brains in “sleep mode” until about 8 am, the AAP, CDC, AMA, and dozens of other organizations, have issued policy statements recommending that adolescents get 8.5-10 hours of sleep each night and that secondary schools start their day at 8:30 or later.

Established in 2019, NJAAP’s [Task Force on Adolescent Sleep and School Start Times](#) is making strides advocating for later school start times in New Jersey, in alignment with the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) Policy Statement on [School Start Times for Adolescents](#).

“I’ve been honored to be involved with NJAAP’s School Start Times Task Force,” noted Ryan Shintani, a student at Ridgewood High School and current member of the Task Force. “It has been incredibly rewarding to be a voice for the youth, especially during the legislative visits, where I had the opportunity to speak on the student experience with later school start times. I’m grateful to work alongside an organization that shares my goal of improving the well-being of students and advocating for policies that support their health and success.”

The AAP has long recommended that middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 AM to better align with the natural sleep cycles of teenagers. This shift is crucial because adolescents experience changes in their circadian rhythms that make it difficult for them to fall asleep before 11:00 PM, meaning early school start times often result in chronic sleep deprivation.

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“Changing start times at Ridgewood HS has had a tremendous impact on kids and parents,” shared Deborah Steinbaum, MD, MPH, FAAP, a pediatrician, parent, and Task Force member who helped advocate for the change at Ridgewood High School. “Our teens are sleeping more and are less stressed, parents are happier, and our sports teams are winning. I’ve had parents tell me, “We will never go back!”

In 2020, the Task Force developed a position statement echoing national policy in support of later school start times and advocating for systemic change in the state. In response to mounting evidence and a growing body of research, the Task Force continues to focus on several key goals aimed at improving adolescent health through better sleep:

- **Sharing the Science of Adolescent Sleep:** The Task Force is committed to raising awareness about the biological science behind adolescent sleep. Studies have shown that adequate sleep is essential for healthy brain development, emotional regulation, and cognitive performance. By educating school leaders, parents, and communities about these findings, we can encourage informed decision-making around school start times.
- **Supporting School Districts to Adjust Schedules:** We are engaging with school district leaders across New Jersey to support administrators seeking to move high school start times after 8:30 AM.
- **Educating Key Decision Makers:** NJAAP leadership continue to meet with New Jersey legislators and key organizations involving school stakeholders, to provide education on the introduced statewide policy requiring later start times for high schools, which, if passed, would bring NJ in line with other states that have passed similar legislation to address adolescent sleep health needs.
- **Providing Resources and Information:** The Task Force is acting as a central repository for resources related to school start times in New Jersey, sharing helpful data, best practice strategies, and logistical information with districts working to implement these changes.
- **Workshops and Presentations:** Task Force members are frequently invited to present workshops on adolescent sleep and school start times for both statewide and national conferences, ensuring the conversation about the importance of adolescent sleep continues to grow.

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Two states, California and Florida, have already passed legislation mandating later school start times to improve adolescent health outcomes. Several others, including neighboring New York and Pennsylvania, currently have legislation moving forward with the same goal in mind. Locally, a growing number of districts in New Jersey have made the change to later start times in recent years, including Princeton Public Schools, the School District of the Chathams, Ridgewood Public Schools, the Bernards Township School District, and Cumberland Regional High School, among others.

“This one policy change to align healthy school start times with teenagers’ circadian rhythms can positively impact their mental health, physical health and their overall wellbeing,” emphasized Bert Mandelbaum, MD, FAAP, Chair of the Task Force on Adolescent Sleep and School Start Times. “We will continue to do everything we can to build a framework to help individual schools achieve this change and also to move legislation forward to establish this change permanently so all teenagers in New Jersey can reap the benefits of more sleep.”

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