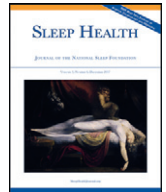




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Engaging the community in the process of changing school start times: experience of the Cherry Creek School District

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing evidence of the positive impact of later school start times on adolescent health and academic outcomes, relatively few districts have changed start times due to concerns about transportation, child care, and athletics/extracurricular activities. This paper provides a case study of the Cherry Creek School District's (CCSD) successful efforts to change start times. The CCSD is a diverse district with an enrollment of almost 55,000 students in suburban Denver. As part of CCSD's strategic plan, a multi-disciplinary task force was formed to examine the impact of start times on student achievement, and recommend a start time schedule driven by best practices on adolescent sleep patterns, balanced with family and community needs. Over 18 months the task force's work included engaging the community through meetings, as well as conducting a large survey ($n = 24,574$) of parents, teachers, and students, and gathering online feedback. An iterative process utilized feedback at every stage to refine the final recommendation given to the Board of Education. Survey results, implementation considerations, outcome evaluation plans, and lessons learned are discussed.

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Introduction

Insufficient sleep in children and adolescents is common, negatively impacting cognitive functioning, emotion regulation, and health.^{1–8} Sleep requirements do not significantly change throughout middle childhood and adolescence, but sleep duration is significantly reduced, with high school seniors commonly obtaining less than 7 hours of sleep per night.^{9,10} One factor that contributes to insufficient sleep in older children and adolescents is the intersection between delayed bedtimes and early school start times.^{11–18} While many argue that adolescents simply need to turn off technology and go to bed earlier, studies show a biological shift in the timing of melatonin release during puberty.^{17,19,20}

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended middle and high schools start no earlier than 8:30 AM, allowing students the opportunity for 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep per night.²¹ This recommendation was based on growing evidence that changing start times results in increased sleep duration and decreased sleepiness,^{11,13,16,22–25} increased attendance and graduation

rates,^{16,26} fewer tardies and increased GPA,^{16,25} fewer students falling asleep in class,^{16,24,25} improved health outcomes,^{16,24} and fewer automobiles crashes.^{13,25}

Across the United States, many districts are considering changing start times; however, common concerns (eg, transportation, child care, athletic/extracurricular activities) have limited major policy shifts.^{27,28}

Following an extensive process of engaging key stakeholders, including parents and students, Cherry Creek School District's (CCSD) Board of Education voted in March 2017 to change start times beginning August 2017. The purpose of this case study is to describe the CCSD decision-making process, ways the district intends to mitigate common concerns, and plans for outcomes evaluation. Our goal in providing this information is to assist districts considering changing start times.

Case study: The Cherry Creek School District

The Cherry Creek School District (CCSD) is located in the southeast suburbs of Denver, Colorado. During the 2016–2017 school year, CCSD had an enrollment of 54,695 students, serving over 300,000 residents in a 108 square mile area (www.cherrycreekschools.org). The district includes 42 elementary schools (grades K–5), 10 middle

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schools (grades 6–8), 7 high schools (grades 9–12), 1 magnet school (grades K-8), and 2 charter schools (grades K-8). Student demographics (Table 1) are similar to national averages, and highlight the diversity of CCSD residents. High schools began at 7:10 AM, middle schools between 7:50 and 8:10 AM, and elementary schools at 9:00 AM.

Working committee/task force formation

In January 2015, a committee was formed to examine the impact of start times on student achievement, and recommend a start time schedule driven by best practices on adolescent sleep patterns, balanced with family and community needs. The committee's work was included in the CCSD strategic plan (April 2016), and a formal task force was formed (September 2016). Task force members (Table 2) met regularly to study, review, and identify rationale and constraints regarding an adjustment to start times.

Engaging the community

In person meetings

Starting in the fall of 2016, almost 30 meetings were held with different groups representing school administration, parents, students, staff, and community members. During each meeting information was provided on adolescent sleep and the AAP recommendations. In addition, preliminary recommendations were presented and feedback obtained, allowing for early planning on how to mitigate the most common concerns.

Community survey

A survey was created by the task force and was reviewed and revised based on feedback from early community meetings. The goal of the survey was to seek community input on “tolerance” and “preference” for change. In November 2016 an automated telephone message was sent to all parents/guardians and school-based staff notifying them of the upcoming survey. The next day the survey (Appendix A) was emailed to all parents/guardians (via emails used to register every student Pre-K through 12th grade), to all school-based staff, and to all students in the 8th to 12th grades. Parent surveys were available in both Spanish and Arabic. Survey data were collected by Survey Monkey (San Mateo, CA) and remained open for 10 days. Instructions clearly stated, “the survey is not a vote, but will be used to inform the district’s decision making.”

Respondents

Surveys were completed by 24,574 individuals (36% response rate). Respondents included 12,862 parents/guardians (33% response rate), 8488 students (40% response rate), and 3224 staff (45% response rate). This response was unprecedented for CCSD, which regularly seeks community input through surveys (eg, changes to standardized testing). There was district-wide representation, and a proportional distribution of parents, students, and staff. The following

Table 1
Demographic Information for Students in the Cherry Creek School District

Demographic	%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1%
Asian	8%
Black	11%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%
White	73%
More than One Race	7%
Hispanic	20%
Free and Reduced Lunch Qualification	29%

Table 2
CCSD Start Times Task Force Members

Position	n
Superintendents	
Associate Superintendent	1
Assistant Superintendent	2
Executive Directors	
High School	1
Middle School	1
Elementary Education	3
Inclusive Excellence	1
Curriculum & Instruction	1
School Principals	
High School	3
Middle School	2
Elementary School	4
Adaptive Programs	1
Program Directors/Coordinators	
Assessment and Evaluation	1
Health and Wellness	1
Research and Data	1
Science	1
Food and Nutrition Services	1
Teachers	
High School	1
Middle School	1
Elementary School	1
Teacher Association President	1
Transportation	
Director	1
Route Planning Manager	1
QA/Personnel Resources Manager	1

summarizes some of the key results, with all results (broken down by respondent) presented in Table 3.

Importance of issue

Eighty percent of respondents said it was “Very” or “Relatively Important” to change start times to align with recommendations from the AAP.

Ideal start and end times

Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) supported a start time for high school students between 8:00 and 8:30 AM, with only 8% of participants supporting a start time of 8:45 AM or later. However, follow-up conversations with parents, students, and staff revealed that many people answered this question based on dismissal time, not start time.

For middle school, 81% of respondents stated the latest reasonable dismissal time was between 3:45 and 4:00 PM. This was consistent regardless of role (parent, staff, student) or level (elementary, middle, high school). Similarly, 78% of respondents stated the latest reasonable dismissal time for elementary schools was between 3:45 and 4:00 PM.

Changes to order and length of school day

Significant support (73%) was found for dismissing elementary or middle schools prior to high schools. However, 57% of respondents stated it was important for older students to be dismissed first to supervise younger students. Upon further review, this response was a result of 76% of students stating this was important, compared to 47% of parents and staff. There was also overwhelming support (approximately 85%) to increase middle school days by up to 20 minutes and elementary school days by up to 15 minutes.

Comments

Respondents had the opportunity to provide comments throughout the survey, with 3685 comments provided. Of these, 40% were supportive of the change, 15% did not want to see a change, and 39% were unrelated to the specific start time questions (ie, homework, block schedules, off periods).

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