



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Sleep Health

Journal of the National Sleep Foundation

journal homepage: sleephealthjournal.org

Creating regional consensus for starting school later: A physician-driven approach in Southern Maine[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

ABSTRACT

In April 2016, several contiguous school districts and an independent high school academy in southern Maine voted simultaneously to start school later, beginning with the 2016–17 academic year. They became Maine's first school districts to implement the American Academy of Pediatrics¹ and the American Medical Association's² health policy recommendations that middle and high schools should not start before 8:30 AM. Local physicians' presentations to school staff and parents on the medical evidence of the health benefits of a later start solidified early consensus. The action required special permission from the Maine Municipal Association to hold a joint school board vote, impacted approximately 6500 students across the region, resulted in no increase in busing costs, and took 8 months to implement after the first formal school board discussions.

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Introduction

This paper discusses our local experience of building community consensus and changing policy so that our region's middle and high schools now start school at 8:30 AM. The movement's facilitators comprised a three-part coalition: school and other local pediatricians, key administrators working across school district boundaries, and parent advocates in the local chapter of Start School Later.³ Here we reflect on the sequence of events and extract lessons from our multi-school district approach. Our work had three components: (1) We gathered early opinions and identified perceived obstacles to public support, and we formulated responses and articulated them directly and repeatedly; (2) We engaged local physicians to consistently present school start times as a research-based public health issue; and (3) We measured the impact of the later start times on students and their activities in and outside of school.

Southern Maine's context

Maine's population of 1.3 million is the most homogeneous and elderly in the US.⁴ School enrollment is declining and students now comprise just 13% of the population.⁵ Covering 31,000 square miles, Maine is larger than all other New England states combined. Only four cities have a population over 25,000; the largest, Portland, has just 66,881 people.⁶ Despite the relatively small population, Maine remains proudly local in terms of governance practices with 242 dispersed School Administrative Units and 492 municipalities.⁷ As in many states, low incomes are widespread, with nearly half of Maine's students (and a growing share of them) eligible for free and reduced lunch.⁸ Opioid abuse is rampant; Maine saw nearly a 40% increase in drug overdose deaths in 2016 (to 376) over the previous year.⁹ These features of Maine, including local control, tight budgets, low incomes, and other pressing social and demographic challenges, set the context in which efforts to start school later began.

The coalition of physicians, administrators, and parent advocates decided to approach the start school later effort at the regional level, despite some obstacles to cooperation. We targeted the four school districts in the urban region of Biddeford, Saco, Dayton and Old Orchard Beach, plus Thornton Academy in Saco. Thornton is one of Maine's 11 town academies that receive public tuition if, as in this case, local communities do not have their own public schools

[☆] Conflicts of interest: None.

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(Saco's school district oversees primary and middle schools). Thornton Academy has been Saco's high school for two centuries. In recent years, Thornton has successfully pursued international boarding students, mainly from China, Eastern Europe and South America, in part to compensate for declines in local enrollment and state and local funding. The cities of Biddeford and Saco are a half-hour drive south of Portland and on opposite sides of the Saco River. Dayton and Old Orchard Beach are within 10 miles of both cities. The combined regional population is 50,348, while the student population is just under 6500.

Despite their contiguity, these four towns have distinct demographic and economic compositions. Biddeford and Saco have been historic rivals since the 18th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries textile manufacturing thrived and immigrant labor tended to live in Biddeford and owners and managers in Saco. Since then, the rivalry has been economic, religious, political, and athletic, and has often hindered educational policy cooperation.

More recently, there have been other regional divides that would need to be addressed for a multi-district agreement on delaying school start times. In 2014, the communities of Dayton, Saco, and Old Orchard Beach dissolved their joint school district union due to irreconcilable differences in financial governance and school choice. Dayton has 1 K-5 elementary school and its own limited school board that contracts 1.5 days/week for Biddeford school district administrative services. Dayton retains a school choice option to send students to Biddeford High School or Thornton Academy. Students in all four communities access vocational programs through Biddeford's Center of Technology.

Biddeford, in particular, and the urban region as a whole, present some other notable contrasts and differences. Biddeford educates more than half of York County's minority population. Sixty percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch compared to only 24% in Dayton. Twenty percent of Biddeford's 2016 eighth grade class was new to the district.¹⁰ At the same time, some of Maine's most valuable beachfront property is in Biddeford Pool. Saco is increasingly a bedroom community for Portland and has the second highest property tax rate in Southern Maine. Dayton is rural. Old Orchard Beach is a major summer tourist destination. Along with Saco students, Thornton Academy also educates approximately 250 private pay students from neighboring towns and foreign countries. Across the region, student bus rides range from 10–30 minutes in more urban parts such as in Biddeford, to more than 70 minutes in rural Dayton.¹¹

Other challenges and barriers to starting secondary school later

Maine is a local control state with municipal governments setting school budgets with voter approval. In 2015, the Legislative Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs voted down a proposed state law mandating an 8:30 AM start for all secondary schools. Opposition from the Maine Municipal Association, the Maine Education Association representing 22,000 teachers, and the Maine Principals' Association, which among other things oversees athletics, influenced the vote. The Maine Principals Association cited rural transportation to and from athletics as their primary reason to oppose, while the majority of committee members deemed start times a local control issue.

A law governing Maine's 27 Regional Technology Centers, of which Biddeford's Center of Technology is our region's unit, restricts local school board control over calendar decisions. Technology centers serve as vocational schools for multiple communities including the four in our region. By law, all sending school districts must align their school schedules with the regional technology center's calendar.¹² This makes school calendar changes difficult if not impossible without broader, regional buy-in. For example, to change Saco's traditional 7:20 and 7:45 AM middle and high school starting times to

8:30 AM would require community support and school board approval from all four communities plus Thornton Academy's trustees. This arrangement led the coalition to pursue a regional approach to starting school later.

The steps toward a regional agreement

The movement to start school later in Southern Maine began in Saco in 2014 with physician-parents of middle school children. By law, Maine school districts must retain pediatricians of record who guide school health policy and oversee nurses.¹² Following the 2014 American Academy of Pediatrics' policy directive,¹³ these physicians began to make their case that adolescent sleep is as important as nutrition and athletic safety. They presented their position in a letter addressed to the Saco school board and signed by nine pediatric and family practice physicians, who collectively cared for 80% of the region's children.¹⁴

Swayed by the local physicians, Saco's school board began to consider what it would take to add buses to change the middle school start time, but it quickly became obvious that there would be no change without cooperation from Biddeford's vocational school. The river had, for centuries, divided the two communities both physically and perceptually, but start school later advocates hoped to build a bridge of cooperation.

Parent advocates and their physician partners began organizing and educating about school start times through Southern Maine Start School Later,³ which is under the umbrella of the non-profit Start School Later national organization. These parents sought out a leadership ally in Jeremy Ray, Superintendent of Biddeford and Dayton Schools and the Center of Technology. Ray, as an elementary school principal in near-by Westbrook prior to his Biddeford/Dayton appointment, had been instrumental in moving the start time to 8 AM. Six months after the State legislative defeat in 2015, The American Medical Association announced its support for delayed start times to improve adolescent wellness.² Ray hosted a broad regional discussion on start times for all school boards and administrators in York and Cumberland counties. These are Maine's two most populous counties, and between them educate nearly half of Maine's students. Representatives from 14 school districts attended, as did the head of the Maine Principals' Association, State Legislators with local constituents, and the Maine School Board Association president. While all of these attendees had recently opposed a start later mandate at the state level, their presence suggested support for a regional change.

Ray invited school pediatricians to present on adolescent sleep research to the school leaders. Only two of the 14 school districts attending, Westbrook and Old Orchard Beach, had thus far moved school start times later, and it was to 8 AM for the previous year. Nonetheless, these schools' representatives were able to report qualitatively on noticeable improvements in students' early morning mood and attention. After these influential presentations, school boards met in sub-regional groups to brainstorm barriers and solutions.

The Maine Department of Education does not track school start times, and so a tangible and valuable outcome from Ray's meeting was an accurate calendar of secondary school start times across Southern Maine. The meeting also revealed that seven of the 14 school districts present supported a move to start school later. Supporters included the Cumberland County stand-alone districts of Scarborough, South Portland, and Gorham. In York County, Biddeford and its three vocational school neighbors, Saco, Dayton, and Old Orchard Beach, all indicated support for the change. Other attending districts pursued different options. Kennebunk schools, for example, decided to change vocational centers rather than change start time with Biddeford's Center of Technology.

Next, rather than appointing the typical steering committee to study the issue, the superintendents from Biddeford/Dayton, Saco

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