Does the early bird always catch the worm? Seattle high schools say no

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.28.19

SEATTLE, Washington — Getting a later start to school is helping high school students in Seattle, Washington, get a bit more shut-eye, a study shows.

Scientists there are studying later school start times.

Teenagers wore activity monitors to find out whether a later start to the school day would help them get more sleep. It did, adding 34 minutes of slumber a night, and they reported less daytime sleepiness and improved grades. Photo by: Elaine Thompson/AP Photo

Senior Hazel Ostrowski (center) attends her first period AP statistics class at Franklin High School in Seattle, Washington, December 12, 2018. High school students are getting more sleep in Seattle, according to a study on later school start times. Hazel was among a group at Franklin and another Seattle high school who wore activity monitors to discover whether a later start to the school day would help them get more sleep. It did, adding 34 minutes of slumber a night, and they reported less daytime sleepiness and improved grades. Photo by: Elaine Thompson/AP Photo

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Scientists there are studying later school start times.

Teenagers wore activity monitors to find out whether a later start to the school day would help them get more sleep. It did, adding 34 minutes of slumber a night. They also reported less daytime sleepiness, and grades improved.
The Seattle School District changed from a 7:50 a.m. start time to 8:45 a.m. in the fall of 2016 for high schools and most middle schools. It joined dozens of other U.S. school districts adopting later starts to help sleep-deprived teens.

**Most Don't Get Recommended Nine Hours**

Teenagers' nightly sleep has decreased and most adolescents don't get the recommended nine hours. One culprit is light from devices that many teens use. The light keeps them awake as they chat, post and scroll long after dark.

Franklin High School senior Hazel Ostrowski, who took part in the study, said sleeping later makes it easier to pay attention during class but she still struggles sometimes.

"I'll wake up so tired I wish I could go back to sleep. At night, I'll be on my phone and I just want to stay up," she said.

**Did Students Get More Sleep Or Simply Stay Up Later?**

Researchers worked with science teachers at two high schools to find out if students got more sleep after the change or simply stayed up later. Over two years, they recruited 178 sophomores to wear wristwatch-like monitors for two weeks to track activity and light exposure. Results were published December 12 in the journal Science Advances.

The scientists compared sleep habits of sophomores in spring 2016, before the change, to sleep habits of sophomores from spring 2017, after later start times went into effect.

Some measures held steady. Naps and weekend sleep schedules didn't change. On school nights, only a few students stayed up later, not enough to greatly budge the average.

What changed was wake-up time, with morning activity starting about 45 minutes later on school days. Combined with a slight shift to later bedtimes for a few, the average sleep duration increased by 34 minutes.

**Morning Wake-Up Time Shifted**

Put another way, morning wake-up time shifted from 6:24 a.m. to 7:08 a.m. Falling asleep shifted only a tad, from 11:27 p.m. to 11:38 p.m.

"Given all the pressures keeping our teenagers awake in the evening — screen time, social media — this is a great thing to see," said Horacio de la Iglesia. He's a University of Washington biology professor who led the study.
Later Start Times Could Benefit Lower-Income Students

Digging deeper, researchers analyzed schoolwide data on first-period punctuality and attendance. Of the two high schools, the one in a more affluent area showed no difference year to year. But the school in a lower-income area had less tardiness and fewer absences after the change, a hint that later start times could help with learning gaps between higher- and lower-income students, the researchers said.

Exam scores and other grades in the science classes increased year to year by a small margin. However, the authors acknowledge that teachers' views on the later start time could have unconsciously boosted the grades they gave.

Most U.S. middle and high schools start before 8:30 a.m., contrary to an American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation, said University of Minnesota researcher Kyla Wahlstrom, who studies the issue.

School districts resist, she said, because later start times disrupt bus schedules and sports practices, and rob parents of afternoon teenage babysitters to watch younger kids.

Prior studies relied on students recalling how much they slept. This was the largest to use a stronger measure, the wearable monitor, she said.

Bringing the research into classrooms made it a learning experience for students, Wahlstrom said, which was "a brilliant way to do it."
Quiz

1. Read the following paragraph from the section "Later Start Times Could Benefit Lower-Income Students."

Exam scores and other grades in the science classes increased year to year by a small margin. However, the authors acknowledge that teachers’ views on the later start time could have unconsciously boosted the grades they gave.

Which idea is BEST supported by this paragraph?

(A) The effect of later start times on students’ performance is not yet clear.

(B) The effect of later start times on students’ health is apparent.

(C) The effect of later start times on student-teacher interactions is positive.

(D) The effect of later start times on student engagement is insignificant.

2. Read the following paragraph from the section "Morning Wake-Up Time Shifted."

Put another way, morning wake-up time shifted from 6:24 a.m. to 7:08 a.m. Falling asleep shifted only a tad, from 11:27 p.m. to 11:38 p.m.

Which selection from the section "Most Don't Get Recommended Nine Hours" BEST develops the idea that teens gravitate toward staying up later and sleeping in later?

(A) Teenagers' nightly sleep has decreased and most adolescents don't get the recommended nine hours.

(B) One culprit is light from devices that many teens use. The light keeps them awake as they chat, post and scroll long after dark.

(C) Franklin High School senior Hazel Ostrowski, who took part in the study, said sleeping later makes it easier to pay attention during class but she still struggles sometimes.

(D) "I'll wake up so tired I wish I could go back to sleep. At night, I'll be on my phone and I just want to stay up," she said.
3 Which person or group quoted in the article would MOST LIKELY agree with the idea that later start times for middle and high schools would benefit students' health?

(A) Hazel Ostrowski  
(B) Horacio de la Iglesia  
(C) Kyla Wahlstrom  
(D) the Seattle School District

4 How was the effect of later start times on students in a more affluent high school different from the effect on those in a lower-income high school?

(A) Later start times did not affect students’ exam scores and course grades at the school in a more affluent area. However, scores and grades improved at the school in a lower-income area.

(B) Later start times did not affect students’ punctuality and attendance at the school in a more affluent area. However, punctuality and attendance improved at the school in a lower-income area.

(C) Later start times did not affect students’ exam scores and course grades at the school in a lower-income area. However, scores and grades improved at the school in a more affluent area.

(D) Later start times did not affect students’ punctuality and attendance at the school in a lower-income area. However, punctuality and attendance improved at the school in a more affluent area.