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Early Risers, Lost Potential

Each fall, groggy teenagers everywhere resume the cycle of snoozing their alarms, chugging coffee, and doing whatever it takes to wake themselves up and face the long school day ahead of them. This repetitive cycle, although it may seem just bothersome at a glance, comes with a variety of hidden consequences damaging to the success of these learners. The recommended sleep duration for adolescents aged 13 to 18 is 8 to 10 hours per night. Yet, despite these guidelines, a significant gap exists between the ideal and the stark reality: research indicates that merely 40% of middle school students and a concerning 30% of high school students manage to get the recommended amount of sleep on school nights ("Sleep in Middle and High School Students"). The early school start times across the United States, with averages ranging from 7:30 to 8:30 am ("Start Time for U.S. Public High Schools"), exacerbate this discrepancy, calling for a reevaluation of school start times. The implications of the current early school start times extend far beyond just inconvenience; they are detrimental to students' academic success, physical and mental health, and road safety. Despite concerns that later start times might conflict with parental work schedules, making it challenging for parents to drop off students, or disrupt extracurricular activity schedules, the advantages of delaying start times far outweigh these issues. Thus, implementing later start times is imperative for allowing students to get adequate sleep, ultimately enhancing their academic performance, reducing the risk of mental and physical health issues, and mitigating the dangers of drowsy driving accidents.

The correlation between early school start times and diminished academic performance is a prevalent issue for students today. Many students find themselves trapped in a relentless cycle of staying up late to complete schoolwork, waking up early for school, and then struggling to remain alert throughout the day. This pattern, driven by the necessity to meet academic demands, often results in a significant sleep deficit, directly impacting students' ability to perform optimally. Sleep, a critical component of cognitive function and development, plays a substantial role in academic success, and the University of Minnesota's research on school districts with delayed start times reveals compelling benefits of later start times: "When compared with students attending schools with earlier start times, the students reported getting higher grades. They also had fewer depressive feelings, got more sleep on school nights and had less daytime sleepiness" (Morgan). It has been proven that "sleep duration, consistency, and quality for the month and the week before an academic test correlated with better grades" (McNamara), which highlights the importance of sufficient sleep for students to achieve academic excellence. This evidence supports the argument that later start times are a viable solution to the sleep deprivation crisis among students. Furthermore, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine outlines the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation on academic performance, noting reductions in concentration, attention, decision-making abilities, and an increase in errors (Morgan). The necessity for later school start times stems from the evidence that insufficient sleep leads to diminished cognitive capabilities that result in poor academic performance. It highlights the urgency for later start times, to allow students to get enough sleep and enhance academic performance. Furthermore, with a third of college students today diagnosed with sleep disorders, the risk of significantly lower GPAs and the likelihood of dropping out increases (McNamara), further emphasizing the necessity to address the sleep crisis among students. This highlights the

importance of recognizing the detrimental effects early school start times have on students, and consequently, their academic and cognitive performances.

Early school start times significantly compromise students' physical health, heightening the risk of cardiovascular issues and other serious health concerns. The consequences of insufficient sleep extend far beyond just feeling tired; they pose substantial long-term health risks. Adequate sleep is essential for maintaining a healthy brain and heart, and poor sleep quality is linked to an increased risk of obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes ("Sleep Disorders and Heart Health"), emphasizing the necessity of quality sleep for physical health. This need is particularly acute for developing teenagers, for whom sufficient sleep is critical. To mitigate sleep deprivation and its associated health risks, one highly effective measure is advocating for later school start times. Teenage years are pivotal for establishing a healthy heart, and there is no room for sleep deprivation in such an important stage of life: "During the teenage years, arteries begin to accumulate plaque [...] and can limit blood flow [...] and poor sleep could potentially accelerate this process" ("Teaching Teens and Their Parents on the Impact of Good Sleep Hygiene on Heart Health"). This not only highlights the alarming consequences of insufficient sleep, but also emphasizes the critical nature of the teenage years for the development of a healthy heart. During adolescence, the body undergoes changes, setting itself up for years to come. The cycle of sleep deprivation is self perpetuating: "even relatively mild sleep problems can cause inflammation in the endothelial cells that line the veins, which could significantly contribute to the development of cardiovascular disease" ("Teaching Teens and Their Parents on the Impact of Good Sleep Hygiene on Heart Health"). Each night spent staying up late for homework or studying, followed by waking up early for school, negatively impacts their heart health. This cycle is exacerbated by the tendency of sleep deprived people to crave

foods high in saturated fats and sugars, which further impairs sleep quality. When you do not eat well, you do not sleep well, and the harmful cycle continues ("Teaching Teens and Their Parents on the Impact of Good Sleep Hygiene on Heart Health"). Ensuring that students receive adequate sleep each night is a vital step in supporting their physical health and preventing the onset of severe health conditions. By pushing for later school start times, the harsh consequences of sleep deprivation can be mitigated, and future generations can become healthier and more vibrant.

Early start times and inadequate sleep not only impairs physical health, but also has profound implications on mental health. Mental health challenges can disrupt sleeping and eating patterns, hinder social interactions, impair learning, and in some cases, lead to suicidal thoughts or suicide. Addressing the mental health crisis among students is essential and one actionable strategy to support mental health is to allow students more time for restorative sleep by delaying school start times. Evidence suggests a direct correlation between sleep duration and mental health, as teens in a study "who got less than 8 hours of sleep had notably higher rates of depressive symptoms than teens who got their 8 hours in" (Wisner). This connection proves the role that sleep plays in mental and emotional well being, emphasizing the need for adequate sleep in preventing mental health issues. Ensuring that students have sufficient time for themselves to do things they enjoy, manage schoolwork, while also getting enough sleep is vital for their overall health. It is very important to adjust school schedules to prioritize the mental health of adolescents in a society where suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 24 ("Suicide in Children and Teens"). The overlap between this age group, burdened with academic pressures and early start times and the alarming rates of suicide among them, proves the urgency to address sleep deprivation and school schedules.

The urgent need for schools to adopt later start times is shown through compelling evidence linking early morning schedules to the prevalence of drowsy driving among teenagers. This group is particularly vulnerable to car crashes due to their high rates of sleep deficiency and their inexperience behind the wheel (Rehman). Alarmingly, in 2017, drowsy driving was identified as a direct contributor to more than 90,000 car accidents, with a fifth of fatal crashes attributed to a drowsy driver (Rehman). This risk is notably higher among teenagers, who, due to early school start times, are more likely to be deprived of the necessary hours of sleep, thus significantly increasing their risk of being involved in a car crash. Research by Alexandra Matiniuk and colleagues, which examined the driving records and sleep habits of young drivers aged 17 to 24, revealed that those who "reported sleeping six or fewer hours per night had an increased risk for crash compared with those who reported sleeping more than six hours [...] The people who slept the least were 21 percent more likely to have been involved in a crash than those who got more sleep" (Fox). Additionally, to support this evidence, "the AAA Foundation published a survey last year that found one in seven licensed drivers ages 16-24 admits they had fallen sleep[sic] at least once while driving in the past year" (Fox). This evidence is crucial in understanding the overlap of sleep deprivation and road safety among young drivers, a group already at a disadvantage due to their limited driving experience. The dangers of drowsy driving are comparable to driving with a blood alcohol content of 0.10% (Rehnis), emphasizing the severe impairment caused by a lack of sleep. This comparison shows the necessity for implementing later school start times, allowing students the necessary sleep to drive safely and attentively.

The time has come to abandon the early bird catching the worm, especially when it comes to the educational system. Just because past generations have faced the challenges of early

school start times does not mean we are bound to continue this tradition. There is still ample opportunity to rectify this for future generations. The issues that stem from sleep deprivation have been long overlooked and neglected. In today's complex era, lacking adequate sleep should not add to people's list of worries, and it is crucial that school schedules align with the biological clocks of adolescents. The commitment to later start times would only strengthen students, enhancing their academic performance, bettering physical and mental health, and avoiding fatal accidents attributed to drowsy driving. The success of students in and outside of the classroom is significantly tied to the amount of sleep they receive each night, and it is important to recognize and address the issues they are facing to promote their success.

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