

New York should require later school start times



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

The U.S. Surgeon General describes children's declining mental health as the crisis of our time.

Centers for Disease Control data released last winter shows teen girls are experiencing record-high levels of suicide risk, and LGBTQ+ teens face extremely high levels of mental health challenges. As mental health awareness month wraps up, we should consider myriad evidence-based interventions to address mental health concerns, including later school start times.

Recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2019, there is now proposed legislation requiring an 8:30 a.m. or later start time for all public schools in New York state. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that adolescents are sleep deprived, which impacts not only mental and physical health, but many other important outcomes, such as mood, attention, memory, executive functioning and impulse control.

We cannot simply blame students for poor sleep habits. Adolescence is a crucial period of brain development. With the onset of puberty comes profound changes in the circadian rhythm, causing a delay in the timing of falling asleep and waking up. This is why many teens have trouble falling asleep before 11 p.m.

Unfortunately, most parents believe 7-7.5 hours of sleep is sufficient for their teen, but experts say approximately

nine hours are needed for optimal functioning.

In 2019, California passed the first state-wide legislation prohibiting high schools from starting earlier than 8:30 a.m. Research by an interdisciplinary group of experts found multiple positive changes between later start times and outcomes, such as more and better-timed sleep, lower depression, lower car crash rates and significant improvements in attendance, tardiness, suspensions and graduation rates.

And let us not forget about teachers. One study found that with delayed start times, high school teachers had later rise times, increased sleep duration and improved daytime functioning.

Of course, logistics like transportation, before and after school care, and extracurricular activities need careful consideration. Unfortunately, no one single solution will work for every family. With statewide legislation, school schedules are more likely to be similar, which could help with managing after-school activities. This also ensures equal access to later sleep times to target well documented sleep health disparities.

Supporters should contact their state representatives to support Assemblyman Harvey Epstein and state Sen. Robert Jackson's proposed legislation requiring an 8:30 a.m. or later school start time for all public schools. Research unequivocally supports later start times; passing and implementing this legislation will signal to our students and teachers that we care deeply about their well-being.

Laurel McNall is a professor of psychology at SUNY Brockport and parent of two kids hoping for some more sleep.