

Teens tired for a reason

Minneapolis educators have come up with a common-sense way to deal with teens who want to sleep in: The let them.

This fall the school district has pushed back its high school schedule about 75 minutes, giving 18,000 students until 8:40 a.m. to get to their first-period classes.

The pragmatic solution is grounded in new scientific studies showing there are valid biological reasons why many teens have a difficult time with early-morning wake-up calls.

Researchers from Brown University have discovered that just as puberty begins to kick in, teens undergo a shift in their biological clocks. Most become sleepy later at night and harder to awaken come morning.

Unfortunately for teens, the resetting of their sleep clocks occurs as they enter high school. And in most school districts nationally, high school students are assigned to an early shift, starting around 7 a.m., to accommodate school bus runs that typically deliver students to high school first.

Forcing teens to bed earlier is no solution. The shift in teens' biological clocks also causes a delay in the nightly release of the sleep-inducing chemical melatonin. As a result, many teenagers are physically unable to fall asleep much before 11 p.m.

Teen who have to make classes that start just eight hours later don't get the final period of deep sleep that is needed for peak performance during the day.

Researchers theorize that the disconnect between teen-age sleep patterns and their early-morning schedules could explain other typical teen behaviors, ranging from classroom inattentiveness to frequent involvement in automobile accidents.

Convinced by the emerging scientific evidence, the Minnesota Medical Society has pushed for statewide legislation that would require high schools to open later.

But a group of Minnesota school superintendents isn't waiting. They're experimenting with later high school start times. Last year, the suburban Minneapolis district of Edina was the first to delay the start of high school, from 7:20 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., by switching its high school start time with that of earlier-rising elementary students. Educators there reported drops in absenteeism and tardiness and fewer students eating breakfast or sleeping in class.

Buoyed by the results, three other Minnesota districts, including Minneapolis, are conducting their own experiments this year. And in Iowa, the Cedar Rapids superintendent has requested a study of delayed high school starts with an eye on making schedule changes in 1999.

Such closely monitored experimentation makes sense. The high school years are stressful enough without forcing teens to battle their own biological clocks.

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