



Town of Reading
16 Lowell Street
Reading, MA 01867-2683

ANDREW FRIEDMANN, Ph.D.
CHAIRMAN
BOARD OF HEALTH
Phone: (781) 942-9061
Fax: (781) 942-9071

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John Doherty, Superintendent of Reading Schools
Charles Robinson, Chair, Reading School Committee
82 Oakland Road
Reading, MA 01867

Dear Dr. Doherty and Mr. Robinson,

In a 2014 policy statement titled "School Start Times for Adolescents", the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended middle and high schools should aim for a starting time of no earlier than 8:30 AM. The policy statement encourages school administrators and other stakeholders to initiate discussions for delaying school start times, a change that could have broad and immediate health and safety benefits for our youth. In my capacity as the Chair of Reading's Board of Health, I'd like to bring this policy statement to your attention and I strongly encourage you to consider the AAP's recommendations.

As children enter adolescence, physiological changes shift their natural sleep patterns. Adolescents stay up later and sleep later than pre-pubertal children. One misconception about delayed school start times is that adolescents will choose to stay up later in response to the delay. According to the policy statement and associated studies this does not appear to happen. Regardless of the school start time, adolescents tend to go to bed around 11 PM. Of course, individual adolescents differ but, in general, it is difficult for most teenagers to fall asleep early enough to be well rested for a start time prior to 8:30.

A growing body of research, cited in the policy statement, demonstrates the urgency and the magnitude of the problem of sleep loss in adolescents. Sleep loss in this subpopulation is associated with a number of adverse health and safety effects, including:

- A greater rate of automobile accidents due to "drowsy driving";
- Decreased school performance;
- Increased mental health problems (including a higher risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts);
- Increased likelihood of unhealthy life choices;
- Greater rates of obesity; and
- Lower school attendance.

In school districts that have delayed school start times for adolescents, average sleep duration has increased. The increased sleep duration has resulted in improvements in a number of the problems listed above. For example, a recent study found a crash rate reduction in 16- and 18-year-olds of 65% and 70%, respectively; notably, the high school with the latest start time (Jackson Hole, WY) had the largest decline in car crashes.

In spite of this growing body of evidence that suggest delayed school start times would benefit the health and welfare of our youth, many school districts resist such a change. The policy statement found that this resistance is multifaceted, including concerns about curtailed time for athletic practices and interference with scheduling of games, reduced after-school employment hours for students, challenges in providing child care for younger siblings, and adjustments in parent and family schedules.

The AAP recommends overcoming these concerns using creative approaches that have worked for communities across the country, including:

- Adjusting class schedules to minimize late dismissal times;
- Scheduling free periods/study halls at the end of the school day to allow participation in after-school extracurricular activities;
- Exempting student athletes from physical education requirements; and
- Installing lights for athletic fields.

Some of these solutions have already been instituted. Should you decide to take up this task, I look forward to working with the School Committee and Superintendent to increase awareness among Reading residents regarding the health and safety benefits that can be gained from delayed school start times for our adolescents.

Sincerely,



Andrew Friedmann, Ph.D.

Chair, Reading Board of Health

Cc: Reading Town Manager, Reading Board of Selectmen, Reading Chief of Police