

Participant Feedback from the Seventh McKee Learning Lunch

School Start-time

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This learning experience was co-sponsored by Roger Thompson, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; and the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

For the past several years, school start-time has been a matter of debate for educators and legislators, especially as they affect the following areas: (a) physical and emotional health, (b) academics and sports, (c) negative behavior-patterns, including crime, and (d) the family, the community, and the nation at large. Is the subject worthy of our consideration as a community? If so, what steps should we take to address it?

In accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, there were three general feedback opportunities, or Assignments 1, 2, and 3. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, provided their insights into and questions about the topic. These responses are presented below.

Assignment 1

Pre-discussion Question: Prior to the presentation and discussion, what question(s) do you have about this topic? The responses follow.

Justification for Current Start-times

- What are some of the reasons for *keeping* the current school start-times?
- What are the major reasons for *changing* the current school start-times?
- Who on the school board is in charge of school start-times?
- What are the barriers for a later start-time in public as well as private schools in Chattanooga?
- Given that the core purpose of a school district is to instruct, assess, and develop—not to transport—why is transportation a factor in changing school start-times?

Educational, Developmental, Social, and Financial Implications

- How much of the issue about later school start-time is a component of poverty and low socio-economic status?
- Is this a greater social issue in terms of parents enforcing bedtimes for kids?
- Does sleep-deprivation affect some communities more than others, [such as] urban vs. affluent areas?
- Does school start-time affect young children the same way that it affects teens?
- What are the financial implications for changing the current school start-times?
- Other than any fiscal challenges, what other challenges to earlier school start-times?

Effects on After-school Hours

- Can we be more productive during school hours, thereby limiting the amount of homework and giving students more time to relax and sleep?
- Will starting school later jeopardize time for activities like sports and band?

Effect on Parents and Teachers

- How will [changing the start-time] affect teachers and their availability when their own family issues come into play?
- What issues come into play with work start-times for parents, especially those with younger children?
- What accountability do parents and guardians have in making sure that required hours of sleep are met?
- Schools do a lot more than just providing 7 hours of instruction. Have they become more pre-school and post-school childcare services? Are other activities becoming substitute parents in these times because of work and other factors?

Community and Federal Involvement

- Can we get total community engagement to help address this issue?
- How can we convince the schools and their communities to start later? The consequences of the lost hour are unknown, but most schools start earlier than 8:00 a.m.
- Can reform happen at a mandated federal level?

Assignment 2

Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants in groups of three or four, discuss three assigned questions. Questions and responses are listed below.

Question 1. How did [the change in] start-time affect your school experience?

- It had little effect on some, such as on some [inflexible] teachers. It did affect others when it came to sports, clubs, and work.
- Some students struggled to get to school on time; others struggled academically.
- Some students participated in multiple activities throughout the day, which made bedtimes late. There was much multi-tasking, which turns out to actually be a bad thing. Students developed an I-want-to-do-it-all and I-can-do-it-all mentalities. They drink coffee in order to fire themselves up to do even more.
- With a 7:30 a.m. start-time, some students didn't feel energized until 10:00 a.m. Grades were lower in the 1st and 2nd blocks. Owing to excessive involvement in sports and clubs, the overachievers were exhausted.
- There was no negative effect because it was the norm. Many of the parents were educators. Sports and after-school programs did not suffer.
- Some students were tired on the ride to school. School start-time was formed around an agrarian society. [The world is] different [now].

- Some students played sports and had practice in the morning, after school, or during both times, so they had to get up early or go to bed late. Some were not aware of the effect at the time and just did what had to be done. Some slept on the car-ride to school and felt groggy during homeroom and early periods.

Question 2. If school start-time currently is a significant problem, what should we do about it?

- Create buy-in, community involvement, and make changes one school at a time or in groups.
- Get transportation personnel involved, conduct research, look at all factors involved, and consider special-education transportation factors.
- Change it, formulate creative solutions, identify the agenda behind the resistance to changing start-times, include bus drivers in the conversation, and utilize pop culture and the media to inform and drive change.
- Continue thoughtful discussions that include the students, teachers, community members, and stakeholders. Include the working student in the discussions. Experiment.
- Communicate the message to the community and work collectively to find a solution.
- Bring the community together on the issue. Get more busses (maybe use city busses).

Question 3. Because we all live in our respective silos, how do we encourage a collaborative community approach to discussing this issue?

- Create dialogue and include stakeholders.
- Involve everybody in the discussion.
- Study research, look at all factors, decide if the district should deal with the transportation issues, and take personal responsibility.
- Learning lunches, school-board involvement, and county-commissioner involvement.
- Have discussions like these, involve parents, poll those involved, and discuss ending-times as well.
- Look at the impact in different sectors, such as business, education, medicine, parents, and unions; conduct research (*NurtureShock*, by Po Bronson & Ashley Merryman); present the facts, and tailor them.
- Talk about it and link up organizations with the people in charge.

Assignment 3

Post-discussion Question: After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to two additional questions.

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?

Complexity

- This knowledge is part of Healthy People 2020.
- There are societal factors beyond academic concerns that come into play with this issue.
- School start-time is a small piece of the puzzle. The whole student/family experience needs to be considered.
- There are different variables involved in the lost-hour topic.

- There is no easy solution to this is complicated situation.
- This perceived “small change” has a large impact on the entire community.
- School start-times are important, not only to the education sector but also to the medical and socio-economic ones as well.
- The fullness/overbooking of all of our lives is a significant contributor to the problem.
- There is a medical basis for the argument of a [change in] school start-time.

Importance of Sleep

- Sleep is an important issue.
- The National Sleep Foundation recommends 8 to 10 hours of sleep for teens.
- Sleep is extremely important for performance, regardless of when school starts.

Variance in School Start-times

- Some schools have a great deal of latitude in determining start-times.
- School start-times are not universal across counties or districts.
- There are several options for school start-times.

Need for Action

- The issue of school start-times is worthy of discussion and action.
- The entire community must be involved in analyzing this problem and in determining a resolution.
- Beginning with the end may be the way to start an effective discussion. State goals and define measures before getting relevant parties together.
- There is a need to review the results from schools that have changed to later times to build expectations.

Question 2. What unanswered questions are you leaving here with?

Current Responsibility

- Why are the school start-times set as they are?
- Who sets the start-times and how can we present [arguments] to adjust times?
- What structural barriers are there to later start-times?

Next Steps?

- What is step 1?
- Who will take the next step?
- Is there anything else planned to address this issue?

Future Responsibility and Collaboration

- Who believes it is a problem?
- What are potential solutions?
- Who will facilitate bringing all the stakeholders together [to create] an action plan?
- How do you engage all of the different groups in productive discussions and meaningful results?

- Who will drive this conversation in the future?
- How can we change school start-times on a local level?
- How do we bring this topic into public discussion?
- Would a trial year be warranted to verify that a later start-time is a significant factor?

Effects on Achievement and Other Factors

- What are the findings from [case-studies about] later start-times?
- How do . . . models that deliver education through technology—such as flipped learning and distance learning—affect our perception of school start-time?
- What are the before-and-after effects of communities that have introduced later school start-times?
- How has achievement that is aligned with state-mandated tests improved as a direct result of later school start-times?
- If school start-time were delayed, would the amount of sleep increase?

Postscript

While we were preparing the account of this McKee Learning Lunch, we discovered a current report by Dian Schaffhauser addressing some of the questions raised in the discussion about school start-time. A summary of the report follows:

A new study in the journal *Sleep* (2015) has confirmed the idea that there could be positive outcomes if high-schoolers were able to start later in the morning. This research, performed by faculty members at St. Lawrence University in New York, set out to determine whether “sleep, mood, behavior, and academics improved after a 45-minute delay in high-school start-time.” The outcome: Even though students delayed but didn’t necessarily extend their sleep time, the researchers did find “lasting improvements in two areas”—tardiness and disciplinary violations. (Schaffhauser, 2016, ¶1)

To further complicate the issue, Lydia Dishman (2012) offers the following research finding:

Not a morning person? Stop blaming poor sleep habits, your waking routine, or the strength of your caffeinated beverage. New research indicates our genetic material has an impact on whether we’re early birds or night owls. (Dishman, 2016, ¶1)

So . . . What should we do?

References

- Dishman, L. (2016). New Research Finds That You May Be Genetically Programmed To Be A Morning Person. *Fast Company*. Retrieved from <http://www.fastcompany.com/3056347/the-future-of-work/new-research-finds-that-you-may-be-genetically-programmed-to-be-a-morning-person>
- Schaffhauser, D. (2016). Study finds late school start improves teen behavior. *Sleep*. Retrieved from <http://thejournal.com/articles/2016/02/05/study-finds-late-school-start-improves-teen-behavior.aspx>

Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

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