

Teens aren't lying — they really need to sleep later

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Minnesota teens who wish schools would start later have a powerful champion: the Minnesota Medical Assn. The MMA has launched a statewide campaign to help teen-agers get more sleep.

Many high schools in Minnesota — and elsewhere — now start as early as 7 a.m. The MMA contends 8 a.m. or later would be much better. The MMA's action was prompted by new understanding of pubertal changes in

daily rhythms of alertness and sleepiness.

"Most adolescents are sub-optimally alert in the morning," said Mark Mahowald, MD, director of the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorders Center in Minneapolis and a prime mover of the MMA project. "Yet their biological clocks program them to go to sleep late — too late to get an adequate amount of sleep before the next school day begins.

"If we as a society are sending kids to school to learn," Dr. Mahowald said,

"it would be wise to send them in a condition that fosters learning."

The MMA wrote the state's 450 school district superintendents last spring to urge that classes begin later. Minneapolis school district officials are scheduled to vote Dec. 13 on a proposal to switch the start of the high school day from 7:15 a.m. to 9 a.m. for the 1995-96 school year. Concerned parents registered their support for the MMA's proposal by phoning Minneapolis school board members at 5:30 a.m., when their children got up.

This winter, the MMA, in collaboration with the Rochester, Minn.-based American Sleep Disorders Assn., will survey the state's schools to learn what students are being taught about sleep and to document the incidence of auto accidents caused by students' falling asleep at the wheel.

A 1990-92 North Carolina study found that 16- to 25-year-olds accounted for 55% of accidents attributed to the driver's having fallen asleep. U.S. Dept. of Transportation statistics show that motor vehicle accidents are the second highest cause of death in the same age group. Alcohol use compounds the risks: In someone who is sleep-deprived, even a drink or two can cause serious impairment.

Rebellion theory refuted

The MMA's initiative was inspired by a presentation on adolescent sleep at Dr. Mahowald's center by Mary Carskadon, PhD, director of chronobiology at the E.P. Bradley Hospital in Providence, R.I. Dr. Carskadon has shown that puberty resets the hands of the biologic clock, shifting the onset of sleep about an hour later in teenagers than in younger children. This finding contests the still widely held notion that staying up late is simply a social phenomenon, a reflection of a teenager's challenge to parental authority or wish to emulate adults.

It suggests, Dr. Carskadon said, that "the widespread practice in U.S. school districts for school buses to run and for the opening bell to ring earlier at high schools than junior high schools, and earlier in junior high schools than primary schools, may run precisely counter to children's biological needs."