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Cherry Creek looks to join wave of later school starts for older students

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John Leyba, The Denver Post

Cherry Creek school bus drivers get their buses ready at the Cherry Creek Bus terminal March 13, 2014 in time for their route.

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One of Colorado's largest school districts is considering letting its older students get some extra shut-eye by starting classes more than an hour later, a move that is gaining traction across the country and in Colorado.

The [Cherry Creek School District](#) says it has parents and science on its side. Of the 25,000 parents, students and staff members who responded to a survey last year, an "overwhelming" number supported changing the district's starting schedule.

The results didn't surprise Scott Siegfried, the district's associate superintendent.

"I get weekly e-mails from families who say that getting up at 5:30 a.m. to make sure they can get to the start of classes on time, is just too early," said Siegfried, whose district has 54,695 students this year. "Their kids are exhausted."

National studies show that most teens start their sleep cycles about 11 p.m., and it continues through 8 a.m. That means an early wake-up call of 5 or 6 a.m. to allow teens to catch a bus or commute to earlier classes allows only six or seven hours of sleep per school night, but also requires students to wake up in the middle of deep sleep.

Nearly all teens need about nine hours of sleep per night, experts say.

If approved, start times at Cherry Creek's seven high schools for the 2017-18 school year would go from 7:10 a.m. to 8:15 a.m, and its 10 middle schools from 7:50-8:10 a.m. to 8:50 a.m.

The district's more than 40 elementary schools would go the opposite way and start about 65 minutes earlier, but get out at 2:40 p.m. instead of 3:30. Research indicates elementary students will have more willingness to learn at that earlier time. The earlier morning time would also be used for more physical activity, Siegfried said.

The proposals, so far, won't have an impact on the budget. Siegfried said the plan is "budget neutral," and district officials say it would add "significant efficiencies" to its bus transportation system.

The Colorado Department of Education doesn't track school district start times, but at least one metro-area district, Boulder Valley, is considering the idea in the near future. Denver Public Schools officials said its school leaders already have some flexibility with determining start times, including submitting requests for changing their start times. DPS has looked into the idea of changing start times as a district, but is not inclined to do so any time soon.

"There are still a lot of mitigating factors that we need to address before making such a move," DPS spokesman Will Jones said. "These issues include, but are not limited to, the impact on our families and students, impacts on transportation and impacts on after school extra-curricular activities."

Cherry Creek's plan will be discussed Friday by board members at a work session. The public can voice its opinions at a regular board meeting Feb. 13.

Cherry Creek's plan aligns with recommendations from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and the Centers for Disease Control, which say middle school and high school start times should begin at 8:30 a.m. or later.

Just altering start times by an hour or so would allow kids more sleep and help reduce the risk of being overweight or suffering depression and would reduce automobile accidents and help boost grades, wrote Judith Owens, lead author of a 2014 policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"Chronic sleep loss in children and adolescents is one of the most common — and easily fixable — public health issues in the U.S. today," Owens concluded.

But most schools are still stuck on traditional schedules. An estimated 40 percent of high schools in the U.S. have a start time before 8 a.m.; only 15 percent start at 8:30 a.m. or later. The median middle school start time is 8 a.m., and more than 20 percent of middle schools start at 7:45 a.m. or earlier.

Kids can nap, sleep more on the weekend and gulp caffeine to temporarily counteract drowsiness, said the academy. But those are poor substitutes for regular, sufficient sleep, Owens said.

"Studies have shown that delaying early school start times is one key factor that can help adolescents get the sleep they need to grow and learn," she said.

Sleep experts say that a shift in sleep cycles — or circadian rhythms — starting in adolescence makes it harder for most teens to fall asleep as early as younger children and older adults. About two-thirds of all teens get less than eight hours while some get a little of six hours of sleep, according to [Start School Later](#), a national group advocating for later start times for school.

According to a report by the Cherry Creek district on the proposal, [Wayzata Public Schools](#) in Minnesota made the switch to later start times this school year through a three-tier system. Its one high school, which used to start classes at 7:20 a.m., now starts at 8:20 a.m. The district's three middle schools, meanwhile, start at 9:10 a.m.

The move came after a year-long process that included several public meetings and the gathering of reams of research, Amy Parnell, the district's spokeswoman, told [The Denver Post](#).

There has been no data yet to track the results of the switch. But parents and students seem to like the change, she said.

"We took into account what developmentally was in the best interest of the children," Parnell said. "We are hearing good things. We have been getting a lot of positive feedback."

One big obstacle for Boulder Valley is the juggling of school bus schedules and increased transportation costs, spokesman Briggs Gamblin said.

"BVSD will not be changing school start times in the 2017-18 school year," Gamblin said, "but has not ruled out a change for the 2018-19 school year if the district can find a workable solution to maintain transportation costs."

Douglas County Schools staggers its start times across the district and grade levels, in part to accommodate transportation needs, district spokeswoman Paula Hans said.

The Cherry Creek proposal, Siegfried said, is based in starting the day right.

"Everything points to if you get enough sleep ... you get off the blocks better," Siegfried said. "If we don't get a good night's sleep, it makes things much harder."