



The League of Women Voters Of The Fairfax Area

4026 Hummer Road, Suite 214, Annandale, Virginia 22003
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September 15, 2008

Mr. Jay Matthews
Education Reporter
The Washington Post

RE: Later start times for Fairfax Public high schools and middle schools

Dear Mr. Matthews:

The League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area believes that it is desirable to delay the start time for instruction at all high schools and middle schools in order to provide the best opportunity for student learning and to promote adolescent health and safety.

Sleep research shows that adolescents have more difficulty going to bed early and waking up in the morning than younger children. Circadian rhythms (the daily cycles of alertness alternating with sleepiness) differ among age groups. Teenagers undergo a phase delay that makes them wide-awake when their younger siblings and parents are falling asleep. Puberty also resets the biological clock, causing a change in sleep schedule. The average teenager's fall-asleep time is around 11 p.m. Teenagers need 9-10 hours of sleep per night to be at their best both physically and mentally. On average, teens are getting about 7½ hours of sleep on school nights. Twenty-five percent of kids are getting 6½ hours of sleep or less. The consequences of sleep deprivation during the teenage years are particularly serious. Learning suffers because sleep deprivation impairs the ability to be alert, pay attention, solve problems, cope with stress and retain information. Other consequences include:

- (1) Increased risk of driving accidents, injuries and death;
- (2) Increased likelihood of stimulants/substance abuse; and
- (3) Emotional and behavioral problems such as irritability, depression, poor impulse control and violence.

In 2007, the Fairfax County School Board convened the Transportation Task Force to provide community perspectives on reengineering school transportation services and developing a bell schedule with later start times for high schools. Two factors came together to create the need for TTF. First, MPS, a consulting firm engaged by the school board, determined that the transportation system has been pushed to the breaking point and needed reengineering. Second, SLEEP, an organization of Fairfax County parents, began a campaign to raise awareness about sleep deprivation among teenagers. After months of deliberation, the 68-member task force developed a recommendation that would meet the academic needs of our students and would accommodate student activities, athletics and work hours. The task force also proposed cost-saving changes to the bus services provided by the school system.

The League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area commends the Transportation Task Force for finding a solution to our transportation issues which incorporates later start times. The benefits to our students and our community will be significant.

Sincerely,

Sherry W. Zachry

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