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High School, Middle School Now Start at 8:30 AM in Greenwich: How That's Working Out

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Categories : [Beyond Darien](#), [Education](#), [Parents & Kids](#)

Tagged as : [Later School Schedule 2017](#)

Date : September 16, 2017

When the new school year started two weeks ago in Greenwich, it started a little later in the day as a result of changes adopted by the town's Board of Education, a controversial move and part of a national debate that pits concerns about keeping students alert with other concerns, including sports practices and game times.

On Thursday, the Greenwich Board of Education heard from about 20 parents, teachers and others about how the new school schedule has been working out, eight days into the new school year.

Despite kinks in the bus scheduling and challenges scheduling sports practice and competitions in other towns, feedback was overall very positive on the benefits to students of the extra hour of sleep.

Valerie Erde said her son, a GHS senior, had wanted to speak at the hearing but had decided since he finished his homework early, he would work on his college applications.

“He said, ‘I’ve been in a diversity of classes and you can tell people are less groggy and more focused at the start of the day, and they feel like talking.’ ..They’re rubbing their eyes less, slouching less and they’re talking more. You can see in class that they’re more focused.”

The schedule (see table, below) has school starting as late as 8:30 a.m. for high school and middle school students, and at other times for other grade levels.

The debate over changing the schedule in Greenwich, which went on over many months, mirrored a national debate, particularly over high school starting times.

The New Canaan school district is also looking into changing early morning starting times (see below). Some studies have shown that teenagers naturally sleep later, and getting them up early can make them less alert.

New Canaan Public Schools Are Looking Into It

From an Aug. 17 article published by NewCanaanite.com:

District officials this year will look into whether starting New Canaan Public Schools later in the morning would benefit students, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Bryan Luizzi said Monday night.

The Board of Education has discussed the prospect informally in the past and this year will “put some resources” behind conducting research and making recommendations “about whether school start times are in line with best practices on meeting students’ needs,” Luizzi said during a board meeting.

[Read the rest of the article here.](#)

Debra Smith, an English teacher at Greenwich High School who has a sophomore at GHS as well, recalled all the times she spoke at hearings in favor of changing the start time and her conviction that sleep deprivation was a detriment to student learning and health.

“It was all theoretical,” she said. “I had yet to experience it firsthand. Now I see a difference in the classroom,” Smith said. “I see students who are more energized and awake.”

“While I recognize there are traffic frustrations during this period of transition, and I hear from parents of athletes, I feel confident we made the right decision,” Smith said.

— *This article is adapted from [one published Friday](#) in *Greenwich Free Press*.*

Rich Comizio said the school start time change should have been implemented at the same time as an upgrade to lighting at school fields.

Comizio said the spirit of competition is an important part of a high school education, and that competition benefits athletes as well as spectators. He argued that Greenwich has a disadvantage versus schools in other districts that have better facilities.

“It’s vital for us to find a way to light up the whole high school,” Comizio said. “I can’t imagine how this town became handcuffed by this individual.”

Comizio referred to Bill Effros, a GHS neighbor on Old Church Road who sued the town. [As a result, Cardinal Stadium operates under a set of lighting restrictions that stem back to the lawsuit that was settled back in 2003 in Stamford Superior Court.](#)

Isabella Ross, a student at GHS, said that last year she would arrive at school groggy and anti-social. “Sometimes this tired feeling could last all day and I’d come home too exhausted to focus on my homework,” she said.

On the days she had first block open and got an extra hour of sleep, she said she could pay attention more easily and had a better attitude toward her peers. “On those mornings, I was generally happier and wanted to talk to people. And I was more productive.”

A parent, Dawn Stevens said student-athletes’ time in the classroom is being jeopardized. She said that whereas that last year none of the football teams missed a last period class to get to a game, that may change out of necessity.

“Last week, the junior varsity team did not leave early because they did not want to pull them out of class,” she said. “They had a 90 minute bus ride to Trumbull and got there just 5 minutes before their game started.”

“I think that’s not a great way to start a season and it’s not great for the kids,” she said. “They may rethink that and pull them out of that last period class, that 7th block.”

Sam Stewart said school start time was personal to him because he had two seizures that were diagnosed as sleep related. “I know some students want to do sports at this school. That is great, but that is their choice. I don’t think the majority should have a tough time through the whole school day to make their day easier.”

Bumpy Ride in the Transportation Transition

Ken Pond, a parent, said the late school buses shouldn't be a surprise, but, he said, "Our bus from Parkway School has been consistently 20-40 minutes late.

"We are the first stop. The 'excuse letter' we got doesn't make much sense to those of us in that area because the buses don't cross over toward Stanwich Road or Dingtletown Road, or encounter any of the traffic from construction in town. We'd like to know why," Pond said. "We'd like to know why kids are getting off a bus they've been sitting on for 40 minutes like a sauna in this unusually hot weather."

"We paid a lot of extra money for these buses," he continued, noting that the district paid for an extra bus to the tune of about \$800,000 to \$1,000,000-plus, and that a bus consultant had also been a costly expense.

Mr. Pond said that last year he received two refunds for late buses at Parkway School. Noting that there have only been eight full days of school this year, he said he was already prepared to ask for refunds.

"Iron out the wrinkles and get it fixed," Pond said emphatically.

Greenwich Schools superintendent Dr. Jill Gildea said the transportation system had been overhauled as part of implementing the new start time and that bus routes, stops, numbers of buses, and new bus drivers were all factors in the project. She said ongoing construction had delayed travel time, but that school bus ridership had increased overall.

The first week of school, there were 200 calls a day about transportation issues, with about half being in reference to a late buses, and the number of calls fell to 35 this week, Gildea said.

"We're grateful for the communications from parents and also their patience," she said. "While we see daily improvements overall, it will likely take at least 60 days for us to fully review and assess and implement all recommendations for smoothing the transportation system."

It is likely the solution will involve additional buses, she said.

Ongoing Discussions

Students, staff and community stakeholders will be surveyed this year to assess the impact of the start time change on academics, athletics, extra curricular, faculty, transportation, food service, family engagement, and student and stakeholder impact, she said.

"Ideally we are targeting school buses to arrive about 15 minutes before the school start time."

GEA president Carol Sutton worst case scenarios have not materialized. "Predictably the strongest supporters are emphasizing the positives. The naysayers are saying nay."

Sutton said there has not been a mass exodus of teachers, and that traffic issues are being addressed quickly. She said it is now time to look at why students are lonely, depressed, anxious and overwhelmed with school and life.

“The mission was never just about sleep,” she said. “The mission is to improve the health and well being of our students.”

More Information

Articles (mostly commentary) elsewhere:

- [Backgrounder: Later School Start Times](#) (National Sleep Foundation)
- [The Economic Case for Letting Teenagers Sleep a Little Later](#) (New York Times, Sept. 13)
- [When Sleep and School Don't Mix](#) (Time Magazine)
- [Parents, Educators: Later High School Start Times Yield Mixed Results](#) (U.S. News)
- [If later school start times are better, why aren't they more popular?](#) (USA Today, Aug. 17)
- [Teachers overwhelmingly oppose later high school start times in Montgomery](#) (Washington Post, Feb. 6, 2015)

From Greenwich Public Schools:

- [“Changing School Start/Dismissal Times & Transportation Update, September 14, 2017”](#)

Previous school-start-time stories on Greenwich Free Press:

- [GHS Cardinal Stadium Lighting Upgrades and Deed Restrictions Leave Greenwich Hamstrung. Again.](#)
- [Greenwich Board of Ed Votes 5-3 in Favor of Implementing School Start Change for Fall 2017](#)
- [Superintendent’s School Start Time Recs: I Will Not Be Here. Someone Else Will Have to Do It... I Have Hope](#)
- [Greenwich Schools Start Time Change. Skeptics Vs Advocates. Dirty Politics?](#)
- [GHS Freshman is Strong Voice at First School Start Time Input Session](#)
- [Joe Siciliano: Change in School Start Time Would Impact Use of Fields by Parks & Rec, Travel Teams and Non-School Groups](#)
- [Tesei to Board of Ed: Be Bold on School Start Time Change](#)
- [Later Start Start Time Advocates Press Board of Ed to Give SST Committee a Mandate](#)
- [If Start Time Science is Acknowledged, Does Delay Til 2017 Leave District Legally Vulnerable?](#)
- [Board of Education Candidate Gaetane Francis on Achievement Gap, School Start Time and Digital Learning](#)
- [BOE’s Sherr: Start Time Steering Committee Members Need to Be Honest Brokers](#)
- [School Start Time Forum: Parents Decry Scare Tactics, Warn Against Putting Budget over Teen Health](#)

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- [Later School Start Times Jumpstart Student Achievement](#)
- [GHS Student Gov Leader Speaks out on Delayed Start Time at GHS](#)
- [Greenwich Schools Chief on Delayed GHS Start Time: “Very Aggressive” Timeline](#)
- [Petition Launch and Delayed School Start Time Rally at Town Hall, Set for Thursday 7pm](#)
- [Delayed GHS Start Time? Sleep Deprived-Students Nap While They Wait.](#)