

# Earlier School Times Don't Hurt Elementary Students' Learning, Research Shows



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Starting classes earlier in the day doesn't negatively affect elementary school students' academic performance, which could be another incentive for some districts that need to stagger start times to delay school start times for secondary students, according to new research.

In a pair of studies, released Thursday by the American Educational Research Association, researchers determined that beginning the school day earlier had “near-zero effects” on the

youngest learners. The earlier times were linked to a small increase in absences, but they also appeared to lead to “modestly higher” math scores, particularly among traditionally disadvantaged students.

The findings for elementary students differ from similar research for middle and high school students that generally supports later start times. That research concludes that earlier start times lead to too little sleep for students—and poorer academic outcomes.

Older students need at least 8.5 hours of sleep, but adolescents' sleep-wake cycle makes it difficult for them to fall asleep before 11 p.m. and wake before 8 a.m., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Research on later start times for secondary students has shown they are absent less often and generally earn higher grades.

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle schools start their days no earlier than 8 a.m. and high schools no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

“Earlier start times really have the least consequences and make the most sense at the elementary school level,” said Kevin Bastian, the director of the Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC) at the University of North Carolina. He co-authored the report with Sarah Fuller, a research associate professor in UNC's department of public policy and at EPIC.

## **What the new findings mean for district leaders**

Bastian said while much research exists about the impact of start times on secondary students, little has been done to examine how different times affect younger students.

“If schools are staggering their schedules, that means somebody has to go first, and that's often elementary, but there's not a lot of evidence out there about whether, in fact, that actually is also good,” he said. “So what we wanted to figure out was to what extent are elementary outcomes related to start times as well.”

For the studies, the researchers analyzed test scores and other data against schools' start times. One study in the pair published Thursday examined all public, nonpublic, and charter schools in North Carolina from 2011 through 2017. Researchers paired that with a deep dive of one district in the state that changed its school start times in 2016.

The researchers controlled for measures like students' race and ethnicity, poverty level, and whether they were still learning English or received special education services, as well as various school characteristics.

The findings have distinct implications for district leaders, who often have to stagger school day start times across levels due to transportation restraints or other logistical reasons. They indicate that beginning elementary students' day earlier to accommodate later secondary start times could be the most beneficial.

As districts across the country seek ways to support students' academic success, many have turned to their class schedules. Some states have gotten in on the action, too. A new California law in effect this year aligns with the AAP recommendations from 2014, and mandates that middle schools begin their days at 8 a.m. or later and high schools no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

Still, adjusting school start times can be a thorny process for superintendents and school boards. It's often met with resistance from both staff and parents, who have to adjust schedules to accommodate. In some situations, the change also means renegotiating teachers' contracts.

And it can be difficult to maneuver logistically, as districts reconfigure bus routes, bell schedules, and extracurriculars.

Bastian said researchers should next study the impact of start times on teachers and other staff members, who may be affected differently than students.