US HIGH SCHOOLS LISTENING TO SCIENTISTS, LETTING TEENS SLEEP

TEENS SHOWING UP TO CLASS BEFORE 8 AM ISN’T GOOD FOR HEALTH

SEATTLE: More school districts around the US are heeding the advice of scientists who have long said that expecting teens to show up to class before 8 am isn’t good for their health or their report cards.

The Seattle school board voted last month to adopt an 8:45 am start time beginning next year for all of its high schools and most of its middle schools, joining 70 districts across the nation who adopted a later start time in recent years.

The movement still has a long way to go. There are more than 24,000 US high schools. Supporters expect that such decisions will be made more quickly now that people have mostly stopped debating the underlying science.

Proponents of later start times got a boost last year when the American Academy of Pediatrics said that while starting later isn’t a panacea for teen health and academic problems, it can improve students’ lives in many other ways.

"Essentially, across the board, any domain that you look at improves pretty dramatically," said Dr. Judy Owens of Boston Children’s Hospital and author of the academy’s policy statement on teen sleep.

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"We’re going to look back on this time period and wonder why it took so long," said Phyllis Payne of Start School Later, which helps parents groups advocate for later bell times. She said 49 new local groups have started in the last three years.

The obstacles to change are mostly financial. St. Paul, Minnesota, public schools delayed the adoption of later start times for high school students. It would cost St. Paul about $8 million to add more buses, explained Jackie Statum Allen, assistant director for strategic planning and policy.

"It would be much better to put that money into the classroom rather than the gas tank," Allen said. In Seattle, officials encountered the same resistance. Some parents of younger children objected when bus schedules were flipped and their kids were put on an earlier schedule for next year. Some argued that later start times will get in the way of after-school activities like football practice. — AP

BULGARIA TO TACKLE ‘Nightmare’ HEALTH SYSTEM

SOFIA: Bulgaria’s medical system is causing a serious headache for all in a country despite massive healthcare investments and the most hospitals per capita in the European Union, it has the highest death rate across the bloc. With 15 deaths per 1,000 people, Bulgaria has held the top spot in the EU’s mortality ranking for nearly a decade, according to the National Statistics Institute.

But it is hoped fresh, ambitious reforms to better distribute public funds and crackdown on corruption will improve matters. "This system needs a painful overhaul," Health Minister Petar Moskov told AFP in an interview. "Health spending keeps rising while life expectancy falls and hospital stays and mortality rates are increasing." At 74 years, life expectancy is also among the bloc’s lowest.

Even worse, Bulgarian children under the age of five are twice as likely to die as their European peers in a "nightmare" situation, said Moskov.

The situation is particularly alarming among the country’s Roma minority where an average 20 out of every 1,000 toddlers died in 2014.

Moskov’s reforms aim to cut the death rate by 20 percent by 2020 and overhaul the way hospitals are financed.

"Extremely inefficient" A 53-percent rise in public spending over the past five years has brought no "tangible improvement in the quality of care," said Vladislav Goranov, finance minister in the conservative government.

The services in place are a prime example of "extreme inefficiency," he added. They also put a huge burden on patients in what already is the EU’s poorest country. One in five Bulgarians lives below the poverty line, earning just 323 levs (165 euros, $180) a month.

"Poor people from the villages sell their horses and carts to find money to pay for treatment of an illness," said kidney specialist Ivan Georgiev from the northern town of Pleven.

The World Bank recently voiced alarm over the “disproportionately high” fees Bulgarian patients are charged for healthcare and medications—a share it said hit 43 percent in 2013, the highest in Europe.

"I have patients with hypertension who refuse to buy a more expensive and efficient drug and ask for something cheaper, running the risk of worsening their condition," general practitioner Hristo Nikolov told AFP.

Currently, only 25 percent of the cost of hypertension drugs is reimbursed, said Nikolov, and even kidney dialysis—a lifesaver for some patients—is not entirely covered. Meanwhile, many new hospitals have sprang, draining public funds and feeding what health minister Moskov called a trend of "over-hospitalization", with 40 percent more people hospitalized in Bulgaria than in other EU countries.

"I spent three days in hospital for a simple intestinal examination that took half an hour, but had I left earlier, the private hospital would not have been reimbursed," said Rositsa Smilova, a saleswoman from Sofia. — AFP