

# Policy Brief

## Start School Later for Better Academic Performance and Student Health



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## Fall 2014 Internship Cohort



## Fall 2014 Internship

In the fall of 2014 the IHSP welcomed eleven McGill students from across the University for a 14-week Internship. Training sessions focused on communicating research findings to the media or general public, and gaining insight into different disciplinary approaches. In addition to in-depth research projects carried out in collaboration with faculty and staff, interns devoted ten to fifteen hours to short policy projects on a topic of their choice. Students were asked to frame an issue, find at least two points of supporting evidence and develop rudimentary policy recommendations. The following document reflects the short timeframe given to students to complete this task, and may not be a polished product.

*Please note the opinions reflected in this document do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.*

# START SCHOOL LATER FOR BETTER ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND STUDENT HEALTH

## THE ISSUE

During adolescence, teenagers undergo physiological changes which affect their sleep cycles: these are typically out of sync with Montreal high schools' schedules. As a result, many teenagers feel tired in the morning. This, in turn, affects their concentration, capacity to learn, and ultimately their academic performance, as well as their physical health.

Implementing later start hours in Montreal high schools can resolve these problems, and is an easy way of improving academic outcomes and student health.

This issue is relevant for school authorities, parents, and high school students themselves.

**BY STARTING SCHOOL LATER IN  
THE DAY, SCHOOL AUTHORITIES  
CAN IMPROVE THEIR STUDENTS'  
ACADEMIC AND HEALTH  
OUTCOMES.**

**Starting school  
too early in the  
day has negative  
impacts on  
students'  
academic  
performance and  
health.**

# WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Currently, most schools in the Commission Scolaire de Montréal (CSDM) begin their classes between 7h30 and 8h. However, it is recommended that high-school age adolescents get around 9 hours of sleep per night on school days, and research indicates teenagers generally have difficulty falling asleep before 11h in the evening, and have difficulty waking up before 8h in the morning. Hence, it is difficult for most CSDM high school students to get enough sleep during the school week.

**Why Teenagers Need More Sleep:** During adolescence, changes in teenagers' hormone release mechanisms mean that their sleep-wake cycles occur later than during childhood. This explains why elementary-age school children typically rise early (hence the TV networks' weekend cartoon schedule) but become late risers once they reach puberty. Conversely, adolescents also often have trouble falling asleep early, as their "sleep drive" is also altered during adolescence, meaning they no longer fall asleep as easily as during childhood.

## The Benefits of Starting School Later in the Day

**Academic Benefits:** An American study has shown that delaying the start of middle school classes by an hour can lead to as much as a 2% improvement in standardized test scores; among 14-year olds, the improvement was by as much as 3.7%. Furthermore, the improvement is even stronger among under-performing students, which suggests the achievement gap between high-performing and low-performing students can be narrowed simply by adjusting school schedules.

**Health Benefits:** According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, sleep deficit among teenagers is also linked to higher likelihood of cardiovascular diseases, car crashes, and abuse of stimulants. Chronic lack of sleep also increases the incidence of Type II diabetes and of obesity.



## MORE FACTS

- In 2013, only half of all students enrolled in CSDM high schools in 2007 had graduated within five years. Pushing back schools' starting times is a simple and effective way to improve Montreal high schools' academic outcomes.
- Starting school later also helps reduce teen obesity rates, one of the Quebec Ministry of Education's stated goals for Quebec secondary schools.
- Pushing back school starting times is a cost-neutral measure: it does not require additional spending and will not put current school budgets under strain.
- Adjustments to school starting times can be introduced incrementally, thus minimizing any disruptive effect on school or home life.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission Scolaire de Montréal should encourage its high schools to push back the start of their school day in order to alleviate high school students' sleep deficit.

The Commission should produce a pamphlet for parents explaining the educational and medical benefits of starting the school day later.

The Commission should educate students about the benefits of getting enough sleep every day.

**Encourage high schools to start classes later in the day**

# HOWEVER...

Starting school later is not a magic bullet. It should not be seen as a replacement, but rather as a complement, to existing educational and health initiatives.

There is very little Canada-specific data about the benefits of delaying the start of the school day. More research may be needed in order to reveal the full effects of such a measure.

## SOURCES

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