
Changing School Start Times: Wilton, Connecticut



5 Schools • 4,300 Students
Before: Grades 6-12: 7:35 am,
Grades 3-5: 8:15 am
After: Grades 3-5: 7:35 am,
Grades 6-12: 8:15 am

Summary

Wilton, a small suburban community, made the change to a later start time for its middle and high school students through the efforts of its League of Women Voters (LWV). After a two-year process, focused mainly on the issues of after-school activities and the concerns of parents of younger kids, Wilton got its change. The results have been impressive: students are getting more sleep and are healthier and happier.

Profile

Wilton, Connecticut is a suburban community in the southwest part of the state. The Wilton School District, which is run by a superintendent and a six member Board of Education, includes five schools: two buildings for grades K-2 housing a total of 990 students, grades 3-5 with 1,030 students, a middle school of 1,000 students and the high school of 1,230 students, giving the district a total of about 4,300 students. Prior to the change, the district ran a three-tiered bus system, with grades 6-12 starting at 7:35 am, grades 3-5 at 8:15 am and grades K-2 at 9:00 am. The middle and high schools operate on an 8-period schedule, and the start time change had no effect on the total instruction time of the students. The district receives almost 100% of its budget from town funds, and little from the State of Connecticut.

Challenge

Wilton faced two main challenges in proposing a change in start times. First, Wilton is a self-described

“sports town.” The Wilton Sports Council, a body representing the interests of the little league, soccer clubs and other private sports organizations, was a tough opponent to the change. They insisted that any change in start times would lead to the expulsion of Wilton teams from the athletic conference, a price too high to pay for any other possible benefit. Second, there were reservations raised by the parents of younger children, who would not reap the benefits of changing starting times, especially if their children now would have to arrive earlier.

In addition, like most other school districts in the country, Wilton’s budget was tight and they therefore had to consider options to change start times that would introduce little cost. Luckily, Wilton’s high school and middle school were already on the same daily schedule and could be considered a transportation unit. Therefore, cost effective options were easier to find.

Champions

The Wilton League of Women Voters (WLWV) led the effort for a later start time for Wilton’s teenagers. The WLWV initiated a research and study project in the Wilton community, which eventually provided the impetus towards the change. Because their efforts in Wilton, CT have been so successful, the WLWV has since traveled around the state to present their findings and encourage other districts to follow their lead. They have, in fact, been instrumental in supporting the Greater Hartford LWV in its efforts for change in West Hartford, CT.

The WLWV’s role in the process was to gather and coordinate information on the subject, and to be advocates for the change. They understood from the beginning that it was the Board of Education and the superintendent that would have to approve and implement the change. However, the WLWV provided an important component of this process: the blueprint

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for raising community awareness. Their plan included an identification of the goals of the change, an identification of pertinent organizations that would need to be involved in the process, a designation of their group as the coalition builder of groups larger than the school community, and finally a map for educating the community about the issue.

Journey

The Seeds:

Wilton first encountered the issue of later school start times when then Connecticut Senate President Kevin Sullivan gave a presentation on the issue to the WLWV in October 2001. In response to this, the WLWV assembled a committee to investigate the issue and write a report on their findings. This group spent six months reviewing the research and other literature on the subject, interviewing experts, and talking with the Edina, Minnesota school district about their experience with the change in start times. In the spring of 2002, the WLWV presented their advocacy position in support of delayed start times, and later published the study group report (available on the Web at www.lwwct.org/wilton). The WLWV invited the superintendent and the Board of Education to attend this presentation. The superintendent was receptive to considering this recommendation, and after conducting some research of his own, was convinced of its merits. Several of the Board members were also part of the WLWV, so the administration was supportive from the early moments of the effort for change.

Public Involvement:

The next step for the WLWV was to garner as much support as possible for this issue through educating the public. The group brought their findings to any group that would listen to them, focusing on PTA meetings, school advisory groups, and other citizen organizations.

The WLWV understood from their research that it would be imperative to conduct a survey of both the students and the staff and to include their input in designing a proposal to change the start times. This survey was administered by the Norwalk Hospital Center for Sleep Disorders with the help of the Wilton High School Student Government in the spring of 2002. The survey was sent home with students or mailed home, and was available on the school district Web site. The results, once tabulated, were also available on

the Web site.

During this time, the Wilton Education Foundation sponsored a "Community Conversation" entitled "Wilton's Youth Under Pressure" to provide an opportunity for the entire community to discuss the issue. The Connecticut Thoracic Society convened a task force made up of the WLWV and the Connecticut PTA to discuss strategies for raising awareness and advocating for later school start times. Wilton's strategy was to inform as many people as possible about the details of the sleep research that supported their efforts to change school start times.

The Administration Gets Involved:

In a public meeting in January 2003, Wilton's superintendent announced his intention to implement a later start time for adolescents and that he was considering various options on exactly how to do so. The WLWV recognized that their role should remain as public awareness coordinators, and that the detailed logistics should be left to the school administration to determine. The superintendent became the driving force behind this portion of the process. The Wilton PTSA also held a forum as an opportunity for parents to have their questions answered and to voice their concerns. The major apprehensions that the parents expressed at this meeting were the adverse effects the change would have on the athletic program and the impact on the younger children. As a result of this meeting, the superintendent discussed the issue with the athletic conference chair, who agreed on the importance of the change and assured Wilton every effort would be made to accommodate their schedule and that they would not be removed from the conference. The superintendent also realized that the change in start times could not involve the K-2 students. Finally, he promised that no student would board a bus before 7:00 am.

The Change:

Finally, in April 2003, the superintendent sent his proposed start times to the staff and the PTA for review. While response to the proposal was mixed, the superintendent decided to go ahead and present it to the Board of Education. He arranged to have several medical professionals attend the Board of Education meeting in order to answer any questions about the biological aspects of the issue. By May 2003, the board voted to approve the change in start times.

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Solution

The Wilton School District maintained its three-tiered start schedule, and achieved a more appropriate starting time for teenagers by flipping the upper elementary start, at 8:15 am, with the middle school/high school start, at 7:35 am. The adolescents gained 40 minutes of time in the morning for sleep.

Implementation

The new schedule was implemented in the fall of 2003. The WLWV and the Wilton Board of Education agreed to review the status of the start time change annually until they could do an extensive and in-depth study after three years. Because Wilton's new schedule did not involve leasing any new buses, the implementation process was made simpler for the administration, and parents and students reported an adjustment period of only about two months to the new schedules. Wilton's efforts were also featured in local press, as well as such national outlets as the *New York Times*, and NBC's *The Today Show*.

Results

Wilton's start time change was a resounding success. Teachers recognized a change in student behavior: they were more awake, had better attitudes and were overall more pleasant. Parents also reported changes in their kids' attitudes, and became increasingly supportive as they adjusted to the new routines.

Teachers who also coached at the schools were concerned before the change that they would be unable to make it to practices, but this turned out not to be a problem. Wilton High School had one of its best athletic seasons, even earning several state championships. The high school athletic programs saw a continued rise in participation. Even the 3-5 grade-school participation increased in extra-curricular activities.

The only problems were for students who had to be pulled out of class early for away games, and for students who participated in more than one sport, although this full schedule would be difficult with any school start time.

Wilton did not see any change in attendance or tardiness.

The three impacted schools — middle, high and upper elementary — participated in a survey initiated by the Parent Teacher Student Association that was

presented to the Board of Education at the end of the first year of the new schedule. Large majorities at all three schools reported satisfaction with the change. The following fall, the local sleep disorders center administered a sleep survey in the high school, with results showing that the students were, in fact, sleeping an extra hour each morning.

The WLWV has also maintained an Internet-based message board for ongoing questions, comments and concerns about the change of start times. They have held several public hearings and town forums to allow discussion of these comments.

The Norwalk Hospital Sleep Disorders Center, which conducted the sleep study before the change, continued with a follow up survey to assess the impact. They used a truncated version of the self-administered School Sleep Habits Questionnaire, which asked questions about sleep, sleepiness and grades. The results have shown that Wilton High School students are getting 35 minutes more sleep than before the change. The number of students who reported that daytime sleepiness was not a problem doubled. Their bedtimes did not change. There was even a trend towards improved grades, but this is hard to measure, especially in a district with already high-achieving students.

Contact

Wilton would love to provide any help they can to promote this change elsewhere. Please contact: Susan Bruschi, the chair of the Wilton Board of Education and former board member of the WLWV, at sabcrb@optonline.net, Carole Kleinfeld, current board member of the WLWV, at ctyk@optonline.net, or Lisa Bogan, current Board of Education Member and WLWV board member, at elmb@optonline.net.

Reviewed by Wilton Public Schools



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