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**NANYANG GIRLS' LATER START TIME A LESSON FOR OTHERS**

# Letting students sleep in is a move worth emulating

Earlier this month, online news of Nanyang Girls' High School's successful implementation of starting school 45 minutes later reached close to half-a-million page views within a day. The change, implemented almost a year ago, was mostly well received, but few people realise how remarkable it was to pull off.

The move to start at 8.15am came after careful deliberation. Implementing a later start time in a secondary school makes sense, as these students are the ones affected by a biological shift in preference for later bedtimes.

Local data shows that a one- to 1.5-hour delay in sleep time takes place between the ages of 14 and 16 years. So, forcing them to sleep at 10pm is not a fact-based solution. A 45-minute delay in school start time makes it more likely that the time will actually be used for sleep (an average of 20 minutes so far in the Nanyang case), thus making the benefits outweigh the costs.

A similar initiative was carried out in Hong Kong, but the delay in start time was only 15 minutes, and the corresponding gain in sleep was only three minutes. Starting later



In order to accommodate starting school 45 minutes later at 8.15am, Nanyang Girls High rejigged its timetable, including reducing the frequency of the school assembly – all done after much deliberation. PHOTO: CHANNEL NEWSASIA

than 8.15 am would be ideal, but this could exacerbate concerns about students using public transportation at the same time as office workers. The leaders at Nanyang did not change the school's start times on a whim. They reviewed the supporting scientific evidence pointing to the importance of adequate sleep for memory consolidation, health, mental well-being and accident reduction in students.

The school administration considered these potential gains as well as obstacles, including the impact on traffic and student transport. They engaged students, parents and teachers in discussions, carefully getting students to internalise the benefits of sleeping better. To end school at the same time as before, the curriculum was adjusted after much deliberation.

The process was not plain sailing. Naysayers constantly reminded us of how impractical and disruptive this would be in Singapore despite objective information being provided about the need for change.

Nanyang Girls High School chose to press on. Data gathered from two teams in Duke-NUS Medical School show that our secondary school students and undergraduates sleep one to two hours less than their Australian and United Kingdom counterparts. It was high time that someone went beyond commenting and acted on the science to help students flourish.

As far as we can tell, most parents support their children starting school

later. Yet there is a need to address the concerns of those who are against the idea by spelling out the facts.

First, some people just need less sleep than recommended and can flourish without adverse consequences. Some are larks, whose natural preference is to sleep early and rise early. But clearly, not everyone else should be held to these standards.

To those who say "We toughed it out, why can't the present generation?" I would say we need to adapt to a changing world and that optimising sleep seeks to give Singaporeans a competitive edge in Asia.

Adequate sleep has benefits. Advocating sleep should be an offensive, not a defensive, move. For example, at least one European football team is providing comfortable rooms for their players to sleep in the afternoon before playing, to enhance night-time game performance. If parents are willing to invest heavily in private tuition, does improving sleep not make sense?

It is not enough to work hard. Working smarter is what we need to get better at. Surviving is not good enough, flourishing is what the next generation must aspire to. Allocating downtime to rest, reflect and sleep will not create lazy people. Instead, it is intended to increase productivity and work intensity during worktime.

Despite numerous medical studies supporting links between short sleep and diabetes, obesity and metabolic syndrome, many doctors are

largely unaware or indifferent to these findings.

The focus of medicine in Singapore is on screening, early diagnosis, and early and cost-effective treatment, not prevention. As such, there is widespread ignorance of well-established facts like the mid-adolescent shift in preference for later sleep times and its subsequent reversal in early adulthood. One doctor has even gone on record to say that sleeping less on weekdays and catching up on weekends is fine — it is not. This sleeping pattern is associated with increased risk of obesity and diabetes mellitus.

To argue that adjustments in transportation to accommodate a later school start time are too difficult is tantamount to devaluing the health and well-being of the next generation.

Even the IT and finance industries, two strong supporters of the notion that one can always work harder for profit, are realising that *karoshi*, the Japanese word for death from overwork, is real.

Mr Ranjan Das, one of India's youngest CEOs, died at age 42 from a cardiac arrest; many attribute short sleep as a contributory factor.

Mr Zhang Rui, founder of Chunyu Doctor, suffered a similar fate, possibly a consequence of a "996 schedule": 9am to 9pm, six days a week plus loads of stress.

Mr Sarvshreshth Gupta, a Goldman Sachs trader, was only 22 when he took his own life, unable to cope with stress at work and lack of sleep.

Lack of sleep is not a badge of honour. Having adequate sleep is a public health issue and no less important than eating right and exercising sufficiently.

Starting school later may not be for every school at the present time. However, it is critical to start the conversation within families, office tea rooms and boardrooms about optimising sleep and time-use, followed by personal commitment to action.

The success of Nanyang against conventional wisdom should prove infectious. One school defied the odds and changed for the better. Others can learn and transform lives in a way best suited to their students' needs. For the sake of our young and vulnerable citizens, I hope this thought will be consolidated the next time Singapore goes to bed.

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