

Hit Snooze

Ah, sleep . . . sweet, beloved, renewing sleep . . . That precious yet out-of-reach fantasy; for no matter how much we rest, we never seem to get enough of it.

And that's because we *don't* get enough of it.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, teenagers need eight to ten hours of sleep every night to function at their best, but only a mere 15 percent of high school students get this much sleep on weeknights. Almost seven in ten students report feeling tired or having little energy at least several days each week. In fifty years, this issue will only be worse as teenagers' responsibilities will have increased while the number of hours in a day remain the same.

There are multiple causes of this unhealthy problem: modern lighting communicates to our brain that the sun is still out, social media diversions keep us up at night, and loud noises from our nearby neighbors prevent us from sleeping deeply. But perhaps the chief culprit in the Case of the Cursory Catnap is the early wake up times mandated by high school schedules.

In order to avoid traffic and arrive at school on time, most students in Hawai'i wake up extremely early. They then stay up late into the night completing homework for the following day. In fact, this lack of a good night's rest has caused nearly three in ten high school students to fall asleep in class at least once a week (National Sleep Foundation, 2006). This is tremendously unhealthy, especially for adolescents who are undergoing the great shift from youth to adulthood.

Early wake-up times are unnatural. When the sun rises, retinal proteins in the human body are activated, ultimately leading to a decrease in the sleep-inducing hormone called melatonin, and this process causes us to naturally wake up; however, teenagers are forced to challenge this law of nature. Almost all high school students must awaken before sunrise so that they can prepare for school, and this wake-up routine disrupts the *circadian rhythm* – our

“biological clock” of patterns in our bodies, especially sleep patterns. Also, by waking up early, teenagers interrupt the body’s process of renewal and restoration. During sleep, brain tissues are repaired, immune systems are restored, important memories are consolidated and stored, creative thinking is inspired, muscles grow, and athletic ability improves in terms of reaction times, energy levels, and stamina. Routinely awakening too early can greatly interfere with these essential processes. (*Psychology* by Myers, David G. and Dewall, C. Nathan)

I propose that schools start their days a few hours later – begin at nine o’clock instead of 7:30, and finish at four o’clock instead of three. This solution would allow teenagers to get the proper amount of sleep every night at a natural time. Students’ performances in school would improve drastically, because rest would restore the body and the brain, freshen the memory, improve thinking skills, allow for growth and athletic ability, and benefit attitudes.

This solution will also directly benefit another Hawai‘i issue: traffic. If school began later, not all Hawai‘i residents would be on the road at the same time, and this would result in a decline in traffic jams and accidents in the morning.

Clarence T.C. Ching was a successful student in his high school career at Saint Louis School, and he worked hard in the classroom to be as prosperous as he was. He was a selfless advocate for education, and the Clarence T.C. Ching Foundation continues his legacy today by generously donating to schools around the state – including my own – for the improvement of school environments. What better way to enhance education than by promoting better sleep habits by moving school days to more reasonable hours?

So snore some more, you’ll learn for sure!