

# Fighting City Hall

*This parent did her best to challenge a very dubious new school policy.*

**By Mary Easter**

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I didn't need a review of the research to tell me that sleep needs change when children become teenagers. I had living proof.

Until he turned 13, my youngest child had always hit the ground running. Despite my pleas to sleep in until 7:30 am, even on weekends he always wanted to get up at 6:00 am and get the day started.

Then....hormones....changes..... he began to grow — and grow! Part of this new teen package was a change in his sleep patterns.

Even though he went to bed at the same time, he would lie there and stare at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Getting up for school began to be a problem. On weekends, he began to sleep until 9:00 am, and then a month later 10:00 am.

I turned to the Internet and found ample information on the changes to sleep patterns that occur when children reach puberty. I learned that early morning is the sleepest time for teens due to the phase delay of their circadian rhythms.

Right around that same time, I heard rumblings that all high schools in our area were going to start classes an hour earlier. My son was already having an awful time getting up at 7:45 am to make it to school for the 8:45 am start time.

It blew my mind to think about his rising at 6:45 am. Shockingly, he would be one of the luckier ones. Some teens would have to be at their bus stops at 6:14 am!

In my naïve way, I believed that the school board trustees must be unaware of all the research on teenagers' sleep patterns. Even if the trustees were prepared to ignore teens' sleepiness and discomfort as a phase or simple laziness, I thought surely they would care about the decreased academic learning.

Initially, it seemed to me that all I needed to do was inform the trustees

of the research. They would immediately see the light and cancel the plan for earlier high school start times. It wasn't that simple, however.

I, along with many others, took the research information to both local school boards. We sponsored presentations from two Canadian researchers, and letters from American researchers, all suggesting that early high school start times were not in the best interest of the students.

We presented the boards with study after study. We brought them petitions signed by hundreds of other parents. We garnered media support and attention.

When the day came for the vote, the trustees actually turned down the motion to change to earlier start times. We had won! Our children had been spared this educational disaster.

Or so we thought. Six weeks later another vote was held. This time around, several trustees reversed themselves and voted in favour of the earlier start time.

With public outrage at its peak, we went to our local member of provincial parliament. Although he told us he sympathized with us, he said he was unable to be of any real help.

Still determined, I asked Frank Klees, the Conservative education critic, to present a 5000-signature petition to the Minister of Education in the legislature.

In his response, the Minister ignored the procedural unfairness and the educational considerations, and instead focused on how much money had been given to the two boards.

In subsequent discussions with the Minister's legislative representative, we were told that all the Minister could do was facilitate communication between the boards' administrations and the community.

Facilitate communication? We had already tried by every means possible to communicate with the admini-

strations of the two school boards. They had discounted our concerns as unimportant and tried to discredit the research. The communication between the two sides was already well-established and clear as a bell.

Now, two years later, we are dealing with the fallout. The community's extra curricular activities continue to be held at their usual times; as a result, some kids' activities go on until 10 or even 11 pm. The children still have to be up early for school, however.

My 15-year-old son is a zombie for his first class and sometimes has little memory of it. This "A" student has even forgotten his locker combination upon arrival at school.

Other areas of life have been impacted as well. Kids skip breakfast to grab some extra sleep and then can't handle a burger for "lunch" at 10:30 am. At 2:30 pm when they get home from school, they gorge themselves for an hour and then aren't hungry for family dinner.

The number of bus cancellation days is sharply up, because that decision has to be made an hour earlier, often too early to properly assess how bad the weather will be. My son's class missed an entire unit of science due to the number of missed days.

Possibly worst of all, I and many others, including our children, have lost our faith in the system. We have learned that school boards are neither democratic nor accountable, not even to the minister of education. Our trust in government at any level has been shattered. I no longer go to board meetings or participate in my school council.

After taking a risk, and stepping outside my comfort zone to pursue this action, all I am left with is a profound sense of sadness and disillusionment.

*(Mrs. Easter is a parent in Chatham, Ontario.)*