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OP-ED OP-ED OPINION

Later school start times won't ensure that students get the sleep they need. But less homework might

By VICKI ABELES
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Students nap on a school bus in Los Angeles, California. (Los Angeles Times)



California lawmakers voted last month to prohibit most middle schools and high schools from starting classes before 8:30 a.m. Once signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown, schools across the state will have three years to comply.

The sponsors of the legislation, Senate Bill 328, rightly cite studies showing the importance of sleep to teen health and development, at a time when American children face a mounting mental health crisis and rising suicide rates.

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But while pushing back start times allows teens to wake later, the law still wouldn't ensure that they get the sleep and rest critical to their mental health. That's why lawmakers need to consider and regulate the overall amount of time students are required to do schoolwork, both inside and outside the classroom.

Most of us take for granted that there are legal limits on how much adults should be allowed to work without special compensation or protection. "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for what we will" was a rallying cry of unions in the early 20th century.

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Children should be afforded the same amount of time to rest and recharge as adults, if not more.

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But somehow we don't yet take for granted that our children's schoolwork ought to be subject to similar limits. The Fair Labor Standards Act established limits on children's employment, but not on their schoolwork.

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, compulsory public education laws were passed in all 52 states, largely as an effort to protect children from labor exploitation. Freed from the physical hazards of factory work, children went to school to become literate American citizens and productive members of the workforce.

A century later, the student workweek remains unregulated, and schools have an unfettered ability to increase the amount of academic work that students are required to do. Children and teens are in school an average of 25 more

days a year today than in the 1950s, and a University of Michigan study found that children between 6 and 17 spend about 7½ hours per week more on academics than they did 20 years ago.

This additional work has not led to a significant improvement in overall academic performance. The nation's Program for International Student Assessment scores have been falling for years. It also hasn't correlated with an increase in future employability. Scores on the Torrance Test for Creative Thinking, which assesses one of the qualities employers seek most, have plummeted since the 1990s.

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At the same time, the importance of unscheduled time for children has been well established. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, passed in 1989, recognizes children's rights "to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities." The United States is the only U.N. member state that hasn't ratified the child rights treaty.

U.S. states and school districts determine the number of instructional hours that American children and teens will have in the classroom. At most schools, the day starts sometime around 8 a.m. and lasts until 3 p.m. This alone makes for a nearly 35-hour workweek, not counting extracurricular activities and homework.

The National Education Assn. provides recommendations for time spent on homework, but at least one study indicates that the amount of homework given to elementary students far exceeds those suggested limits. A 2014 survey of American teachers found that high schoolers are assigned 17½ hours of homework a week, or 3½ hours per night.

The upshot of all this: For most students in the United States, the workweek often exceeds 40 hours — the work limit we set for employed adults.

Children should be afforded the same amount of time to rest and recharge as adults, if not more. Moreover, they should not be forced to choose between the sleep they need for good health and the work required to get good grades. Both will have a strong impact on their future prospects.

And, while the burdens and stakes are high for all students, they are even greater for those from underprivileged families, who often need to care for younger siblings and work after-school jobs on top of their other responsibilities.

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According to one recent study, only 15% of teens are getting the recommended eight to 10 hours of sleep on school nights. Studies suggests this could have a host of harmful effects, causing them to age faster and be more susceptible to disease as adults.

Too much schoolwork also cuts down on essential play time. The U.N. declared recreation a right for children for good reason. It is an essential contributor to their physical and mental health, and it helps them develop the social and decision-making skills they need in order to find fulfillment and success later in life.

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Children deserve legal protection from excessive schoolwork. If we believe, as science tells us, that rest and recreation are critical to children's health, we should ensure they get it.

Vicki Abeles is an attorney and the author of "Beyond Measure: Rescuing an Overscheduled, Overtested, Underestimated Generation." She is also the director of two documentaries, "Race to Nowhere" and "Beyond Measure."

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