

The impact of an unfunded mandate implementation: Findings from a CSBA study on “late start”

By Jeremy Anderson / May 2024

Background

In 2019, California became the first state in the nation to mandate later school start times for middle and high schools. Senate Bill 328 aimed to address the significant body of research highlighting the negative impacts of early start school schedules on adolescent sleep patterns and overall well-being. The bill provided an exemption for rural districts without defining “rural” in this context. It encouraged, but did not require, the California Department of Education (CDE) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to contact educational partners to provide information about sleep deprivation.

In the leadup to the first year of universal implementation, LEA leaders expressed their concerns surrounding the practical implications of later school start times; however, there was no research on the mandate’s impacts at the local level. CSBA opposed SB 328, arguing that it unnecessarily encroached on local control and that it was a one-size-fits-all approach in a diverse state. Since the bill’s passage, there have been no initiatives by the Legislature to evaluate implementation or to make changes to ease policy concerns at the local level. The research team at CSBA launched a year-long, holistic project to study these impacts and highlight what happens when a well-intended but unfunded mandate is applied to California districts.

CSBA research on late start

Throughout 2023–24, the CSBA research team conducted focus groups, interviews and a statewide survey on the impact of later school start times at the local level. The team interviewed students, parents, principals, superintendents and board members.

The statewide survey received 325 responses from 219 school districts. There were 174 unified and 45 high school districts represented by 146 superintendents, 104 board presidents and 74 chief business officers (CBOs) or equivalent. Disaggregated by type of district, 41 percent were suburban, 23 percent were rural, 23 percent were located in towns and 12 percent were designated as urban*.

Key findings

Many respondents to this study reported that implementing later school start times was going well with no major concerns. At the same time, many expressed concerns with implementation for their LEA’s students and staff.

Later start times are impacting instructional minutes for some students

Respondents told CSBA researchers that students miss instructional time in the afternoon due to later school start times:

- ▶ 69 percent of superintendents heard from faculty or staff that later school start times led to students leaving school early due to extracurricular activities.
- ▶ 40 percent of board presidents reported the same issue.

A consistent theme across focus groups and the statewide survey was the concern regarding students missing instructional time in the afternoon. Though school schedules have shifted later in the day, many extracurricular activities have not. Moving these activities earlier is also not feasible for some districts due to the availability of

* As California does not have official locale definitions, these locale designations come from the National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/locale/definitions>.

volunteer coaches, many of whom are parents whose work schedules do not align with new school dismissal times. Additionally, students leaving school early puts pressure on teachers who must keep track of missed assignments.

Missed instructional time is particularly concerning, as the state and LEAs have poured billions of dollars into post-pandemic learning recovery efforts. Extracurricular activities that were pushed back required students to remain at school later in the evening, which led to later bedtimes, potentially mitigating the intended impact of more restful sleep. Additionally, extracurricular activities are now going later into the night such that lighting has become a major issue. One superintendent reported the district having to spend over \$130,000 on lighting, which was accelerated by the passage of SB 328. Another CBO estimated the costs at around \$200,000 for additional transportation.

Later school start times are impacting both LEA and student transportation:

- ▶ 81 percent of superintendents who responded to a question regarding changes in transportation scheduling said that their district had to change transportation schedules due to later school days.
- ▶ 36 percent of board presidents reported additional transportation expenditures directly related to late start.
- ▶ 93 percent of CBOs that answered a question on spending directly related to late start mentioned transportation as the top expense.

Superintendents, board presidents, parents and students expressed concerns about the effect of later school start times on transportation before and after school. Later school start times added extra layers of complexity to transportation scheduling and resource allocation, particularly for extracurricular activities and morning drop-off.

Later school start times are causing difficulties for district staff both before and after school:

- ▶ 62 percent of superintendents said their LEAs had to fund additional staff time due to the later school start time.
- ▶ 24 percent of board presidents indicated that later school start times had impacted some aspect of labor negotiations.

In both focus groups and open-ended responses, the central issue related to staffing was student supervision with either existing or additional staff. Another important theme was afternoon staff scheduling disruptions. Leaders reported disruptions in staff course sequencing and personal impacts to teachers, such as with child care and health care appointments.



Now we're going 8:30 to 3:30, and just that extra half hour, because we're kind of remote, it takes a lot longer to get to the schools we play. So, our students ... are missing their last class of the day. The teachers have said that our athletes are trying to keep track of [their assignments], and helping them get caught up has just been really hard.

— High school principal

The importance of these findings

SB 328 is one of many examples of a mandate that gets passed without considering what support LEAs would need to make the mandate's goal more successful. If the goal is to increase the health and well-being of California's students, then the absence of those supports threatens to undermine the mandate's success. Several respondents to CSBA's survey expressed support for the overall purpose of the bill. They indicated that they would wholeheartedly participate if given additional resources such as transportation funding or local flexibility. With guidance and resources, implementation can be more manageable. While CSBA considers ways to help alleviate the policy pressures of SB 328, future mandates need to consider what structural supports LEAs require to make the end goal of the mandate positively impact California's students.

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