



# Waking up to reality

The unintended consequences of mandated later school start times in California

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# Executive Summary

The 2022–23 academic year marked the first time that later school start times were mandated for all of California’s middle and high schools (with the exception of rural schools). This mandate was passed in response to scientific research that shows that later start times better align with the circadian rhythms of teenage students and, therefore, produce a host of benefits. While the legislation was well intended, a blanket statewide policy raised concerns from educational partners who pointed out that the diverse circumstances of the state’s local educational agencies (LEAs) would make universal implementation challenging and that there were few flexibilities allowed for a district’s local control or decision-making.

The passage of the law was not accompanied by plans or funding for formal evaluation of implementation. To address questions about the impact on LEAs and to provide policymakers with data about a major system change to schools, the Research and Education Policy Department (REPD) at the California School Boards Association (CSBA) launched a year-long study to understand the impact of later school start times within and across districts.

This study presents the findings from four focus groups, five in-depth interviews with school leaders from different school districts, and statewide survey responses from 325 school leaders in 219 unified and high school districts, as well as 137 elementary district responses. There are five common themes from this research:

- ▶ **An increase in missed instructional time and other extracurricular impacts:** The most concerning finding was that many students who participate

in extracurricular activities and sports are missing afternoon classes at a greater rate than before the mandate. The constraints that limit the ability of many districts to adjust extracurricular schedules are resulting in students’ early dismissal, forcing them to make up work and miss direct classroom instruction.

- ▶ **Transportation and lighting challenges:** Later school start times presented school districts with challenges coordinating bus routes, especially with their elementary schools or neighboring districts. These effects spilled over into afternoon operations where buses for school-to-home transportation and extracurriculars are in demand. In addition to transportation, lighting concerns for extracurriculars and before-school safety was a common response in the survey.
- ▶ **Concerns around staffing:** Participants in this study reported additional needs for staffing, mainly before school, when students who had working families had to drop them off before the later start

time. Students arriving at school at earlier times could interfere with the purpose of the legislation as it mitigates the ability of students to align their sleep cycles.

- ▶ **Inequitable effects on students and families:** This theme captured a range of inequitable impacts to members of district communities directly related to later school start times, many of whom come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These include the increased need for child care, impacts on students' ability to work after school, and unequal access to before- and after-school curricular options created due to later school start times.
- ▶ **Opportunities presented by the change in school start times:** Some school leaders took the change in school start times as an opportunity to reimagine master schedules. They found creative ways to alleviate traffic patterns and offer staff more flexibility in meeting and instructional times.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These themes are used to make policy recommendations that address some of the challenges presented by the later school start time mandate and other unfunded mandates in California. Recommendations for the state and local districts are:

- 1) Allow for more flexibility and local control on school start times.
- 2) Provide funding for costs directly associated with late start such as transportation.
- 3) Investigate the impact and cost of unfunded mandates in California.
- 4) Require legislation that proposes large system changes to local education systems to include an automatic impact analysis to be conducted by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office three to five years after enactment.
- 5) Optional local recommendation for LEAs — To provide more evidence for missed instructional time, LEAs could collect instructional minutes data to provide the state the true local impact on student learning.





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# Introduction

In 2019, California became the first state in the nation to mandate later school start times for middle and high schools. Senate Bill 328<sup>1</sup> aimed to address the growing body of research highlighting the negative impacts of early school bells on adolescent sleep patterns and overall well-being. SB 328 is brief, containing only 355 words. The law states that:

- ▶ Middle school schooldays (including middle schools operated as charter schools) shall start no earlier than 8 a.m.
- ▶ High school schooldays (including high schools operated as charter schools) shall start no earlier than 8:30 a.m.
- ▶ It does not prohibit a school district from offering classes or activities to a limited number of students before the start of the school day.
- ▶ It does not apply to rural schools. However, the law does not define what constitutes a rural school.

The law encourages, but does not require, the California Department of Education (CDE) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to contact educational partners, including families, to provide information about sleep deprivation.

Implementing the late-start mandate prompted extensive debate among parents, policymakers, and other educational partners. Recognizing the importance of understanding the implications of this policy shift, a year-long research study was undertaken by the Research and Education Policy Development (REPD) Department at the California School Boards Association (CSBA) to assess the late-start mandate's policy impact on members of LEA communities.

This report presents the findings of this research. The project used a variety of methods to capture perspectives and experiences surrounding the implementation of the late start

mandate, shedding light on its effects on students, educators, families, and the broader community.

While SB 328 intended to deliver well-supported biological benefits to teenagers,<sup>2</sup> this report does not seek to measure the impact of the mandate on student alertness or rest. It solely focuses on the policy implementation experiences of LEAs to highlight what support they may need to implement the bill effectively, flexibilities they may require, and what recommendations could help them in easing some of the unintended consequences of the mandate.

School scheduling operates within a complicated ecosystem of transportation, class scheduling, extracurricular activities, and a wide range of other services and activities. Making a change to that scheduling can cause a litany of downstream effects and unintended consequences that have real-world impacts for students and families. By exploring the benefits and challenges encountered during the transition to later school start times, this report provides insights into how implementation has impacted LEA communities and how the state Legislature may better support unfunded mandates.

An unfunded mandate is any mandate related to education that does not contain funding for implementation and that has not yet had a test claim approved by the Commission on State Mandates, a process that can be time consuming.<sup>3</sup>

## THE SCIENCE AND EARLY CONCERNS

The potential benefits of pushing school start times back for students are supported by a substantial body of research. The main argument for later start times in middle and high school centers around adolescents' biological sleep needs and their ability to perform well in school. Studies have shown that teenagers have a naturally delayed sleep-wake

cycle compared to children and adults. This means they tend to fall asleep later at night and require more sleep (typically 8-10 hours per night) for optimal functioning. Academic researchers,<sup>4</sup> and institutions such as the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>5</sup> and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,<sup>6</sup> have found that later school start times can have positive impacts for students, such as:

- ▶ Improved academic performance
- ▶ Improvements to mental health
- ▶ Reduced absenteeism and tardiness
- ▶ Safety benefits
- ▶ Potential for additional sleep time<sup>7</sup>

Realizing these benefits heavily depends on the success of implementation at the local level. California’s 5.8 million students are represented by geographically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse school districts where moving school start times will impact them in radically different ways.<sup>8</sup> That diversity prompted many educational partners

to raise concerns<sup>9</sup> over the near-universal nature of SB 328. These concerns included:<sup>10</sup>

- ▶ Logistical challenges around morning and afternoon transportation
- ▶ Impacts on working families who depend on older siblings for child care before and after school
- ▶ Staffing morning programs to ensure the safety of students who still come before the required start time
- ▶ The inequitable impact of the law on working communities whose schedules may be less flexible

In addition to the concerns listed above, by law, school districts must meet a minimum annual number of instructional minutes, as shown in Table 1. The failure of a school district to meet these requirements comes with severe financial penalties. This mandate has created challenges for LEAs to meet these minutes for all students, particularly those who participate in extracurricular activities, a challenge that will be discussed in depth later in this report.

**Table 1 – California instructional time requirements for school districts**

Required days	Required minutes per grade span	Penalty for not offering required instructional minutes	Penalty for not offering required instructional days
180	TK/K 36,000 1-3 50,400 4-8 54,000 9-12 64,800	Product of the total apportionment for affected grade level multiplied by percentage of instructional time school district failed to offer.	Apportionment proportionately reduced for each school day fewer than 176.

Source: California Department of Education, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/pal/instructionaltimetable.asp>

# Methods

Implementing a statewide mandate impacts every LEA community member in unique ways. One of this study's main goals was to explore how (or if) later school start times were impacting district communities and operations at a variety of operational levels. The methods were designed to gather unique insights from many different members of school district communities to produce a holistic view of how the late start mandate affects those at the local level.

Many of the findings in this report are supported by the data from a 2023 statewide survey of school leaders in high school, elementary, and unified school districts. Prior to survey deployment, the research team held a series of focus groups to ensure that the questions asked encompassed a range of experiences for district communities.

## FOCUS GROUPS

REPD conducted five focus groups in spring 2022 to help inform development of a statewide survey. Questions for each group were created to gain the unique perspectives of participants in the following areas:

- ▶ **Students:** Focused on high school students to capture their experiences with sleep, academic performance, transportation, and extracurricular activities under the new schedule.
- ▶ **Parents:** Gathered insights regarding logistical challenges, sleep patterns of their children, and perceived impacts on family life.

- ▶ **School board members:** Explored perspectives on policy implementation, community engagement, and budgetary considerations.
- ▶ **Principals:** Obtained ground-level insights regarding classroom dynamics, teacher experiences, transportation, scheduling considerations, and overall school climate.
- ▶ **Superintendents:** Sought district-level perspectives on operational adjustments, resource allocation, and long-term planning for the mandated start times.

## STATEWIDE SURVEYS

Recognizing that different district positions may offer unique insights, four separate surveys were sent to superintendents, chief business officers (CBOs), school board presidents, and elementary superintendents. The survey was sent to the full CSBA membership of 968 LEAs. Though SB 328 only applies to middle and high schools, the focus groups' findings clarified that there



may be spillover effects to elementary districts. In recognition of this, a separate survey was sent to superintendents from elementary school districts to explore the extent of those effects.

The survey questionnaire included topics touching on:

- ▶ The operational benefits of later school start times
- ▶ Impacts on transportation both before and after the school day
- ▶ Perceived safety concerns
- ▶ Impacts to extracurricular activities
- ▶ Impacts to district budgets directly attributable to later school start times
- ▶ Whether students were missing afternoon instructional time due to later school start times and extracurricular activities
- ▶ Perceptions of disparate impact of later school start times to the district community

## INTERVIEWS

To gain even deeper insights into the implementation process and its local adaptations, in-depth interviews were conducted with key figures in five districts chosen to represent different areas of California. The districts were also

chosen to reflect a variety of enrollment numbers, unduplicated pupil percentages, and locales. These interviews targeted personnel involved in district operations related to later school start times or district scheduling. Appendix A provides descriptive information for the districts.

By combining focus groups, a statewide survey, and targeted interviews, this research can provide a multifaceted perspective on the implementation and effects of SB 328.

## SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

### Survey respondents by position

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the survey sample districts for high school and unified school districts. There were 325 responses from 219 school districts representing a total of 1,900,991 students. Responses were from 174 unified school districts and 45 high school districts. There were also responses from 137 elementary superintendents to help assess any spillover effects like transportation disruptions.

Superintendents from unified, high school, and elementary districts had the highest response rates and the highest total number of respondents. Chief business officers (or equivalent positions) represented the lowest response rates of all four groups.

**Table 2 – Position of survey respondents**

	Sent	Responded	Response Rate
Unified and High School District Superintendents	422	146	35%
Elementary Superintendents	474	137	29%
School Board Presidents	402	105	26%
Chief Business Officer (or equivalent)	334	75	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,632</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>28%</b>

### Survey sample district descriptions

Since SB 328 provided an exemption for rural districts from the late start requirement, the research team disaggregated the sample by general geographic classification or locale. Since the CDE does not have a formal, universal classification system for different district territory types, REPD used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Locale Codes<sup>11</sup> to classify the locale of sample districts. Suburban school districts represented the largest percentage of respondents at 41 percent; town and rural districts tied for 23 percent; and city districts were 12 percent.

See Appendix B for a detailed breakdown of those codes for the survey respondents.

**Table 3 – Enrollment ranges for survey sample districts as compared to California**

Enrollment range	# of districts	% of sample	California average
1-1,000	38	17%	40%
1,001-2,500	39	18%	17%
2,501-5,000	46	21%	15%
5,001-15,000	60	27%	19%
15,000+	36	16%	10%

Table 3 represents the enrollment range breakdown of school districts that participated in the statewide survey. Districts with smaller enrollments are greatly underrepresented in this study, while districts in middle enrollment bands are slightly overrepresented. However, given the exemption provisions of SB 328, this was to be expected since this bill allows for rural school districts to opt out of later school start times.

**Figure 1 – Unduplicated percentage ranges for sample LEAs**

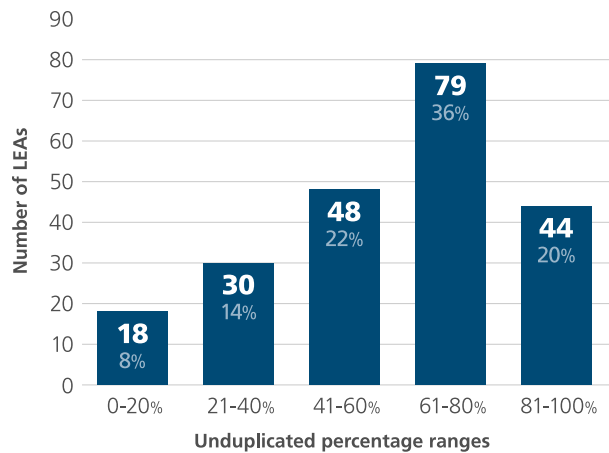


Figure 1 represents the distribution of districts' unduplicated pupil percentage ranges. This distribution largely represents the statewide distribution with slight overrepresentation in those districts with unduplicated percentages in the 61-80 percent range. For more information on the state's average distribution of unduplicated pupil percentages versus the study's sample see the second table in Appendix B.

# Common Themes

While this study found some variation across districts, the high degree of similarity in their experiences were noteworthy. Several common themes emerged from the analysis of focus groups, in-depth interviews with school leaders, and the statewide survey. These themes are:

- ▶ Opportunities presented by the change in school start time
- ▶ Missed instructional time and other extracurricular impacts
- ▶ Transportation and lighting challenges
- ▶ Concerns around staffing
- ▶ Inequitable effects on students and families

## OPPORTUNITIES

While many of the responses highlighted the challenges presented by shifting school start times, school leaders discussed some opportunities presented by the mandate. Though this does not represent most of the data collected, it is important to note some school leaders' strategies addressing changes in school schedules.

A principal from a suburban district with an average daily attendance (ADA) of more than 30,000 looked at the change in start time as an opportunity to

### GETTING AHEAD OF A MANDATE AND TAKING CONTROL

*"Those districts that, like us, implemented early, had an easier time of it. I think [that created a] perception of greater local control..."*

How does a district incorporate local control when faced with an unfunded mandate? One superintendent from a large urban district who participated in this study's in-depth interview chose to get ahead of the mandate. This school leader used the return to school from the pandemic in 2021 as an opportunity to enact later school start times and gain feedback from the community two years before it was mandated. By getting ahead of the mandate, the district was able to make adjustments to the school schedule to make it better fit their local context. Starting before the mandate took place also enabled the community to take ownership of the process while altering transportation routes and rearranging school site schedules with zero periods and tutoring options.

collect community input and reimagine the school's master schedule. This principal sought input from parent and student groups in adjusting the schedule, which resulted in an 8:30 a.m. start and a seven-hour workday for teachers. The school implemented an optional seventh period to replace a zero period that they had before the schedule change. In this seventh period, teachers can offer courses for students willing and able to stay later in the day.

Two respondents stated that students who came to school early were using the time to complete assignments or catch up on work. When asked about the benefits of a later school start time, one superintendent from a large urban district said, "I think they do appreciate having an extra hour in the morning ... to do some homework .... So, there's a benefit."

A board member from a small district echoed this benefit, saying, "For students who want it, they're fully able to take a seven-period day because they can get there at 7:20. ... They have that option — sort of an unintended benefit — if you want to call it that; not what the authors of the bill intended."

Five board presidents also gave accounts of how the change in school start time had positively impacted school scheduling. Two reported that they enacted an optional afternoon period for students. Three spoke about using the additional morning time for staff planning and improving bus routes. Four students in one of this study's focus groups reported that they believed they were more well rested. While this study did not attempt to measure the impact of rest for students, these anecdotal accounts did pop up for a segment of participants.

## **MISSED INSTRUCTIONAL TIME AND EXTRACURRICULAR IMPACTS**

One of the most consistent themes across all focus groups, interviews with school leaders, and the statewide survey was the concern regarding missed instructional time in the afternoon due to earlier dismissal times for students participating in sports and other extracurricular activities, which has increased with later school start times.

Though school schedules have shifted to later in the day, many extracurricular activities have not. Sixty-nine percent of superintendents and 40 percent of board presidents surveyed had heard from faculty or staff that students who had to leave school early due to an extracurricular activity were missing more in-class time than prior to the later school start. Moving these activities to an earlier time is not feasible for some districts due to the availability of volunteer (or walk-on) coaches, many of whom are parents whose work schedules do not align with extracurriculars.

Additionally, students missing their final periods of the day puts pressure on teachers who must keep track of missed assignments. One parent, speaking about their student in a focus group, stated that, "He's missing school because games still started at 3. School doesn't get out until 3:17. So he is missing, for sure, sixth period... every sport isn't able to do sixth period athletics because a lot of our coaches are walk-on coaches; they have a full-time job during the day."

A principal from a small, urban school district corroborated this worry in a focus group when they said:

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, depending on the sport, their last class of the day. The teachers have said that our athletes trying to keep track of [missed assignments], helping them get caught up, has just been really hard. A lot of our students are complaining about it.

**Table 4 – Responses to questions on impacts to extracurricular activities and instructional time**

	Superintendents	Board Presidents
Has the district needed to rearrange extracurricular activity schedules due to changes in school start time?	Yes 80% No 18% Unsure 1%	Yes 68% No 21% Unsure 11%
Have you heard from faculty or staff that students miss more afternoon instructional time due to extracurricular schedule changes (e.g., athletics) related to later school start times?	Yes 69% No 23% Unsure 8%	Yes 40% No 47% Unsure 12%
Has starting school later required changes to transportation scheduling?	Yes 81% No 19% Unsure 0%	Not asked

Beyond missed instructional time, the shift of some non-sports related extracurriculars to later in the day has caused some students to stay up late to complete schoolwork. One student who participates in a dual enrollment program stated, “I would have had a fairly regular schedule before the time change... but because of the change, my high school and college classes combined [are] from 7:20 a.m. to 10 p.m. And then when I get home, I have two meetings to attend that were also impacted by the time change.”

When asked about challenges, three of the five district leaders who participated in more in-depth interviews shared student perspective on missing instructional time due to the shift in start time and extracurriculars. One superintendent from a small, urban district in northern California said:

The downside on the athletic front is not so much a law, not so much an expense issue... but it's a lot of instructional time, because when the schools are ending later, kids are missing more time because games still have to go. If it's basketball season ... the freshman game can't start much past 4 o'clock, or the Varsity game won't start until 8:30.

Missed instructional time is particularly worrisome in the context of ongoing efforts for post-pandemic learning

recovery. Later extracurriculars have the unintended consequence of forcing some students to work later in the night (either on schoolwork or in part-time jobs), potentially mitigating the value of an earlier start time altogether.

## TRANSPORTATION AND LIGHTING CHALLENGES

The mandated later start times presented logistical hurdles for district transportation operations. In some districts, the morning traffic congestion caused by the adjusted schedules disrupts on-time arrivals for both students and staff. Additionally, transporting students to afternoon activities has become more complex due to later dismissal times. Addressing these transportation challenges may require innovative solutions, including staggered start and dismissal times or revised bus routes to optimize efficiency.

This study found that:

- ▶ Eighty-one percent of superintendents who responded to a question about changes in transportation scheduling said that their district had to change transportation schedules due to later school days.
- ▶ Thirty-six percent of board presidents reported additional transportation expenditures directly related to late start.

- ▶ Ninety-three percent of CBOs that answered a question on spending directly related to late start mentioned transportation as the top expense.

In open-ended responses, three board presidents described how students residing far from their school campuses experienced longer days due to poor local transportation systems that extended their commute time. Highlighting this point, a principal from an urban school district wrote:

It's been a hardship for a lot of our families, plus our bus system is not great, and so students that live far away ... get here at 7:15 in the morning and then they just have to sit around. When school is out ... they can't leave because they don't finish their practices until it's dark. That would be a safety concern we had found from parents.

CBOs provided some additional insights into the impact of later school start times on transportation. One CBO remarked, "As a result of transportation issues, we have classes starting at 9 and ending as late as 4. We recently surveyed our students, and the number two reason they do not come to school remains 'not getting enough sleep.'"

Another spoke to the financial costs of later start times, saying, "We have had to add additional bus routes to our high schools in the morning since they are ... at peak traffic times. Transportation costs have increased [by] approximately \$200,000."

LEAs incurred increased costs when additional bus routes were added to account for changes in school start times or schedules. When asked about extra costs directly attributed to the change in school start times, a superintendent from a mid-size, suburban district in the Central Valley region responded that "the increase in cost is now running the buses four times a day instead of two times a day [because] prior to the late start time, we would have just a morning route and an afternoon route, and now we have two morning routes and two afternoon routes."

The lack of funding for universal school transportation is already a central issue for California LEAs. Many districts that provide this transportation do so on strict budgets

that struggle against a difficult labor market for drivers and mounting costs for capital expenses such as fuel and maintenance. This struggle has been enhanced for many of the respondent districts due to this change in scheduling.

In addition to transportation challenges, outdoor lighting was another common concern expressed in the survey. The shift in school start time presents challenges related to safety for students who walk to school in the dark and for students who participate in extracurricular activities with no lighting later in the evening.

- ▶ Eighty-four percent of superintendents who responded to a question on what areas, if any, their LEA had to make expenditures directly related to late start indicated money was spent on lighting for either safety or extracurricular activities.
- ▶ Fifty-seven percent of CBOs who responded to the same question answered similarly.

## STAFFING CONCERNS

Staffing has been a central concern for LEAs post-pandemic. Many classified and certificated positions, such as bus drivers and mental health professionals, have been difficult to fill. That challenge is even more significant for many of the smaller or more remote school districts, some of whom are exempt from the late start mandate, but not all.

A considerable challenge related to later school start times identified by school leaders was the difficulty in securing additional staff for morning supervision and afternoon activities. Later start times necessitate extended supervision before classes begin, and some schools reported difficulties finding staff to fill these new roles. Similarly, overseeing after-school activities became more complex due to the later dismissal times, which strained existing staff resources.

Addressing staffing concerns might involve exploring options for staff compensation adjustments or potential partnerships with community organizations to supplement supervision needs. Additional staffing needs have also resulted in budgetary changes. This includes additional expenses for

before- and after-school security when there are not enough staff to supervise the number of students on campus.

- ▶ Sixty-two percent of superintendents said that their LEA has had to allocate more hours for existing staff.
- ▶ Twenty-four percent of board presidents indicated that later school start times had impacted some aspect of labor negotiations.

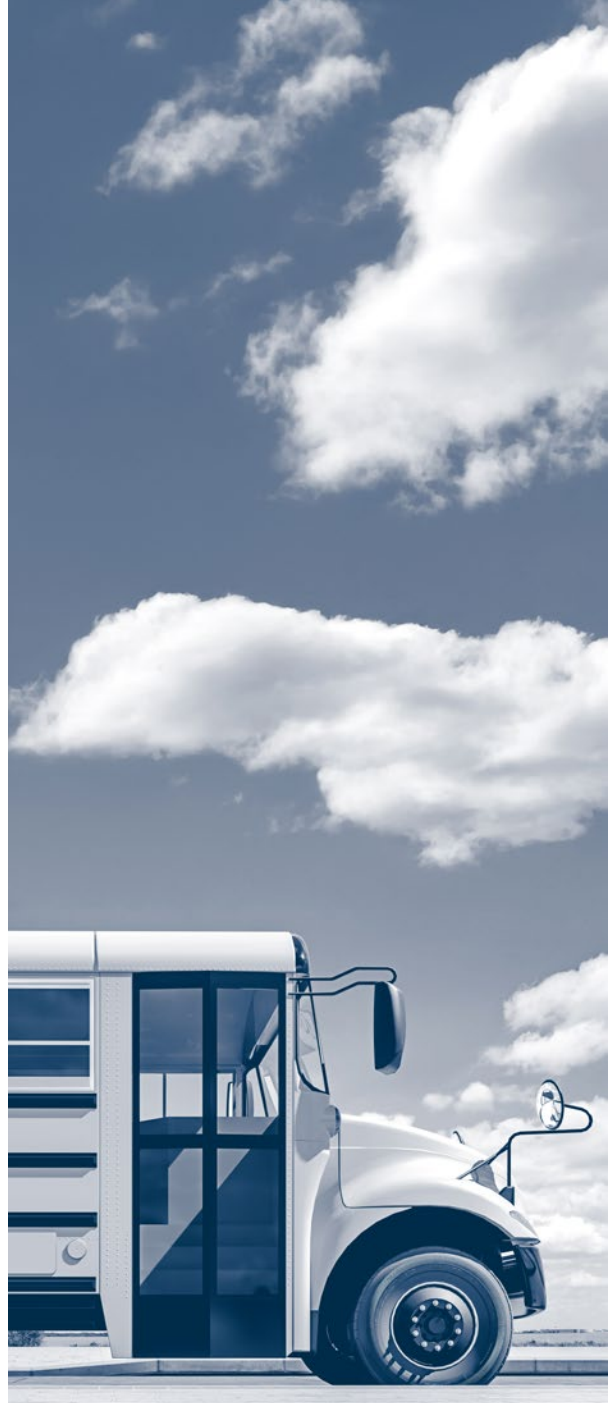
Another issue discussed by survey respondents was afternoon staff scheduling disruptions. Leaders reported disruptions in staff course sequencing and mentioned personal impacts to teachers, such as child care difficulties and scheduling health care appointments.

### INTERSECTING CHALLENGES

One example of challenges presented by how late start intersects with other district operations is difficulty finding qualified bus drivers to accommodate route schedules while fulfilling obligations to students with special needs. One superintendent from a large, urban school district in Southern California said:

What we did is we created a new job classification called van drivers. Some districts had it, but for us we did not have that before. For students who may have ... IEP requirements, but they don't necessarily need a large yellow bus — because it's really hard to find a bus driver right now with all the certifications that are required. Whereas a van driver, you can just do your regular driver's license.

This raises a red flag as transportation is guaranteed for students with special needs. Districts turning to van drivers may present questions related to the qualifications of drivers and their vehicles.



## INEQUITABLE EFFECTS

While the later start time aims to benefit all students, a significant worry raised by parents, particularly in the focus groups, was the inequitable impact of the change on families. Parents with inflexible work schedules, especially those in hourly or service jobs, may face difficulties adjusting to the later school start and dismissal times. This misalignment between parental work and school drop-off schedules has increased child care needs and financial strain for families without access to flexible work arrangements or affordable child care options.

### WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY ON LATER SCHOOL START TIMES

Clear messaging and open lines of communication with the community were pivotal in implementing later school start times for many districts leaders that were interviewed and surveyed for this study. When asked if their district surveyed community members on the start time change, 26 percent of board presidents said that they had.

In some interviews, superintendents told CSBA about their community engagement strategies. One spoke of the importance of social media and using administrative assistants to get the word out to the community. Another superintendent noted that, “We had a lot of conversations before we actually implemented. We had about six months’ worth of opportunities and different sessions that our assistant superintendent had with the community.”

These accounts highlight the importance of three things:

- 1) Communicating about mandated changes as early as possible.
- 2) Advertising changes as widely as possible so that members of your community are not caught off guard.
- 3) Eliciting feedback from members of your community to identify concerns early in the process.

Focus group participants and survey respondents stated that later school start times impacted parents by disrupting existing child care arrangements, particularly those with multiple children attending schools with different start times. In many families, older siblings often play a crucial role in caring for younger siblings before and after school. Later start times may disrupt these established routines, creating challenges for both parents and younger children.

- ▶ Forty-one percent of school board presidents who responded to the question indicated that later school start times impacted certain community members more than others.
  - When asked which groups are most impacted, 40 percent mentioned working families struggling with child supervision. Thirty-two percent said that student-athletes and those participating in extracurricular activities were most affected.
- ▶ Thirty-six percent of superintendents who responded to the question indicated that later school start times impacted certain community members more than others.
  - When asked which groups are most impacted, 38 percent of superintendents mentioned parents whose working schedules made child supervision and drop off difficult, many of whom are from lower socioeconomic areas.

One final concern based on this study’s data analysis is the potential inequitable access to courses due to zero period or afternoon scheduling. While SB 328 sets a school start time, it does not prohibit schools from offering educational programming before this time. Survey respondents, focus group participants, and other school leaders said that one of the ways that they were adapting to later school start times was to offer courses during a zero period in the morning. Like other downstream effects of SB 328, this also undermines the intent of the law as it provides a curricular incentive for students to come at earlier times. Respondents to this study also reported that the impact of later school start times has fallen mainly on lower-income and working-class families who rely on their children for child care and, in many cases, an extra source of income through an after-school, part-time job. This may make attending those added curricular options more difficult for students from these families.





# Policy Recommendations

To address the common themes illustrated by this research, this report makes the following policy recommendations for state and LEA leaders:

## 1) Allow for more flexibility and local control for school start times.

Different California school districts have wide ranges of geographic, socioeconomic, and demographic realities that affect local policy implementation. While SB 328 contains an exemption for rural school districts (without defining what constitutes a rural school district), it provides no guidance or resources to help with implementation. School leaders in this study often expressed the desire for more local flexibility in school start times. Granting more local control over school start times will allow districts that can enact later school start times to do so while allowing those that encounter the challenges cited within this study to customize schedules to their local needs and resources.

## 2) Increase funding for transportation and lighting.

Those who participated in this study overwhelmingly expressed direct support for the recommendations from research around later start times and, given the resources to do so, said that they would choose to participate even if they are currently exempt. The chief roadblock for most of those districts in participating in and successfully implementing late

start is transportation and lighting. As discussed in the Common Themes section of this report, later school start times caused many districts to add routes to their morning transportation schedules. This required additional buses and drivers, both of which are in high demand but low supply. Others explained how the lack of lighting has complicated extracurricular schedules and morning drop off. LEAs need funding for transportation and lighting to address these concerns.

## 3) Investigate the impact of unfunded mandates on local educational agencies.

Unfunded mandates like SB 328 place additional burdens on California LEAs. According to the California State Controller's *State-Mandated Program Cost Report of Unpaid Claims and Deficiencies*, the amount of insufficient appropriations for education reimbursement claims filed for state-mandated programs was listed at \$840 million.<sup>12</sup> Section 2 of SB 328,<sup>13</sup> like other state mandates, allows for the Commission on State Mandates to assess whether costs are associated with this mandate and whether reimbursements are appropriate. However, this process puts the

responsibility on the LEA to collect these costs, put together an argument through a test claim for reimbursement, file it with the commission, and then go through the mandate determination process.

Late start is one of the growing numbers of unfunded mandates that present costs to LEAs for program changes required by the State Legislature. The Legislature should assess unfunded mandates and determine whether they are meeting their intended goals. If so, it should investigate the cost of these mandates to LEAs to allocate funding to ease the stresses of local implementation. Lawmakers should also consider the inequitable impacts of later school start times on different members of district communities.

**4) Require legislation that proposes large system changes to local education systems to include an automatic impact analysis to be conducted by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office three to five years after enactment.**

Building on recommendation three, there are countless other mandates that LEAs abide by that also go without regular assessment by the Legislature. Like later school start times, these mandates add significant costs to LEAs that go unrecognized and unaided by the state. Most of them are never re-evaluated by CDE or the Legislature to gauge whether they are achieving their intended goal. Mandates continually stacked onto LEAs without evaluation or resources can potentially harm operations, district communities, and students by diverting existing resources away from educational programming.

The Legislature should partner with nonpartisan, expert researchers such as the Legislative Analyst’s Office, university researchers, or other research institutions to evaluate the impact of unfunded mandates on California LEAs. This review of existing mandates should be conducted regularly, particularly when the Legislature is considering new mandates that cause significant system changes like later school start times.

**5) Optional LEA recommendation — Local districts should collect data when possible.**

The most overwhelming finding from this report revolves around some students missing afternoon instructional time. This takes valuable learning time in the classroom away from student-athletes and those who participate in extracurricular activities and puts additional pressure on teachers. If school leaders hear from staff that students are missing afternoon instructional time due to a change in school start times, they should collect data on those missed minutes. That would help to bring actionable data to any discussions on potential changes to SB 328 in the future.

## Conclusion

Theoretically, a policy mandate is a statement of values. Passing a mandate sends the message that legislators feel so profoundly that the policy will positively impact students' lives that they are requiring every LEA to participate. If the desired outcome of that mandate is so important for students, then the state should set up LEAs to succeed in implementing the policy. This means they need funding, education, follow up, assessment of the effectiveness of the policy, flexibility for implementation, and the willingness to change the policy as more is learned about its impact.

SB 328, requiring later school start times, is one of many examples of a mandate that the State Legislature enacts without considering what support LEAs would need to make the mandate's goal successful. The goal of this law is to increase the health and well-being of California's students. In that case, failing to provide the supports necessary for successful implementation threatens to undermine its success. Many people who participated in CSBA's survey from districts that are exempt wholeheartedly support the law's overall purpose and indicated they would participate in late start if given additional resources such as transportation funding or local flexibility. With flexibility, guidance and resources, implementation can be more manageable for districts so that they can address challenges such as transportation and staffing. State legislators should consider the ripple effects of policy mandates before their passage and provide the resources necessary to ensure their success.



# Appendices

## APPENDIX A — IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW DISTRICT DESCRIPTIONS

	Enrollment	Unduplicated pupil percentage	Locale type*
District 1	37,642	61%	Suburban
District 2	891	85%	Town
District 3	5,847	40%	City
District 4	10,981	23%	City
District 5	5,358	88%	Town

\*See Appendix B for a definition of each locale.

## APPENDIX B — ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION ON SURVEY SAMPLE DISTRICTS

**Table 1 – NCES locale designation of survey sample high school and unified school districts**

	Number	% of sample
City	27	12%
Suburban	90	41%
Town	51	23%
Rural	51	23%

**Table 2 – LEA unduplicated pupil percentage sample distribution versus the statewide distribution**

Unduplicated pupil percentage range	Sample Distribution	Statewide Distribution
0-20%	8%	7%
21-40%	14%	15%
41-60%	22%	23%
61-80%	36%	29%
81-100%	20%	25%

- ▶ **City:** Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more down to less than 100,000.
- ▶ **Suburban:** Territory inside an urbanized area and outside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more down to less than 100,000.
- ▶ **Town:** Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles or more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.
- ▶ **Rural:** Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. This ranges to census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

# Endnotes

- 1 SB 328 Local educational agencies: before and after school programs: middle school and high school start time, (2021).
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- 9 Blume, H., Agrawal, N., & Kohli, S. (2019). "Will later school start times mean more sleep or more hassles for California?" *Los Angeles Times* [www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-14/california-later-school-start-times-student-react](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-14/california-later-school-start-times-student-react)
- 10 Walker, T. (2022). "Later school start times more popular, but what are the drawbacks?" National Education Association Today. [www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/later-school-start-times-more-popular-what-are-drawbacks](https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/later-school-start-times-more-popular-what-are-drawbacks)
- 11 National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Local Classifications. [nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries)
- 12 Cohen, M. (2023). *State-mandated program cost reports of payments and appropriations*. California State Controller's Office. Sacramento, CA.
- 13 See endnote 1.

