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# A Sleep-Deprived Nation

The importance of sleep in education, and a call to action

**James D. Davis Ed.M., MA**

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If the goal of our educational system includes high-functioning, healthy students, then educators have to prioritize something alongside academic mastery and social-emotional wellness. We have to prioritize sleep.

Think back to the last time you had a poor night's sleep. Maybe the dog was barking, a baby was crying, or you drank one too many cups of coffee in the late afternoon. How did you feel the next day? Recent science suggests that you likely had [trouble concentrating](#), had greater [emotional reactivity](#), and [made more errors](#) at work.



During a recent presentation on the role of sleep in education, I asked a group of students this same question: How do you feel after not getting enough sleep? “Foggy, angry, trouble concentrating, hungry” — all of these seem to be valid in light of the research. No one feels good after depriving themselves of sleep. Sleep is essential.

Even more important than student performance is student safety. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [claims](#) that sleep deprivation leads to depression, heart disease, obesity, and type 2 diabetes. And if that is not alarming enough, consider that sleep deprivation is linked to the top two leading causes of death in adolescents: accidents (namely, [car crashes](#)) and [suicide](#).

No amount of coffee, exercise, or self-talk can replace the benefits of a healthy night of sleep.

## Sleep Deprivation — and Accountability

In a recent survey, we found an alarming write-in from one of our students: “I can’t read/write/think straight, I haven’t had more than five hours of sleep this week.” It is a line that all educators should be asked to confront, since the terrible paradox of modern education, especially within highly motivated students, is sadly obvious. This young student, 14 years old at the time, was doing everything in her power to succeed, not recognizing that those extra hours of study were

inhibiting her ability to perform, all while setting the table for the unfortunate health outcomes mentioned above. In the name of self-enhancement, students are sacrificing self-preservation.

And it's not their fault.

One concern is the glamorization of sleep deprivation from self-help gurus on social media. Famous and assumedly well-intended speakers often make heroes of those who are inclined to give up sleep, proudly referring to them as *beasts*, and chiding those who prioritize rest, passing them off as harmless gazelles. It may seem silly, but people are watching. Impressionable students are listening. And in one of the Internet's most famous motivational videos, "[How Bad Do You Want It? \(Success\)](#)," narrated by motivational speaker Eric Thomas, nearly 45 million people have tuned in to learn that "If you're going to be successful, you've got to be willing to give up sleep. ... If you really want to be successful, some days you're going to have to stay up three days in a row, because if you go to sleep, you might miss the opportunity to be successful." It is a dangerous message.

Sadly, it does not end in pop culture.

Educational institutions are sending a similar message. Adolescent circadian rhythms make it difficult for teens to fall asleep before 11 p.m., and they stay in a what the [National Sleep Foundation](#) refers to as a circadian "dip" until 7 a.m. or later. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the CDC both [recommend school start times begin no earlier than 8:30 a.m.](#) Schools are not listening. The [average school start time](#) in the United States is 8:03 a.m.

***"In the name of self-enhancement, students are sacrificing self-preservation. And it's not their fault."***

Worse still, many institutions offer classes that begin before the regular school day. Oftentimes, it is the motivated students who bear the heaviest burden. If these extra classes begin at 7:15, say, then allowing time for a student to shower, dress, and commute would demand a wakeup in the neighborhood of 6 or 6:30 a.m. Students in more urban areas who take public transportation might find themselves waking up at 5:30 or earlier. This is not a strategy for success, and it has not always been this way.

Sleep deprivation is a recent epidemic. Americans have been sleeping [fewer and fewer hours per night](#) over recent years, down one full hour since the 1940s, to a measly 6.8 hours per night. The CDC recommends 8–10 hours for adolescents, 7–9 hours for adults — which makes us, on average, a sleep-deprived nation.

Car crashes, disease, potentially increasing the [risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease](#) — there is no counterbalance to the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation. As we construct systems to educate our young people and usher them down the river of their lives, does our behavior match our goal?

**Achievement Pressure and "Talent Delusion"**

So, we beat on, boats against the current, achieving in spite of ourselves. And therein lies the problem. At the nonprofit organization I work for, the [Good Athlete Project](#), we refer to the phenomenon of successfully navigating the world while regularly ignoring one's degraded state as the "Talent Delusion." High-achievers find themselves achieving at a high level, obviously enough; that said, they might never reach their full potential, since they exist regularly in a degraded state. It is those high-achievers who preach their methods to the world, insisting that sleep is a convenience, rather than a necessity.

Societal memes arise from these faulty paradigms, and it is not the high-achievers who are most likely to suffer. It's the disenfranchised. It's the under-supported young students who take these words as gospel. These are dangerous messages to spread and they are coming from sources who do not feel the full weight of that danger.

Teachers, please share the importance of sleep with your students. Administrators, please create structures that allow sufficient sleep opportunities for both students and teachers. Our students' ability to thrive within their environments — and their health, and perhaps even their lives — may depend on it.