

Summary of High School Bell Times Work Group
May 9, 2013, 3:00–5:00 p.m.
Carver Educational Services Center, Room 120

Next meetings:

- Thursday, May 23, 2013, 3:00–5:00 p.m., Carver Educational Services Center, Room 127
- Thursday, June 6, 2013, 3:00–5:00 p.m., Carver Educational Services Center, Room 127

Links:

- Thakkar, V.C. (2013). Diagnosing the wrong deficit. New York Times, April 28, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/diagnosing-the-wrong-deficit.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Opening remarks

John invited participants to contribute feedback gathered from stakeholders to date.

- Susan and John described their visit to Rocky Hill Middle School to interview the principal about the benefits of rotating class periods.
- John described a conversation with the principal of Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, a school looking for strategies to address overcrowding. The principal considered tele-learning a positive option with multiple benefits.

Criteria for evaluating options

The group generated two lists of criteria considered “deal breakers” or “must haves.”

Deal breakers

- Is not focused on student achievement
- Too costly (but would consider a plan that phases in a change, thereby spreading increased costs over multiple years)
- Is not the right thing to do for students
- Adversely affects non-affluent students/families
- Creates inappropriate bells (start times) for any student
- Has a significant negative impact on non-school activities/extracurricular activities

Must haves

- Must address needs of primary stakeholders
- Must have “sleep education”/health education for students, parents, and staff
- Benefits must be clear and unassailable

- Must be the right thing to do (willing to consider costs for options that will produce real benefits)
- Must be a true net gain

Participants discussed the following:

- Potential bell time options with significant costs were compared to the “maintenance of effort” costs to demonstrate funding difficulties. A one-year bell time change may be cost prohibitive. A suggestion was made to phase in any costs associated with a bell schedule over a few years.
- “Budget neutral” ideas are preferable. However, an option that enhances student achievement and is a “fabulous idea” is worth including, if the expense can be justified.
- The group was reminded that the charge of the group is not only to evaluate costs, but to generate options for the superintendent of schools to consider.
- Options that shift athletic practices from after school to before school are not desirable. A suggestion was made that students choosing to participate in a sport for a season might be acceptable, considering that participation in a sport is a choice, and the season for a sport lasts for roughly one third of the academic year.

Student survey

Student members presented data they collected at the May 7, 2013, meeting of the Montgomery County Junior Council (MCJC) General Assembly. Seventy middle school students responded to a student-generated survey. Sixty percent were 8th graders, 26 percent were 7th graders, and 14 percent were 6th graders. The percentage of students responding “yes” to the following questions was as follows:

- Do you think beginning middle school at 7:55 a.m. is too early? (60 percent yes)
- Do you think beginning high school at 7:25 a.m. is too early? (89 percent yes)
- Based on any older sibling, friends, and what you have heard today, do you think high school bell times should be changed? (86 percent yes)
- If high school bell times are changed and it DOES impact the middle school bell times schedule, would starting/ending school later negatively affect your parent/guardian’s schedule? (63 percent yes)
- If high school bell times are changed and it DOES impact the middle school bell times schedule, would starting/ending school later negatively impact your after school activities? (58 percent yes)
- How much do you sleep on an average school night? (Average response: 6 hours, 48 minutes)
- If school were to start/end later, would you go to sleep... (earlier: 7 percent; later: 33 percent; same: 58 percent)
- How often do you dose off or lose focus due to sleepiness in 1st or 2nd period? (Everyday: 43 percent; 2-4 days of the week: 22 percent; 1 day a week: 16 percent; rarely: 14 percent; never: 4 percent)

Discussion of new proposal

John presented a proposal that shifted elementary and middle school bell times by 10 minutes, lengthened the elementary school day by 10 minutes, and started high school 50 minutes later.

Participants discussed the following:

- Moving elementary start time later exacerbates an existing problem of a late elementary school starts that make it difficult for working parents to get to work on time or creates a need for longer morning child care.
- The other concern about later elementary schedules was students waiting for the bus or getting off the bus in the dark, particularly magnet students with longer bus rides to magnet centers.
- The option is cost neutral with respect to transportation costs but would have contractual implications. The work group's charge allows it to consider options that require contractual changes, but it was observed that lengthening the elementary school would have contractual impacts.
- Ending high school 50 minutes later would adversely affect high school extracurricular activities.
- Middle school students may be old enough to be home by themselves, but the concern was raised that middle school students are getting home before high school students.

Options currently under discussion include the following. Votes reflect participant feedback from an earlier meeting.

- **New Option:** switch middle school and high school, make 10-minute adjustments
- **Option L:** school start times are moved 35 minutes later but order remains the same (10 votes)
- **Maintain current bell times** with educational support (public education about importance of sleep) and flip instruction for periods 1 and 2 (9 votes)
- **Maintain the status quo (6 votes)**
- **Option N:** elementary day extended to 6 hours, 45 minutes: high school and middle school start later, elementary schools start earlier (6 votes)
- **Reduce class minutes** (for high school) and increase number of instructional days (start later but same end time) (4 votes)
- **Variation on Option H:** provide separate buses to serve the high schools. Share buses with Fairfax County Public Schools, keep elementary and middle school as now, and phase in changing high school only e.g., 1/3 each year; with tele-learning to allow some students to start later, plus optional self-drive 2nd period (2 votes)

Loudoun County Public Schools

Fred Evans, former MCPS high school principal and director of secondary education for Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS), summarized the experience of LCPS:

- Elementary schools start at 7:50, 8:15, 8:30, 8:35, and 9:00 a.m.

- Middle schools start at 8:35 a.m.
- High schools start at 8:54 a.m.
- Boundary changes were more a topic of public debate than start times
- Most athletic teams compete in inter-county play, so the schedule does not present problems for start times of competitions

Participants discussed the following:

- Traffic congestion may be a more significant issue in Montgomery County than Loudoun (although development in Loudoun over the past few years has increased traffic).
- Athletic practices past dark present a number of problems. At those schools with lighted fields, only the stadiums are lit, while other practice spaces are not lit (softball fields, etc).
- When change occurs, there is often public debate. It makes sense that the debate in Loudoun concerns boundary changes and not the schedule that has been in place for a number of years.

Next steps

- The high school parent survey was mailed on May 9, 2013. Submissions will be accepted until May 31, 2013. Results will be available in June.
- A first draft of the work group report will be available in July. Participants were asked to add July 11 and July 25 to their schedules.

Meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.