

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

January 13, 2015

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Continuing the Discussion on Changing Bell Times

On June 17, 2014, the Board of Education (Board) received a report that included stakeholder input and the cost implications of changing school bell times by shifting high school start times 50 minutes later, starting middle schools 10 minutes earlier, and extending the elementary school day by 30 minutes. While I have supported the idea of starting high schools later, I felt that the cost of this particular model was prohibitive. Mrs. Patricia O’Neill, then Board vice president, introduced the following resolution that was adopted unanimously by the Board of Education:

Resolved, That the Board of Education requests the superintendent of schools to review low-cost options, not to exceed \$10 million, for changing the start times for Montgomery County Public Schools and identify the implications of these options; and be it further

Resolved, That the superintendent of schools presents a report to the Board of Education in time for consideration during the Fiscal Year 2016 Operating Budget request.

During the June 2014 discussion, Board members expressed an interest in looking at different models. The attached report, *Bell Times—Analysis of Additional Options*, identifies five options and several variations within some of these options. The analysis addresses the challenges and advantages for each option. The cost of each model also is provided. During the Board’s discussion on June 17, 2014, Mr. Philip Kauffman, then Board president, requested that staff consider a “split schedule” as one of the models. Staff also was asked to review what Fairfax County Public Schools was doing with bell times and to determine if systems of comparable size to Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) were considering changes to their start times. Further, staff was asked to reexamine the sleep research for any new findings and to determine what the research indicates about the sleep needs for elementary age students. Information in response to these requests is included in the attached report.

The length of the transportation window is the major factor that determines the cost of any

option. It is possible to reduce the need for buses and school bus operators by lengthening the window of operations, which is the amount of time between the first trip of the morning and the last and likewise for the afternoon. The length of the transportation window is noted and discussed for each option identified and reflects an assessment of the additional resources and costs for each option.

The report also identifies the challenges and potential benefits of each of the options. The charts provide further details. The options presented for today's discussion are within the parameters set forth in the Board's resolution. The five options are:

- Shift start times for all schools later (retaining the same order and length of school day) by 20 minutes or 35 minutes
- Start elementary schools first (with variations for start times and length of school day)
- Modify the superintendent's proposal from October 2013 to reduce costs
- "Split" the high school day into two start times (leaving unchanged elementary and middle school start times and length of school day)
- No change (leave bell times as currently designed)

Research Findings

MCPS contracted with Hanover Research (Hanover), an independent research company, to review the literature on the sleep needs of both teens and elementary-age children. Hanover's research report, *School Start Times, Sleep, and Student Outcomes*, is attached to the Bell Times—Analysis of Additional Options report as Appendix D. Extensive review of sleep research also may be found in the *2013 Bell Times Work Group Report*.

In summary, the Hanover report's findings are similar to our previous research. The body of research on school start times does not provide conclusive evidence that start times impact student achievement. There is, however, research that indicates the positive impact of sleep on wellness factors, such as increasing problem solving, decreasing vehicle accidents, and improving daytime sleepiness.

In addition, we asked Hanover to provide MCPS with research findings regarding the sleep needs of elementary-age students. The research on sleep outcomes for elementary-age children is limited. Elementary school start times vary in their impact on student achievement. Elementary school students (ages 5 to 12 years) require 10 to 11 hours of sleep per night. The limited studies that are available indicate that a lack of sleep has a negative impact on elementary-age children.

Study of Safe and Healthy School Hours for Maryland Public Schools

On December 22, 2014, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) released a report on its *Study of Safe and Healthy School Hours for Maryland Public Schools* to the Maryland General Assembly and Governor Martin O'Malley. The study was conducted

pursuant to Chapter 620 of the Acts of 2014 that required DHMH to “review the science on the sleep needs of children and adolescents, including the effects of sleep deprivation on academic performance and benefits of sufficient sleep; review and study how other school systems have implemented alternative school day starting times and how various activities in those school systems were impacted and scheduled around the changes; and make recommendations regarding whether public schools should implement a starting time of no earlier than 8:00 a.m.”

The Executive Summary of the report is attached to the **Bell Times—Analysis of Additional Options** report (Appendix C). Both DMHM and the Maryland State Department of Education endorsed a recommendation to “encourage the Maryland State Board of Education use its authority (specified in Md. Code Ann., Ed. § 2-205) to advise local school systems of the benefits of later school start time policies, and to encourage them to conduct feasibility studies regarding the implementation of school starting times of 8:00 a.m. or later.”

Superintendent’s Recommendation

Given the cost implications and the outlook for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Operating Budget and challenges presented by each of the options discussed in the report, I recommend that the Board of Education only considers no-cost options (*Shift Start Times for All Schools Later or Leave Bell Times Unchanged*). The most practicable of the no-cost options is for all schools to start and end 20 minutes later. The cost implications are inconsequential and asking students, staff, and parents to adjust their routines by 20 minutes seems reasonable. Although 20 minutes is not ideal for extending sleep time, it is a move in the right direction, and it will allow the potential for some extended sleep for all involved.

I have been consistent in my support of and my belief that bell times is important to student success and well-being, but must be viewed in the context of other priorities that impact students as well as staff, families, and the broader community. Whenever there is change, it will impact many. Should the Board of Education decide to move forward with my recommendation to consider only those options that are no-cost, and if it chooses to adopt the 20 minute shift, we must be ready to work with our communities and schools that we serve.

JPS:LAB:lsh

Attachment