



# Overview of Bell Times Recommendation

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Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is considering changes to school starting and ending times—also known as bell times—to help make sure students, especially those in high school, are getting enough sleep. Superintendent of Schools Joshua P. Starr has recommended starting high school 50 minutes later, starting middle school 10 minutes earlier and keeping elementary school start times the same, but extending the day by 30 minutes. On October 8, 2013, the Montgomery County Board of Education voted to support Dr. Starr’s plan to gather broad community input and study the cost and operational impact of the recommendation. The earliest any bell times changes could occur is the 2015-2016 school year.

## **The Bell Times Work Group**

Dr. Starr’s recommendation is based on the report of the 2013 Bell Times Work Group. The group was convened in December 2012 and spent months studying past reports on this issue, reviewing the latest research, hearing from experts, and developing options for Dr. Starr’s consideration. The group conducted surveys of high school students and their parents to determine if there was sufficient interest in later start times. In August 2013, Dr. Starr received the group’s report, which summarized research findings about teenagers’ sleep needs and other research on school start times. Key findings from the report include the following:

- When students enter their teen years, their bodies change in such a way that they cannot fall asleep as early as they did when they were younger, but they continue to need more sleep than adults.
- Nationwide, studies show teens need 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep per night, but get an average of 7.6 hours. Consistent with published research, surveys of MCPS high school students conducted by the work group showed MCPS high school students sleep for about seven hours a night, and sometimes less.
- Inadequate sleep negatively impacts important brain functions that are part of the learning process, including the ability to consolidate and remember information learned during the day, working memory, and performance in abstract and complex tasks involving higher brain functions.
- Insufficient sleep in teens is associated with higher rates of obesity and depression, lower levels of motivation and attentiveness, and increased rates of traffic accidents.
- When schools move start times later, research shows that teens do get more sleep and do not simply stay up later, as is often predicted.
- When schools move start times later, research also shows that teen drivers are involved in fewer automobile crashes.
- The 2013 MCPS survey showed that 70 percent of parents of high school students felt that high school started “too early,” and 69 percent preferred that high school start later. That same survey found that 63 percent of high school students felt that high school started “too early,” and 54 percent indicated they want high school to start later.

The Bell Times Work Group developed several options for Dr. Starr to consider. The Work Group also urged the district to launch an initiative to educate students and parents about the importance of sleep and the risks of sleep deprivation.

## The Superintendent's Recommendation

The current bell times schedule for MCPS is as follows:

Level	Time	Length of Day
High School	7:25 a.m.–2:10 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Middle School	7:55 a.m. –2:40 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 1	8:50 a.m. –3:05 p.m.	6 hours, 15 minutes
Elementary School Tier 2	9:15 a.m. –3:30 p.m.	6 hours, 15 minutes

The proposed bell times schedule in Dr. Starr's recommendation is as follows:

Level	Time	Length of Day
High School	8:15 a.m. –3:00 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Middle School	7:45 a.m. –2:30 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 1	8:50 a.m. –3:35 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 2	9:15 a.m. –4:00 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes

Further detail may be found in the Bell Times 2013 report at the following link:

[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/belltimesworkgroup/index.aspx](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/belltimesworkgroup/index.aspx)

## Community Outreach and Future Analysis

The next phase of this process is designed to gather input through extensive outreach to students, staff, parents, and the community about Dr. Starr's recommendation. Outreach to the community will include four public meetings, meetings with community organizations, surveys, focus groups and other opportunities to submit input. Dr. Starr emphasized the importance of hearing from the entire community, including those who may not traditionally participate in public hearings and meetings. While preliminary cost estimates were developed as part of the Bell Times Work Group report, a detailed analysis of the cost and operational impact of making changes to school schedules needs to be completed.

Dr. Starr and the Board of Education recognize that work schedules, childcare arrangements, and family routines may be affected; therefore, the timeline ensures everyone will have an opportunity for input and planning for the proposed changes. While the current 7:25 a.m. start time for high school students was the reason the Work Group convened, middle and elementary school students and their families, as well as teachers and other MCPS staff at all school levels have a strong interest in any school bell time changes and must be heard.

The health and wellness benefits of a later start time for high school students are significant and merit further consideration. Other stakeholders will want to understand how it will impact them and what the benefits and challenges will be as children progress through their academic careers in MCPS.

## Summary of Issues for Elementary and Middle Schools

### *Elementary Schools*

Elementary school communities generally do not want the school day to start any later than it already does. Therefore, the proposal leaves elementary start times unchanged but does extend the student day by 30 minutes. The Work Group wanted to prevent any delay in elementary start times that would create a need for additional morning childcare.

- MCPS has been concerned for some time that its elementary school day is shorter than all but one district in Maryland. Elementary students and staff could benefit from additional instructional time. How the additional time will be used will be part of the discussion over the next several months.
- In order to start middle, high, and elementary schools 30 minutes apart, while not starting any school before 7:45 or after 9:15 a.m., the length of the school day at each level needs to be the same in order to maximize use of buses.

### *Middle School*

Under the recommendation, middle schools would start 10 minutes earlier. This change is needed to avoid a later start time for elementary schools, while maintaining enough time for school buses to serve all schools and complete their routes. Most MCPS buses serve three or four schools in both the morning and afternoon.

- Feedback from parents and staff participating in community conversations about bell times indicates that most participants want schools to start around 8:00 a.m. The superintendent's recommendation makes the best use of transportation resources while keeping start times for both middle schools and high schools as close to 8:00 a.m. as possible.
- The rationale for choosing middle schools to have the earliest start time was based on the sleep research, which indicates that younger middle school students (typically Grades 6 and 7 students) are more similar to elementary students with respect to their sleep needs and are typically able to fall asleep earlier than high school students. Older middle school students (typically Grade 8 students) are more similar to high school students with respect to their sleep needs, however eighth-grade students do not have the full academic and extracurricular loads of high school students. Therefore, this 10-minute adjustment to start times is anticipated to have the least impact on middle school students.
- Acknowledging that every part of the bell times discussion involves trade-offs, the community is being asked to consider the benefits of having four years of an 8:15 a.m. high school start time in exchange for starting middle school 10 minutes earlier. Input will be received from middle school stakeholders to determine the impact of this change and to identify ways to address anticipated challenges.

The extensive community outreach plan will engage students, parents, and staff at all levels, as well as the business community and local agencies that may be impacted by the change. Once all the input has been received and the full costs have been determined, a final recommendation will be formulated and discussed with the Montgomery County Board of Education by late spring 2014.