



Healthy school start times mean better performance:

In the classroom On the field Behind the wheel

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What's Going On?

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is considering changing bell schedules so that students can function at their biological best. The proposal is based on the science demonstrating that later start times for adolescents promote better health and academic well-being. The School Board is seeking further community input on this issue. **Please review the following and support this initiative at upcoming public meetings in February:** www.fcps.edu/news/start.htm!

Science on Sleep

An enormous amount of peer-reviewed research has been conducted on the sleep requirements of youth. Two leading organizations are the National Sleep Foundation (www.sleepfoundation.org) and Harvard Medical School (<http://sleep.med.harvard.edu>).

Experts agree: High schools should start no earlier than 8:30 am for best learning.

Research findings are not in dispute and include the following:

- Adequate sleep is essential for students to learn, retain, and fully understand new material.
- Teens need about 9.25 hours a night; most are seriously sleep-deprived.
- **Teens undergo a “phase-shift” in their sleep schedules** compared with other populations. The hormone that promotes sleep – melatonin – does not kick in for this group until 11 pm and does not leave until about 8 am, so they generally have trouble falling asleep or waking up outside these hours.
- Younger children have an earlier phase and tend to wake up far earlier than older children.
- Inadequate sleep is linked to diabetes, obesity, hyperactivity, & impaired immune systems.
- Rested students perform better in sports, music, and other extracurricular activities (ECAs). Their judgment improves, including behind the wheel and in social situations.



“At least once a week, more than one-quarter of high school students fall asleep in school, 22% fall asleep doing homework, and 14% arrive late or miss school because they oversleep.”

– National Sleep Foundation poll (2006)

Comprehensive investigations of schools that have implemented later start times for adolescents found:

- Teens DO sleep longer: Bedtimes stay about the same, students sleep more on school nights, and need less “catch-up” sleep on weekends.
- Less depressed moods and fewer visits to counselors.
- Reduced tardiness, absenteeism, and dropouts.
- Students stay awake & prepared to learn & participate, meaning less remediation needs.
- Reduced risk of drowsy driving and incidents of car crashes.
- Same or improved involvement in extracurricular activities and sports.



FCPS Transportation Task Force Supports Bell Schedule Changes

The School Board appointed a **Transportation Task Force (TTF)** in 2007 to consider the best approach to achieving a healthier bell schedule and to look at potential impacts and resolutions. Sixty-eight parents, teachers, administrators, and community group representatives met dozens of times over six months. (For its report, see www.fcps.edu/fts/taskforce07/documents/index.htm)

In March 2008 the TTF concluded:

- **Bell schedule changes are needed.**
- **Benefits of later start times are supported by numerous scientific studies and results in other school districts.**
- As many elementary schools as possible should start between 7:50 and 8:55 am.
- The schedule should be designed so that elementary students won't have to wait for buses in the dark.
- High schools should start around 8:30 am to allow time for after-school activities.
- Middle schools should start last (9:20–9:40 am) to balance bus runs, decrease unsupervised time after school, and because they take up only two years in a school career.

FCPS held study circles in 2008 to discuss potential impacts. It did NOT weigh criteria or level of opposition or support.

In 2008, FCCPTA, which has 80,000 members and supports later start times and the TTF conclusions, conducted a survey of parents. **Of more than 6,000 responses, 85% preferred the TTF plan to the current bell schedule.**

FCPS Bell Schedule Revisions – Iteration 3

 In July 2008, FCPS issued “Iteration 1” of bell schedule changes, estimated to cost \$13-\$14 million a year. **The School Board directed staff to dig deeper. In January 2009, staff issued “Iteration 3.” Estimated cost: ZERO.** (www.fcps.edu/fts/taskforce07/documents/finalreport/iteration3.pdf)

 This FCPS staff draft:

- **Meets TTF criteria for bell schedule changes.**
- Maintains current GT, academy, TJ, and before/after bus runs, now cut in 2010 proposed budget.
- Has elementary school start times between 7:50-9:25; end times at 2:30-4:00 – as they are now.
- Has middle school start time at 9:40; end time at 4:30.
- Has high school start times at 8:30 or 8:35 (only 3 start later, with the last at 8:55); end time at 3:20 (3:45).
- Makes bus transportation more efficient and relieves stress on the system by distributing buses more evenly through the day. (Today, there is no buffer between bus runs, creating a domino effect when one bus is late.)
- **Corrects \$20 million in identified problems with the current system.** FCPS staff has estimated it would cost this much to bring the bus system up to adequate service levels and to desired standards.
- **Is only a DRAFT and can be evaluated for further changes based on individual school or population needs, as well as community feedback.**

“We believe the bell schedule we propose ... achieves these beneficial later start times for the adolescents in Fairfax County in a way that is acceptable to the community.”
– FCPS Transportation Task Force conclusion, 2008

FCPS has created a ZERO-cost plan for healthy school start times that also solves critical transportation problems.

Issues

 **Sports:** Other districts that switched encountered similar concerns and fears about high school sports and ECAs as some have expressed with this proposal. **In each case, these activities were successfully built into the new schedule.** Loudoun high schools start at 9 am and end at 3:48 pm. Arlington schools, which switched in 2001, rescheduled practices and games with little difficulty. See Appendix U of the TTF final report: www.fcps.edu/fts/taskforce07/documents/finalreport/appendixu.pdf.

 **Extracurricular activities (ECAs) and teacher-help rescheduling:** **The School Board and the Board of Supervisors have asked for approaches for rescheduling,** NOT for eliminating sports or ECAs (contrary to rumors). The Park Authority has stated it will work to accommodate later dismissal. Many FCPS high schools have incorporated an “8th” period in the school day for clubs and teacher help/makeups. **All FCPS sports/ECAs CAN be scheduled to work with later start/end times.**

 **FCPS staff can do for student activities what transportation staff did for busing schedules!**

 **Middle school times:** Some parents are concerned about students getting on the bus on their own in the morning. Parents would need to make arrangements, as many do now for elementary students. Families in other districts have resolved this by finding before-school programs or other supervision. **The proposal retains the budget for middle school after-school activities.** These funds could be used for activities *before* school, depending on school needs. See the SLEEP position paper on middle schools at www.sleepinfairfax.org/take_action.htm for more discussion.

 **Busing:** FCPS has more than 1,600 buses and only 1,144 are used on any given day. Therefore there is flexibility for bus usage if needed in further refinements of the bell schedule. Iteration 3 tables on bus pickup/dropoff times include special ed buses, skewing the information to outlier bus runs. Most runs in the plan are shorter or the same as today.

 **Family adjustments:** **Parents are used to adjusting work/family schedules** when their children enter school, move from K to 1st grades, from elementary to middle, and middle to senior high. A changed bell schedule also would require adjustments. Daycare and SACC may need to shift earlier or later, but the length of the school day will not change.

Background

 **In 1998, an FCPS School Board task force concluded that sleep deprivation has a negative impact on learning in Fairfax County.** It found that later middle/high school start times would improve academic performance, reduce unsupervised time for teens, decrease teen car crashes, and improve moods and relationships. The proposal did not progress, largely because of concerns about potential costs. Issues raised were not researched because the discussion was shelved.

 In 2004, Phyllis Payne and Sandy Evans, FCPS parents, launched Start Later for Excellence in Education Proposal (**SLEEP**) in Fairfax. They approached the School Board, the Fairfax County Council of PTAs (FCCPTAs), and other groups with research backing the need and viability for this change. The School Board started a review.

 A transportation consultant found that bus pick-ups for high schools started at 5:21 am! Students are *dropped off* at high schools as early as 6:45 am. A 2006 report found later start times were viable at a low cost.

 **Support for later start times:** FCCPTA and Virginia State PTA; FCPS Student Advisory Council’s High Schools of the Future; School Health Advisory Committee; National Sleep Foundation; Medical Society of Northern Virginia; League of Women Voters Fairfax; members of police groups (juvenile incidents peak during unsupervised time after school).

Collaboration is Key!

Let’s work together to benefit all 170,000 FCPS students!

ACT NOW! Go to www.SLEEPinFairfax.org and sign the petition, attend town hall meetings, write to the School Board.