

Schools drifting to later starts

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But some parents hate tangled schedule

By Michele Morgan Bolton, Globe Correspondent | December 3, 2009

The scenario is a familiar one to parents everywhere who struggle to move bleary-eyed teenagers out the door to school on weekday mornings - where they then doze through morning classes, or chug caffeine to get through the day.

Studies show that the teenage body ticks to its own clock, making it hard to go to sleep and then wake up at the time required for school or a job. To work with nature, instead of against it, a number of school districts south of Boston are delaying start times, or thinking about doing so, to help students stay awake in class.

Some have juggled their start times, letting older students start their day a bit later during the years they most need sleep. They follow the thinking in at least 80 school districts nationwide that have pushed high school start times to later in the morning, banking on National Sleep Foundation data that students who sleep more learn better.

Duxbury was among the latest to do so, moving its start time in September for middle and high school students from 7:30 to 8:15 a.m. To do that, officials swapped their bus run with that of third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders at the Alden School, who now start their day at 7:45 instead of 8:25 a.m. A uniform start time would have cost an additional \$1 million for transportation, officials said.

The Silver Lake regional school district, which includes Halifax, Kingston, and Plympton, is considering starting high school classes at 8:05 a.m. instead of 7:20; middle school at 8:15 a.m.; and elementary school between 9:05 and 9:15.

Marshfield is also considering delaying its 7:15 a.m. high school start time, but has not released any specifics. Superintendent Middleton McGoodwin said the School Committee will not be hasty; a subcommittee of parents and staff is studying the issue and will seek public input, he said.

"We are reviewing research and visiting school districts that have made the change," he said. "But our whole concern is for students' needs. What the research says, and what the community says, could be different."

Indeed, the Sharon school district considered delaying its start times last year - but officials there have since balked at moving after a survey showed that a majority of parents and teachers did not support it.

Hingham was ahead of the curve in 2003 when it moved the start time at its high school from 7:20 to 8 a.m. Since then, performance and attendance are up, as are MCAS and AP scores, officials say.

"I think it has been terrific," said high school principal Paula Girouard McCann. "Morning is not a teenager's best time."

McCann said the change was a non-issue for the community; incidentally, Hingham High was recently named a National Blue Ribbon School.

Elsewhere, Shrewsbury Public Schools switched to an 8 a.m. high school start in 2004, as did Lynnfield. Deerfield Academy moved its start time from 7:55 to 8:30 a.m. last year.

Not everyone is pleased with every change.

In Duxbury, unhappy parents have complained since last winter, when the local School Committee voted to change the start times, that their lives were being disrupted and that they were being excluded from the decision process.

A forum on the issue was held recently, and a report on what was discussed is expected to be released soon. But no matter the report, Duxbury school officials have said the new schedule needs to be in place for at least several years before they can determine whether it has made a positive impact.

Parents of younger students say the earlier start times have created a child-care nightmare. And while the district and other organizations offer after-school programs and activities, not all can afford to participate, some parents say.

Barbara Cleary says she has to work at managing the tangle of bus schedules for her three children - Sam in Grade 8, Tim in half-day kindergarten, and Deborah, a fourth-grader who must now catch a bus at 7:05 a.m.

"If I wasn't a work-from-home mom, I wouldn't be able to do it," she said. "I think in the long run we may find this a good thing, but the issue was that [School Committee members] really had their minds made up already."

Transportation is a major sticking point in any district's consideration of a later day for students.

Norton shifted its high school start time from 7:15 a.m. to 7:40 about five years ago, and principal Raymond Dewar says the extra sleep has helped students' performance. But what has not worked well are a 9 a.m. start for the middle school and 7:50, 8:20, and 10 a.m. starts for three elementary schools to accommodate a limited fleet of buses, he said.

Officials are assessing further changes, Dewar said, but, "like every community, we are prisoners of the buses."

Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, said it's too early to tell whether later start times for older students, and in some cases earlier start times for younger students, will be a trend. He said it has worked in some cases, and not in others. And some districts must negotiate with teachers before they can move schedules.

"I haven't heard a lot on it nationally. The jury is far from being in on this," said Koocher.

Jonathan Considine, a spokesman for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, said start times are a local decision.

"We would have no objection to a local school committee examining [them] to determine what makes the most sense for its students and community," he said.

A bill introduced on Beacon Hill this year could change all that, though. Sponsored by state Senator Cynthia Stone Creem, a Newton Democrat, the legislation calls for a study to determine how high school start times affect academics. If passed, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education would examine existing research and take comment from students, teachers, and policy-makers about what across-the-board changes should be made.

A minimum of two public hearings would be held.

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