

School Start Time and Bus Routes Task Force Report; November 2009

Process

The School Board charged a team to: *Create a long-term solution to grades E-12 school start time that maximizes resources and compliments personalized learning experience.* Representatives of each site, inclusive of teachers, parents and elementary principals met with district office and transportation department to review possible options for bus routes for the 2010-2011 school year.

The team included district facilitators, Gwen Jackson and Jenni Norlin-Weaver, Laura Hunt (Cornelia parent), Beth Hanson (Creek Valley parent with alternate Kari Dahlquist, principal), Amy Graham (Concord parent), Sharon Norlander (Normandale teacher), Julie Baker (Highlands teacher), Julie Hatzung (Countryside principal), David White (Transportation manager) and Jay Willemsen (Director of Fiscal Services). Jolene Goldade (Communications) and Adam Duffy (District Media) both assisted with gathering inputs.

The team reviewed the current realities and shared contexts, conscious of the fact that in 1998 a cycle was created to rotate the routes that the district can no longer maintain without purchasing additional equipment. A survey was created to gather K-9 community and staff input via the district website. Over 1,000 responses were received.

The Task Force is seeking School Board discussion and direction on work to date, with action anticipated later in November.

Background

Unacceptable means include:

- Reduce bus services to/from school
- Create an early start time for high school (they remain on tier 2)
- Add significant transportation costs (a single full size new bus costs \$85,000.00)
- Create inequities in educational services

Current Busing Information

The district has enough vehicles to run a three-tier system using 42 full-size and 9 special needs buses. The combination of sites on a tier requires that the equipment needed not exceed this number. Current bus runs are:

- 7:10–7:40 (tier 1) bus run – Middle Schools, Non-public Schools
 - 7:45–8:30 (tier 2) bus run – Elementary run #1: Non-public Schools, High School
 - 8:50–9:15 (tier 3) bus run – Elementary run #2: Non-public Schools
- (note: Non-public schools are provided transportation access as per legislation)

	<u>Start Time</u>	<u>End Time</u>
South View & Valley View	7:45	2:40
Edina High	8:30	3:10
Concord, Normandale	8:35	3:05 (Early)
Cornelia, Countryside	9:20	3:50 (Late)
Creek Valley, Highlands	9:20	3:50 (Late)

The complexities of the schedule are compounded by a variety of elements, including growth in district-wide choice programs, middle level scheduling, increased special education transportation needs, and growth in ridership across all student populations. The current schedule is the one which utilizes equipment and driver time most effectively. However, many families feel strongly about school start times and wish to share their desires with the district as decisions are made.

Community Input

Community and staff respondents K-9 were asked in the survey questions posed to rank order the importance of 'early' 'late' 'consistent' times or 'length of ride,' rather than to vote for a specific option.

The response consistently ranked number one overall was 'early start time' and the second overall most important was 'consistency.' At the middle level there was interest shown in 'late start time,' without specific definition of a time.

Survey Comment Summary (those themes which appear most frequently)

- Some staff and families support a cyclical rotation of start time schedules
- Some prefer adoption of start times as relatively permanent fixture (plan long term for child care and family needs)
- Child care costs are impacted by start times and generate strong feelings
- Middle school comments often referenced a desire for a 'later' start time
- Some elementary families prefer the later time, while others prefer an earlier one
- Comments about preference are generally driven by child care concerns, or perceptions about 'best' learning times
- There are comments that specifically refer to preferences for 'after 8:00' but 'before 9:00'
- A November decision is important to accurately estimate flex benefit plan needs
- Fiscal prudence is important
- Any combination of 'levels' (e.g. Elem and MS or MS and HS) can cause families some stress
- Many respondents do not understand the legal obligation to transport non-public students
- 'Choice' program families may not understand the transportation time increases with the selection of a school that draws from across the district
- 'After school' activities are more challenging for those on later start times
- Many respondents do not have a clear understanding of the reasons the schedule has been the same for some time, including misunderstandings

Options

To date, no single clear choice has emerged that will fulfill all requirements and restrictions. The team has studied seven specific options, considering all of the available equipment as well as numerous potential modifications to the current schedule. Each option carried both pros and cons. *None* would allow for the district to change the current schedule without radical shifting of school structures or purchase of equipment. As a single example, the movement of one elementary school from the third tier to the second would require the purchase of ten additional buses.

Direction

Continued study appears necessary, with no change for 2010-2011. The district will need to stay with the current schedule, since there are limitations without major expenses, and the current schedule requires no additional expenditure. However, we recommend re-convening a team for study in order to meet the charge to make 'long-term' recommendations.

Additional recommendations:

- Continued study of start times, pursuing a consultant to assess other options and other creative solutions
- Study possible modifications to the fee structure for KIDS Club in order to diminish the impact of later starts for those families and to make the cost as equitable as possible
- Align to three current district studies: 1) Facilities, e.g., 'Could KIDS Club at each site have dedicated, purposeful facilities?' 2) Elementary School Choice/Boundaries, e.g., 'Where/how can we best serve our elementary students?' 3) Middle School Study, e.g., 'Is the current middle school schedule and start time optimal for student success?'
- Explore creative solutions, including having the city provide buses or expand sidewalks, and seek legislative change for levying nonpublic transportation support
- Create a communication that clarifies the decision rationale for concerned stakeholders