

March 9, 2009

There are serious questions about some of the assumptions and conclusions in The Washington Post editorial this morning.

Statement: Most people think the bell rings too early.

What could this assertion be based on? Results from the FCPS online survey show that over 37,000 parents are satisfied with the current schedule. That's 3 times more than the number who don't like it, and more than FOUR times more than the number of signatures on the SLEEP petition. (And, it should be noted, there are an unknown number of people who say that though they signed the petition at one point, they no longer want later start times.) What is the basis for saying that most people want later start times?

Statement: People hate the schedule created by transportation officials

It is NOT the "schedule" or flaws of iteration 3 that people don't like. It is the parameters put forth in the TTF proposal itself. Switching dismissal times for older and younger siblings; scheduling the last tier of schools to start well after 9am (9:20-9:40am) and to end after 4pm (4:10-4:30pm); and removing an hour of time from high-school students' schedules are all features of the Majority Report of the Transportation Task Force. These are the features that Fairfax County residents do not like.

Statement: There are real and significant benefits to later start times on student performance and health.

The proven link is between "more sleep" and "learning and health." A critical look at the research on "late start times" and these factors shows a mixed bag of results. SAT scores in Edina actually went down; no study shows a statistically significant effect on grades (except a negative effect on grades when after-school activities were moved before school in Minneapolis); there's a trade-off in terms of increased alertness in the morning classes but more absences and early dismissals from afternoon classes. The conclusion that students get more sleep is largely based on geographic studies done in the 1990s. Advances in technology since the 1990s, such as Facebook, text messaging, twitter, have introduced factors that may be more influential on student bedtimes than just school start and end times. Results in South Burlington show that bedtimes moved later with a late start: "With the change in start time, students and parents saw a shift in the sleep patterns. In the evening, bedtime moved one hour later with the wake up time moving one hour later in the morning."

Sleep is one element of a healthy lifestyle. The mixed results on some of the research for late start times supports the idea that sleep is only part of a healthy life. If late start times imply offsetting negative impacts, then the positive effects of more sleep are diluted. In addition, scientists point out not all teens experience the biological changes that shift sleep patterns, so not all teens will benefit from late start times.

The Post editorial concludes "A good night's sleep remains an important goal."

That is absolutely true. What is categorically not true, however, is that late start times are the only way - or even the best way - to achieve that goal. Let's work on changing bus schedules so that bus rides are a more reasonable length; and educating students on the importance of sleep and the many ways to improve sleep (reduced exposure to light and electronics in the evening; reduced caffeine consumption in afternoon and evening, and so on).

But, please, listen to the majority of Fairfax County parents, students, and educators who have conclusively stated that they do not want a change in school start times.

Let's also dispel once and for all the myth that changing school start times is "no-cost." The Task Force was charged with two tasks: (1) find ways to increase efficiencies, and (2) investigate a late-start schedule. Increasing efficiencies will save money; but implementing a late-bell schedule will cost money. When combined, the effects are offsetting, and the overall proposal is no-cost. However, the two pieces do not have to be combined. They are separate decisions. The school board can choose to adopt the efficiency improvements and use those savings to help out with other parts of the budget. Implementing the late-bell proposal will cost money.

I conclude with a resounding thank you to all the hard-working volunteers of the Transportation Task Force, as well as my respect and thanks to the Fairfax County school-board. This is a challenging time for our school system, with issues from budgets to boundaries to be considered. The time and hard work of the school board is much appreciated.

With respect,
Lorraine Monaco