

February 12, 2009

Honest Differences With SLEEP Over Bell Schedule Change

With a draft bell schedule now available, some FCPS residents have weighed the costs and do not want high school start times changed. Parents, students, FCPS employees, and county residents are sorting through what are seen as unacceptable impacts on family life, student sports, extracurricular activities, and childcare arrangements.

SLEEP claims that misinformation, rumor and conjecture are being spread about the impact on sports and extracurricular activities

CONSIDER: There are a limited number of lit fields and tennis courts in the county. Unlit fields and courts can be used between the end of school and nightfall. That time window shortens if high schools are dismissed later.

CONSIDER: With the later release of high school students, sports will start later; travel to sports venues will coincide more closely with rush hour than at present; club sports that share facilities with FCPS athletes will start later; and adult sports leagues will start later still.

CONSIDER: FCPS Swim and Dive teams currently swim before peak swim times for paying FCPA customers. FCPA is investigating whether they will lose paying customers if they push high school swim times – with their dedicated lane use – into after-work hours when paying customers use the pools.

CONSIDER: The extra hour of sleep that SLEEP advocates must come from somewhere: sports, band, homework, family time, or other activities.

SLEEP claims that a negative environment could taint the decision-making process

CONSIDER: The WAKEFairfax website applauds “[t]he volunteers for SLEEP [who] have dedicated themselves to a worthy goal: improving the lives and education of our teenagers ... and all the volunteers should be commended for their efforts.” It goes on to direct readers to learn more about sleep benefits on the SLEEP website.

CONSIDER: The SLEEP website exhibits a view that acceptable solutions can be found to all objections to the bell schedule change. This assumption of what may be acceptable to others creates a negative environment for those who disagree with SLEEP.

SLEEP claims FCPS has “just started the process of looking at potential impacts”

CONSIDER: FCPS studied this issue in 1991, 1998, 2006 and 2007. The TTF Majority and Minority Reports were delivered to the School Board in March of 2008. These reports included thorough discussions of the impacts of a bell schedule change on students, employees, residents and businesses, and family life.

SLEEP claims that parents are hearing “dire predictions” and that this “bleak picture ... could undermine a collaborative approach.”

CONSIDER: The hundreds of parents who have written to the School Board, signed petitions, and blogged the Washington Post against the bell schedule change are thoughtful members of the Fairfax community attempting to honestly grapple with potential changes.

CONSIDER: SLEEP has consistently cited research that supports their particular view of adolescent sleep needs and of the absolute necessity of a bell schedule change to address the problem. SLEEP consistently fails to cite research pointing out negative tradeoffs from a bell schedule change in some jurisdictions. SLEEP does not discuss districts that studied and did not adopt a bell schedule change.

CONSIDER: The SLEEP website presents a bleak picture if the bell schedule is not changed, implying that no other solution to teen sleep challenges could adequately address the problem.

SLEEP claims that middle school parents believe “incorrectly” that after-school programs will be cancelled

CONSIDER: The TTF Majority Report states that “because all [middle school] students would be in school until the late afternoon,” they would all benefit by reducing their susceptibility to “inappropriate behavior and bad influences.” This statement implies that after-school programs would no longer be needed.

CONSIDER: In their press release of Feb. 11, 2009, SLEEP advocates that “the middle school after-school money be made available for before- or after-school programs as determined by the principal.” This statement effectively promotes the elimination of the current after-school program, a program uniformly praised by administrators, teachers, parents, and students and whose benefits are documented in Appendix T of the TTF Majority Report.

SLEEP claims that the FCPS Transportation Dept. has finally achieved a no-cost bell schedule change

CONSIDER: The proposed bell schedule includes two parts: 1) reduced transportation costs through improved efficiencies achieved from altered bus routes, consolidated bus stops, and the like; and 2) increased transportation costs due to the bell schedule change. The Transportation Dept. estimates that these will cancel each other out, resulting in a no-cost bell schedule change. Without a bell schedule change, however, transportation dollars could be saved and potentially used for other purposes.

SLEEP claims that “parents and various interests” are being “[pitted] against each other”

CONSIDER: With their attitude that everyone will adjust to a bell schedule change, SLEEP has pitted itself against families who disagree with their point of view.

CONSIDER: The SLEEP website states: “Our children deserve to have a complete night of

rest. It's not an option. It's a physical requirement. Our children's health and safety should not be compromised for the convenience of the status quo." Some families do not agree that a bell schedule change is the only solution to sleep-deprived teens. SLEEP has not voiced adequate understanding of, or compassion for, the diverse priorities that parents have for their families and their children when these priorities disagree with their solution.

Fair-minded, reasonable people disagree about the bell schedule. In the Washington Post, Michael Alison Chandler reported that "hundreds of parents, students and school staff members ... worry that the extra rest isn't worth the scheduling headaches it would cause" (Feb. 9, 2009). These concerns are not based on rumor or misinformation. They are based on the assessments of real people who, using the same facts that SLEEP is using, come to a different conclusion than does SLEEP.

Like the leadership of SLEEP, I am deeply hopeful that a spirit of respect and collaboration will characterize the upcoming community dialogues and School Board deliberations.

Patricia Velkoff
Chair, TTF Minority Report