

## Response to SLEEP Statements of March 2, 2009

The SLEEP leadership updated their web site on Monday, March 2. On the site, they

- criticize the current draft plan (iteration #3);
- accuse FCPS staff of deliberately sabotaging the plan;
- maintain that most community members want a late bell schedule;
- imply that opponents are misinformed and want to “cling to the status quo”
- urge supporters to write to the school board and urge more time to “explore other options to change high-school start times.”

We have great respect for the dedicated work of all the SLEEP volunteers, and an appreciation for the importance of sleep as a health issue. We have serious concerns, however, about the dismissive and divisive tone of recent statements, and honest differences of opinion about several conclusions.

### **Criticisms of Iteration 3**

On their web site (March 2, 2009), SLEEP states that there are problems with the current draft iteration, including “late start times for preschools and late schedules for middle schools.” But, the parameters for this draft were established by the TTF Majority report. The Majority report included the 3-tier system that staff used to draw up the proposed plan. SLEEP founders Phyllis Payne and Sandy Evans, along with five other members of the SLEEP advisory council, signed that report and gave their approval to the 3-tier system, including the start and end times for the last tier: start from 9:20-9:40 and end from 4:10-4:30. **SLEEP cannot criticize FCPS staff for using the very schedule that is recommended by the TTF proposal.**

### **Criticism of FCPS Staff**

On their web site, as of March 2, 2009, SLEEP asserts that [it appears] “this draft and the projected sports schedule were intentionally designed to shock and divide the community and to make parents, students and teachers cling to the status quo.” This statement is a direct insult to FCPS staff who followed the school board directive to create a no-cost bell schedule change. FCPS staff closely followed the guidelines and parameters specified in the TTF proposal. At the very least, the school board should consider asking SLEEP to remove from their web site any implication that FCPS staff deliberately tried to sabotage a later bell schedule.

### **Criticisms of Opponents**

The SLEEP web site makes repeated reference to the idea that opponents “cling to the status quo.” This dismissive statement is insulting to the thousands of parents, students, employees, and community members who are carefully looking at the costs implied by the proposal: increases in child-care expenses; disruptions to family schedules; economic hardships for employees who can't support family on FCPS salary and so on. Dismissing these concerns is insensitive, and contributes to an unnecessarily divisive tone.

### **Assertion that the majority of the community supports later start times**

While it may be true that thousands of people have signed a petition created by SLEEP, it is also true that many people who signed that petition now are **not** in favor of the TTF proposal. What is missing from the petition is an acknowledgement of costs. While many people would prefer later start times in general, they do not support a change to later start times **AT ANY COST**. Costs matter. Many idealistic changes would benefit our community: more school buses; smaller class sizes, better salaries for teachers; more resources for science, libraries, and athletics. As a community, we have to accept that costs prohibit some good ideas from being implemented.

### **Continued reference to a “No-cost” proposal**

SLEEP continues to state that the late-bell proposal is a “no-cost” solution. In truth, the TTF proposal contains two offsetting pieces: increasing efficiencies in transportation will save money; changing to a late-bell schedule will cost money. If the late-bell schedule is not chosen, then the savings from efficiencies could be applied elsewhere in the school budget. To continue to assert that the late-bell proposal can be achieved at “no-cost” is misleading.

### **Incomplete information comparing Fairfax County to other jurisdictions**

In looking to other jurisdictions as models of whether to implement a late-bell change, SLEEP doesn’t take into consideration important differences between Fairfax County and these other jurisdictions. Some of the differences include: number of schools, programs and students; number of buses; complexity of bus routes due to large number of students who attend non-neighborhood schools; number of employees; number of athletic facilities; percent of facilities shared with other groups; percent of employees who rely on second job; ethnic and economic diversity, and so on. Ignoring these differences will lead to poor decision-making.

### **Assertion that late-bell proposal is the **ONLY** solution for sleep needs of teens**

Many people concerned about the overall health of teens in our community continue to be dismayed by the “all-or-nothing” approach SLEEP embraces. Changing school start times is **one** way to help teens achieve better sleep. Sleep experts have many recommendations for teens, particularly on how to face the challenges provided by our increasingly technology-minded society: computers, cell phones, hand-held game devices and other electronics do contribute to the sleep deprivation of our teens. By focusing on only one solution (and a solution that comes with significant costs), SLEEP is short-changing the very group it is trying to help.

### **Implication that opponents are misinformed and uneducated**

What is perhaps most troubling to many members of the Fairfax County community is the implication that anyone who disagrees with the current proposal is somehow misinformed or not well educated on the subject. This perception is promulgated by SLEEP and – even more troubling – being repeated and reinforced by some school board members.

To summarily dismiss the opinions of individuals who disagree with this bell schedule change as being based on “misinformation” or “falsehoods” is highly insulting. With all due respect, it’s not up to the SLEEP leadership to decide if any particular family in Fairfax County is made better off or worse off by this proposal; each family has the prerogative to decide that for themselves.

To reiterate, we have great respect for the dedicated work of all the SLEEP volunteers, and an appreciation for the importance of sleep as a health issue. We have honest differences of opinion about the relative costs and benefits of the current proposal, and are disheartened by the dismissive and divisive tone of the recent discussion.

Lorraine Monaco

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[wakefcp@gmail.com](mailto:wakefcp@gmail.com)

<http://wakefairfax.googlepages.com>