

MONTGOMERY COUNTY SCHOOLS CONSIDERS LATER START FOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Written by John Matthews, retired Director of Transportation, Montgomery County Public Schools and ASBO MD&DC Past President

In the fall of 2012, Mandi Mader, a parent of a Montgomery County Public Schools student, formed the Montgomery County Chapter of Schools Start Later, Inc. and began forwarding petition signatures to Superintendent Joshua Starr. In December, Dr. Starr formed a work group charged with examining the possibility of changing bell times. The work group was to look at previous reports and past efforts within the county and current sleep science research and trends, conduct an analysis of school start times to develop options for consideration, and report on its findings.

The 2013 Bell Times Work Group was comprised of students, staff, and parents who met bi-weekly from January to June and were led by retired Director of Transportation John Matthews (a Past-President, MD&DC ASBO). The group of 20 members reviewed the history of bell time change efforts that occurred in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in the late 1990s. MCPS adopted the current four tier bell schedule in 1993 which has remained unchanged for 20 years (see schedule below). When adopted, the issue of teen sleep needs was not a topic of discussion. Soon after, in the mid-1990s, three major universities conducted sleep studies on teens and found that the average person age 13–25 needs 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep daily. Also, the onset of sleepiness is delayed until 11:00 p.m. for the average person in this age group—a shift from the earlier bed times of younger children. Further, these “circadian rhythms” are controlled by the body’s internal clock which gets its rhythm from the rising and setting of the sun. The only way to change these patterns is to artificially control light and darkness in a controlled environment. The findings of sleep studies in this area are exceptionally consistent.

As the work group plowed through the studies both new and old, several factors became apparent:

- The science on sleep needs is well-established and unchallenged by other studies.
- People in the age group (13-25) need 8.5-9.5 hours of sleep nightly.
- People in this age group do not begin to feel sleepy before 11:00 and cannot alter this by simply forcing an earlier bedtime.
- In some studies, this age group performed better academically while in others they did not; the evidence in this area is inconclusive.
- Many more elements of health and safety were apparent in research that revealed the following factors associated with lack of adequate sleep:
 - Increased anxiety
 - Increased likelihood of obesity and associated long term health issues such as diabetes and hypertension
 - Decreased attention
 - Increased likelihood of car crashes
 - Decreased ability to process complex thoughts
 - Decreased ability to remember information
 - Decreased decision making ability

- Decreased motivation.
- Moving start times later consistently showed increased amount of sleep and did not result in later bed times as is commonly predicted.

The work group also conducted a survey of MCPS high school parents and high school students to determine their level of interest in a later start time because these groups were considered primary customers and beneficiaries of any effort to change school schedules that might result. The survey was therefore targeted and did not include other stakeholders, such as middle and elementary school stakeholders, or even high school teachers and staff. Since no specific options had yet been defined, asking open-ended questions of other stakeholders seemed pointless and likely to cause unnecessary and premature angst. These initial surveys showed that 69% of high school parents and 54% of high school students preferred a 30 or 60 minute later start time.

Consensus was not reached among the group members regarding the need for changing bell times. This difference of opinion was rooted in the difference about the importance of two basic outcomes from the research. At odds were those who valued academic outcomes only, against those who valued the list of health and safety benefits noted above. One point of agreement, however, was reached on the need for creating a sleep awareness program for students, staff and parents. The American culture has very little regard for the importance of sleep in a balanced lifestyle which includes good diet, exercise and sleep. This attitude is often assumed by parents for student sleep needs, as well as by students.

The work group submitted its report and findings to Superintendent Starr in July 2013. After review, Dr. Starr was convinced that there was value in pursuing an option that combined portions of two of the options presented by the work group. The Superintendent’s recommendation called for switching the order of school start times for middle and high schools, delaying the high school start time by 50 minutes, making earlier the middle school start time by 10 minutes, and adding 30 minutes to the elementary day but keeping the start times fixed. (note schedules below)

The work group report was officially released to the public at the October 3, 2013 meeting of the Board of Education. Dr. Starr announced his desire to move forward with further analysis and the members of the Board voted to support his plan.

Currently, MCPS staff is conducting a comprehensive outreach effort to include all stakeholders in the conversation. Every effort is being made to hear from stakeholders about their interest and support, and their concerns about plans to change bell times. Several outreach activities are planned, including four community forums; “Neighbor to Neighbor” discussion groups; surveys of staff, parents and students; and other activities to hear from interested parties. A thorough analysis of costs associated with the proposed changes will also be conducted before a decision on whether or not to move forward with a change is made. The decision on changing bell schedules is planned for summer 2014 and changes, if any, will not occur before the start of the 2015-16 school year.

Current MCPS Bell Schedule:

Level	Time	Length of Day
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High School	7:25 a.m. – 2:10 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Middle School	7:55 a.m. – 2:40 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 1	8:50 a.m. – 3:05 p.m.	6 hours, 15 minutes
Elementary School Tier 2	9:15 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.	6 hours 15 minutes

Superintendent Starr's recommended Schedule:

Level	Time	Length of Day
Middle School	7:45 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
High School	8:15 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 1	8:50 a.m. – 3:35 p.m.	6 hours, 45 minutes
Elementary School Tier 2	9:15 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.	6 hours 45 minutes