

Weston Public Schools



WILLIAM S. McKERSIE, PH.D.
williammckersie@westonps.org

Superintendent of Schools
24 School Road
Weston, Connecticut 06883-1699

Telephone: (203) 291-1401
FAX: (203) 291-1415

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TO: Weston Board of Education

RE: School Start/End Times Task Force Preliminary Work Plan

Background¹

For two years, the Weston Public Schools has been considering the idea of changing start/end times. In November 2017, I provided the Board of Education (BOE) a comprehensive statement on the pros and cons of changing bell times. (Document available at this link: [11-14-17 School Start/End Times Document.](#))

Fast forward to last fall, we decided to focus analysis of a potential change in start/end times on an incremental adjustment of 15 minutes for the secondary schools and 20 minutes for the elementary schools. (The time change for the elementary schools would be 20 minutes to allow for ample time between the two sets of bus runs, first for secondary schools and then for elementary schools.) An incremental approach is based on the experience in other communities and districts, where similar inquiry processes have started with a consideration of multiple time options and variables. While laudatory, a broadly defined review has led to extended debates, which have become divisive and stalled decisions.

Midway through last year, we conducted surveys of WPS parents and employees, with a focus on the proposed 15/20-minute adjustment. The results of the surveys indicate there is interest in continuing to explore a bell schedule time. However, to be true to the survey findings, it appears to be an open question in Weston whether a 15/20-minute adjustment is adequate and would be supported—proponents say, “not enough;” opponents say, “why bother.” As the results also indicate, changing basic school schedules is a complex endeavor with many intended and unintended consequences. While the medical research is increasingly clear about the health and well-being benefits for adolescents of start times more in line with their inherent sleep patterns, serious practical considerations have hampered wide-spread adoption of new start/end times. Indeed, in Fairfield County only one district has recently modified its start/end times. Other districts, while considering a change, keep delaying the decision for a variety of organizational, design, financial and political reasons. (The full report on the survey is

¹ The content for the Background section was shared with the entire WPS Community in “What to Expect...2019-20,” ADD DATE.

available at this [link](#) .)

To attempt to bring clarity to a complex situation, the BOE agreed in June 2019 that we establish a Task Force on School Start/End Times. Chaired by the Superintendent, the Task Force will be advisory and include a BOE member, two central office administrators, two principals or their nominees, two teachers and two PTO members (the school administrators, teachers and parents would be selected to ensure full representation of the lower and upper schools). The Task Force will review possible changes to School Start/End Times for the 2020-21 School Year. No later than January 2020, recommendations would be presented to the BOE on whether or not to pursue a change to start/end times in FY 21. If recommending a change, the report would include a detailed action and financial plan.

School Start/End Times Task Force Preliminary Work Plan

As promised in June 2019, I am presenting the preliminary work plan for the Task Force. This plan will be reviewed and finalized during the first meetings of the Task Force. The Work Plan includes three sections.

1. Task Force Details – Membership, Resource Groups, Guidelines and Schedule

Membership:

Superintendent – Chair of School Start/End Times Task Force
Ken Crow, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction
Phil Cross, Director of Finance & Operations
Lisa Wolak, Principal, Weston High School (Representing Upper Schools)
Laura Kaddis, Principal, Hurlbutt Elementary School (Representing Lower Schools)
Mark Berkowitz, Athletic Director
WTA Representative for Upper Schools Perspective (To be added by WTA)
WTA Representative for Lower Schools Perspective (To be added by WTA)
PTO Representative for Upper Schools Perspective (To be added by PTO)
PTO Representative for Lower Schools Perspective (To be added by PTO)

Resource Groups:

- Cabinet – Lewis Brey (Legal & HR); Mike Rizzo (PPS/SPED); Craig Tunks (Technology); Mike DelMastro (Facilities, Grounds)
- First Student Bus Company – For all transportation analysis, including modified routing and scheduling.
- Weston Police Department – For formal and informal traffic studies and information.
- SFCSA Roundtable on School Start/End Times – Informal group of area superintendents looking to “think regionally” on this critical issue.

Guidelines:

- Advisory body to the Superintendent, who will make final recommendations based on input from the Task Force.

- All final decisions on recommendations, highlighted opportunities or concerns will be determined through consensus (this a non-voting Task Force).
- Members will be required to bring to the Task Force the broad perspective of their respective roles (they should strive to not speak or act solely for their individual perspective).
- Members will be required to be present for all Task Force meetings and public forums. Focus groups are likely to be held; for those, we will determine which Task Force members need to be present.
- Task Force meetings and public forums will be publicly noticed and conducted as public sessions, with a posted agenda, including opportunity for public comment.

Schedule:

- The Task Force will meet at least every other week, starting the Week of September 30, 2019 and ending prior to when the Superintendent’s Final Recommendation is presented to the Board of Education (tentatively January 27, 2020). A meeting schedule will be established at the first Task Force meeting. Additional meetings may need to be added, and the frequency increased, as the Task Force move towards the deadline of January 27, 2020.
- Meetings typically will be held during school/business hours.
- Public forums and focus groups will be held both during the day and evening hours.
- To repeat, Task Force meetings and public forums will be publicly noticed and conducted as public sessions, with a posted agenda, including opportunity for public comment.

2. Guiding Analytical Framework

Guiding Questions:

The Task Force will examine four broad questions—

1. What are the pros and cons of shifting the start/end times of school for all buildings to 15/20 minutes later?
 - a. WMS/WHS starting at 8:00 a.m. and ending at 2:45 p.m.
 - b. HES/WIS starting at 8:50 a.m. and ending at 3:35 p.m.
2. What are the pros and cons of shifting the start/end times of school for all buildings to 45/50 minutes later?
 - a. WMS/WHS starting at 8:30 a.m. and ending at 3:15 p.m.
 - b. HES/WIS starting at 9:20 a.m. and ending at 4:05 p.m.
3. What are the pros and cons of flipping the start/end times of school for the Lower and Upper Schools?

- a. WMS/WHS starting at 8:35 a.m. and ending at 3:20 p.m.²
 - b. HES/WIS starting at 7:45 a.m. and ending at 2:30 p.m.
4. Considering the three sets of pros and cons, within the following set of analytical priorities, what is the recommended change for school Start/End Times in the Weston Public Schools?

Analytical Priorities:

The Task Force will consider pros and cons across a series of analytical priorities. Listed below, these are dealt with more completely in the November 2017 report to the Board of Education ([11-14-17 School Start/End Times Document](#), see pp. 6-9). The analytical priorities are based on school start/end time initiatives in other school districts and communities.

- 1) Academic Program
- 2) Health Impact – Physical, Emotional, Psychological
- 3) Co-Curricular – Athletics
- 4) Co-Curricular – Music & Performing Arts
- 5) Co-Curricular – Clubs & Activities
- 6) Non-School Programs
- 7) Contractual Obligations
- 8) Non-Contractual Issues for Staff
- 9) Budget and Financials
- 10) Transportation – Safety
- 11) Transportation – Traffic Congestion
- 12) Family Life Arrangements
- 13) Campus & Building Operations
- 14) External Relations

While this entire list of considerations is important, we know from experience that four become critical to decisions on school start/end times and the effectiveness of implementations. Some describe these as logistical issues, which understates their significance—they really are structural and need to be seen in that weighty light. I repeat here the points from the November 2017 Report (pp. 8-9).

Top Logistical Considerations:

While the scientific research (medical) arguing for later start times is increasingly obvious, the logistical realities of modifying schedules loom large. Indeed, the logistics may be limiting the benefits suggested by the science. Lessons from other districts that are implementing new start/end times suggest four top logistical considerations.

² This timeframe adjusts for the necessary added five minutes between our first and second bus runs. Thus, the current second run, which allows for an 8:30 a.m. start, would be adjusted to 8:35 a.m.

*First, the **financial and budget aspects** of new start/end times must be examined closely, both for immediate and long-term effects. The major costs may relate to transportation, but there likely are budget pressures emanating from many of the analytical priorities and considerations. For instance, later end times for school will impact building and facility usage, requiring possible changes to custodian time, security and lighting and utility usage.*

*Second, **detailed traffic studies are required**. The impact must be understood of shifting when the preponderance of students, families and staff are on the road—both in busses and individual vehicles. In our congested region, changes in the volume of traffic can have significant impact on travel times, which could result in longer travel thereby minimizing the value of delaying school starts. Increased traffic congestion also could create a public relations challenge for the district with residents.*

*Third, **bus schedules have to be carefully analyzed** to make sure the new times will work as well as they currently do. If time changes result in the congestion flagged in the previous point, bus sequences will have to be modified.*

*Fourth, while all students will be affected, **athletes as a group will deserve special attention**. Ending school later will impact practice schedules and length, as well as push contests, and the return time from contests, later in the day. Athletes may be faced with fewer hours between school ending and reasonable bed times. Athletes may also be faced with greater reductions in class time, or after school academic help, due to practice and contest timing demands. Athletes and their families will have to be advised carefully if start/end times are changed. Students participating in performing arts, music and other major co-curricular programs may also have changes to their schedule, but given they perform inside, and are not often traveling to other locations, the consequences are more limited.*

Research & Information Base for School Start/End Times:

The Task Force's primary research base will be analysis already conducted in Weston. We will return to the documents and materials prepared for the decision in 2009 to change start times at WHS from 7:25 a.m. to 7:45 a.m. We will use the November 2017 report to the BOE for guidance. Lastly, the 2018-19 Survey of Staff and Families will be a key resource. Based in part on this historic and recent analysis, the Task Force likely will organize a series of focus groups to probe particular issues and considerations across the four guiding questions.

We are taking as a given the emerging strength of medical research on the importance of aligning school bell schedules with the inherent sleep needs and patterns of adolescents. As a result, the Task Force will not devote time to gathering or reviewing that research. Instead, the final recommendation from the superintendent will include links to existing compendiums on the medical research.

Similarly, the Task Force will only selectively gather or review the research on the impact of school start/end time changes in other districts and communities. The Task Force will efficiently

examine helpful examples from other locations for each of the analytical priorities and considerations, primarily as way to inform pros and cons and the superintendent's final recommendation. The reason for being cautious in this research review is pragmatic—the research is limited in sample sizes and thus limited in how much it can inform Weston in valid and reliable ways. Simply put, Weston will need to determine based on our own analysis, relative to our own priorities and realities, if we can make a change in school start/end times work well.

3. Next Steps

The Task Force will have its first meeting during the Week of September 30. The meeting will be posted once a final time and date is set. During the initial meeting, the Preliminary Work Plan will be reviewed and finalized, including setting dates for the majority of the twice monthly meetings. That schedule will be announced.

The Superintendent will provide the Board of Education an update at the October 21, 2019 BOE Meeting on initial progress. Updates also may be necessary for the BOE's Curriculum, Policy and Finance Committees, depending on the nature of findings and considerations. Monthly updates for the Full BOE, and possibly the various BOE Committees, are anticipated between October and the January 2020 deadline.