



Lexington Public Schools

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SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT DR. JULIE HACKETT - DECEMBER 4, 2018

I. A PROPOSED LATER SCHOOL START IN 2019 - 2020: SUPERINTENDENT'S REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

BACKGROUND

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued the first-of-its-kind policy statement on a serious public health crisis facing America's youth: widespread, chronic sleep deprivation. A growing body of research indicates that early school start times are a contributing factor, and in their policy statement, the AAP urges educators and policy-makers to consider school start times that are no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Furthermore, they note that even a 30-minute delay in school start times could lead to improved safety, academic outcomes, physical and mental health, and a better quality of life. The AAP's policy statement was informed by a wide body of scientific evidence, including 63 references from a number of recent studies.¹

In 2017, all Middlesex League Superintendents signed an agreement to implement a later start by the fall of 2018. Lexington did not implement a later school start in the fall of 2018; however, in the span of a year and a half, the School Committee and administration considered no fewer than twelve later school start options. These options ranged from no cost solutions like "The Flip" (a solution that was considered by some as a radical change to both the elementary and high school schedules and one that may have an adverse impact on working parents and families), to options that ranged in cost from \$1 million to close to \$5 million, to the option being contemplated tonight: a low-cost (\$37,000) option that achieves the desired 45-minute later start for high school students, with minimal impacts to elementary and middle school students.

My official start date as the newly appointed Superintendent of Schools in Lexington was July 1, 2018. I have focused my efforts these past five months on trying to better understand the implications of a later start from all perspectives, and to develop a fair process that allows all voices to be heard and leads the School Committee to a final

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics. Policy Statement: School Start Times for Adolescents. Available at: www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2014-1697. PEDIATRICS Volume 134, Number 3, September, 2014.

decision. As I reflect on Lexington's process to date, in many ways it would be easy to put an end to the discussion of a later school start. It is a concept that was passed down from the previous administration, there are significant implementation challenges which translate (at least temporarily) into a significantly increased workload for my administrative team, and now that the possibility of a later start is upon us, students, parents, and teachers appear to be somewhat more conflicted about the issue. However, in matters of great consequence, history and experience teach us that the easy thing to do is not always the right thing to do.

DATA COLLECTION

When a school system is faced with a major decision, how the community feels about the decisions matters. Surveys were given in the fall of 2017; approximately 52.5% of high school staff felt the current school day started too early and 48.2% believed students would perform better with a later start. Just under two thirds or 62.2% of high school students responded they were tired or sleepy at school most days or every day. These data were integrated into the resolution I drafted and the School Committee ultimately passed in August, 2018 (see School Committee Resolution on a Later School Start). The School Committee Resolution offered three assurances: (1) School Committee support for a later school start time for Lexington High School students and their desire to maintain elementary and middle school start times at this time; (2) a willingness to explore the possibility of funding a high-school only later start solution for implementation, should cost-savings and other efficiencies be identified in the next few months; and (3) consideration for implementation in the fall of 2019.

Once the decision was made to focus on a later school start with a possible fall, 2019 implementation, we developed another survey and organized several public forums (including one in Boston) to get a sense of the school community's response to a specific option (see Superintendent's 10-25-2018 Letter). As of December 3, 2018, we received approximately 1,800 survey responses from students, staff, and parents, and results were mixed. Many felt the option currently under consideration was the right choice, but they had a number of questions. Others felt it was the wrong choice, and they identified anticipated obstacles, such as the inability to drop their children off at 8:15 a.m. Given the size of the school community, a sample of 1,800 is relatively small; nonetheless, we learned that parents and community members tend to be more in favor of a later start and high school students and staff tend to be less in favor.

The second survey was intentionally open-ended, as we wanted respondents to be able to share what is on their minds. Several parents and community members noted the health-benefits of a later school start at the high school level. One community member, who identified as a pediatrician, stated that a later start would be a "better fit for high school sleep cycles which leads to better mental and physical health...this is a crucial step toward showing the community that we value our children's health and well-being." A smaller number of respondents expressed concerns about the potential negative impact on younger learners. Students and teachers shared similar views, with one

respondent, who identified as a student, indicating, “The 45-minute delay in start time is just that - a delay. It will not slow down the pace of school, or make kids more relaxed and healthy. Instead, it will just push everything back 45 minutes and we will be left with the same problems we have now.”

Many survey respondents asked that we carefully consider the implementation timeline to allow those who are impacted time to adjust. Through public forums, comments on surveys, and in individual meetings, we heard many positives, as well as a host of challenges and concerns, including the following: METCO elementary students may be adversely impacted by arriving later in Boston, which may cause challenges for students when they re-integrate into their own neighborhoods; elementary parents need to drop off their children at 8:15 a.m. in order to get to work on time; staff members who commute are worried about the impact of the change on their professional and personal lives and wonder if they would have a chance to see their families or volunteer for after school clubs and activities. Others urged us to communicate and coordinate with outside providers and transportation, and they wondered about how the change may impact the start and end times for students in the LABBB Collaborative program. Still others expressed concern about athletic scheduling challenges; the impact on student participation rates in sports; and added costs for the Town Recreation Department, which does not presently have the appropriate lighting for athletic fields. It is worth noting that Middlesex League districts have reportedly received similar feedback, and about half of the districts already have or will soon implement a later school start, including: Burlington (2017); Melrose (2017); Stoneham (2018); Winchester (2018). and Reading (2019).

SUPERINTENDENT’S RECOMMENDATION

It has been my experience that for any controversial decision, a good process always gives us a glimpse of the future and a window into the possibilities. We learn the nuances of the potential benefits and the potential pitfalls of a decision from those who speak out and share their unique perspectives. With respect to the decision before us this evening, we have the benefit of thousands of minds who voiced their opinions on how a later school start time decision may impact them personally. Thanks to the involvement of the Lexington school community, we know more about what is on the minds of our stakeholders than we knew prior to seeking their input. Ultimately, the later school start decision rests with the School Committee, and the question before you is whether to move forward with a fall, 2019 implementation of a 15-minute later school start for elementary students and a 45-minute later school start for high school students.

For all of the associated challenges and unintended consequences of a later school start, what I find most compelling are the simple physiological and biological benefits of a later school start. A considerable body of research exists indicating that an early start is detrimental to the health and well-being of adolescents. We know that delaying the

school start times to 8:30 a.m. aligns our school schedule with the sleep patterns of our high school students “whose sleep-wake cycles begin to shift up to two hours at the start of puberty” (Dr. Judith Owens, Boston Children’s Hospital). We know, too, that a 30-minute later start may drastically improve outcomes for adolescents. With as little as a 30-minute later start, they may be less anxious and moody and more emotionally regulated. With as little as a 30-minute later start, students may improve their cognitive functioning and their attention and alertness while driving, resulting in fewer accidents. With as little as a 30-minute later start, students may have better memory, behavior control, executive functioning, and performance in school, not to mention a better quality of life.

The scientific evidence now available to us suggests that it is impossible for an adolescent to fall asleep much before 11:00 p.m. Science tells us that adolescents are biologically programmed to wake at 8 a.m. or later, which conflicts with later school start times. As a result, we now require Lexington High School students to wake for the day and function during the “circadian nadir,” or their lowest level of alertness during a 24-hour day. I do not know how in good conscience we look past this fact when a feasible alternative solution exists.

As we consider a later school start, we are responding to the American Academy of Pediatrics’ adolescent health imperative, which has been given to educational policy makers and leaders throughout the nation. According to the AAP, “The quest to reduce the high cost of sleep loss in adolescents is not only an important public health issue but one of paramount importance to educators, pediatric health care providers, and advocates for adolescent health. Although many changes over the course of adolescence can affect the quality and quantity of sleep, one of the most salient and, arguably, most malleable is that of school start times.”

A number of studies have demonstrated that early start times impede adolescents’ ability to get a sufficient amount of sleep. In one study of 18,000 students who experienced a change in start times (from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m.), researchers found that students’ bedtimes after the change were similar; in fact, they gained nearly one additional hour of sleep on school nights during the year of implementation (Wahlstrom et al, 1997).

Naturally, there are no guarantees that we will see such positive outcomes because there are variables that are not necessarily within the school system’s control. To a certain extent, it is the students and families who choose how much time they spend on their studies, how often they participate in private lessons, extra-curricular activities, after-school jobs, and technology use. Researchers stress the importance of continued education and community engagement concerning the need for parents to work with schools to balance the demands, indicating that such an approach may increase the likelihood of success should a later start be implemented. While we cannot influence every decision for students and families, education in Lexington is highly valued, which

widens our sphere of influence. By moving to a later school start we may not completely eradicate stress or adolescent sleep deprivation, but that does not mean we will ever stop trying.

While I am confident that we could be ready for a later school start in the fall of 2019, there are a number of implementation challenges that warrant more time. I also believe it would be beneficial for the school community to have time to grow accustomed to the idea.

Therefore, I recommend the following motion:

To implement a later school start for the 2020 - 2021 school year and include the following changes: (1) adjust Lexington High School start times by 45 minutes to an 8:30 a.m. start; (2) decrease the length of the middle school day by 10 minutes, making it a 6 hour and 40 minute day consistent with Lexington High School; (3) adjust elementary school start times by 15 minutes, moving from an 8:45 to 9:00 a.m. school start; and (4) approve the budgetary increase needed to maintain the 8:15 a.m. drop-off time for elementary parents.

Next Steps

Assuming a motion is passed to move to implement a later school start, I propose the following:

1. Superintendent appoints a Project Manager to oversee the effective implementation of a later school start.
2. Superintendent and administrative team identify the logistical considerations that need to be addressed to ensure the effective implementation of a later school start and develop a Later Start Implementation Timeline.
3. Superintendent works with Director of Research and Planning, to design a study to examine the effectiveness of a later school start. Publicly communicating the outcomes of the study would be added to the Later Start Implementation Timeline.

Reference Materials: American Pediatrics Association Policy Statement; Superintendent's 10-25-2018 Letter; and Later Start Resolution of the Lexington School Committee, August, 2018.

II. Equity Audit in the Lexington Public Schools

On September 25, 2018 the Lexington Administrators Council presented a draft position paper called, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Our Call to Action." In the draft report, we indicated our intention to act on the advice of community members to engage an outside partner in a district-wide equity audit. While we are still in the process of analyzing feedback from our community reviewers and constituents, early analysis

indicates that the equity audit has been well-received. We are currently in the process of selecting an equity audit partner, and we anticipate having a consultant on board and ready to work with our Joint Council to collect preliminary data at our December 12, 2018 meeting.

Reference Materials: Possible Equity Audit Partners.