

# Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS)

## Community Engagement: Changing School Start and Dismissal Times

### ASSESSMENT (RESEARCH)

Over the last 12 years, the Fairfax County School Board has considered the controversial idea of giving adolescents more time to sleep by shifting high school starting times to a later schedule. Several extensive studies were undertaken by staff members and consultants that examined both sides of the issue and produced varying recommendations. In August 2007, the School Board appointed a 68-member Transportation Task Force to examine the school transportation system for inefficiencies and to recommend a bell schedule to achieve later start times for high schoolers.

The Transportation Task Force delivered its report in March 2008, which recommended a three-tiered approach to the bell schedule: elementary schools would go first, high schools second, and middle schools third. It was then up to the staff to create a practical bell schedule for minimal costs based on this recommendation. In November 2008, the Department of Transportation produced a no-cost bell schedule with specific times, and the School Board—in conjunction with the Department of Communications and Community Outreach—decided to engage the community in a discussion on the proposed changes.

Politically, this was an issue that had become contentious for the 12-member School Board, which was essentially split on its support for such a change. Added to that was the energized FCPS Transportation Task Force and a long-time parent activist group that were strongly pushing for the change. Once specific times emerged from the staff recommendation, other special interest groups—including sports clubs and sponsors of extracurricular activities—started opposition campaigns to fight the change, fearing later dismissal times would eliminate or reduce time for sports practice and other activities. The School Board became interested in initiating conversations in the community about issues that families might face—such as day care arrangements, work schedules, traffic, etc.—if such a general change were implemented. The goal of this project was to push beyond the loud voices and engage families, school district employees, students, and community and business members in the discussion and decision whether later high school start and dismissal times, and the accompanying changes, were acceptable.

### PLANNING

The planning involved two phases. It was particularly important to hear the concerns of the school system's "invisible" parents—those who work two jobs, don't speak English well, or are not typically active in school policies.

For Phase One, the School Board decided to hold a series of **study circle discussions** with parents who were carefully selected by parent liaisons at targeted schools so that they didn't represent any of the special interest groups. Five study circle groups met for a total of 11 meetings held June 16-26, 2008. A total of 41 parents attended one or more of the study circle meetings. Four of the study circles had non-English speakers (Korean and Spanish). Major areas of agreement and concern were identified. Results of the study circles were shared with the School Board so it could begin to examine the potential consequences of such a change.

Phase Two was designed to cast a much wider net for discussion and targeted all families, school district employees, students in grades 6-12, and community and business members. This phase involved a quantitative approach with an **online survey** for each of the targeted audiences, and a qualitative approach with **open community dialogues**.

Measurable objectives were developed for Phase Two:

- By February 28, 2009, 15 percent of targeted audiences (families, school district employees, and students) will complete an online survey to indicate their support for change.
- By February 28, 2009, 1,050 members of targeted audiences will participate in seven qualitative community dialogues to share pros and cons of such a change (average 150 at each meeting).
- By March 9, 2009, the School Board will receive results from the survey and dialogues to aid in its decision.

Tactics:

- With the help of the FCPS Department of Accountability, four surveys were developed that targeted each audience: parents, students in grades 6-12, school district employees, and community and business members.
- The surveys were pretested with target audiences at two different schools to fine-tune the questions.
- In addition to English, surveys were translated into Spanish and Korean for parents, and all were posted online February 9-28, 2009.

- Seven schools were identified as community dialogue locations that represented geographical and population diversity. The dialogues were held February 24-26, 2009.
- Facilitators were selected to run the overall community dialogues, interpreters ensured non-English speakers were able to dialogue in their same language, School Board members selected dialogues to attend, transportation staff members attended to answer technical questions on bell schedules and bus runs, and extra staff members were on hand to help.
- Software was developed for attendees to sign in at laptops and submit optional e-mail addresses, which automatically created a database of stakeholders to receive updates on the issue.
- Facilitator script and discussion questions were developed to ensure consistent feedback was being gathered. A template was also developed to record the answers.
- Handout materials for table discussions were carefully selected to ensure no bias.
- A six-minute video was written and produced to play at each dialogue to deliver consistent background information on the issue.

## COMMUNICATION

Participation in the seven community dialogues and in the online survey was promoted in many ways including:

- E-mail alerts sent to parents, students, and community members through FCPS' Keep in Touch (KIT) notification system in English, Spanish, and Korean.
- Press releases to all local media outlets.
- School and PTA newsletters and, also, Newswire, an FCPS web-based service that provides stories for school and department newsletter editors.
- Telephone messages for Korean parents.
- Oral and written communications for principals to share with staff members, students, and families.
- Student newspaper articles.
- Superintendent interview on the Kojo Nnamdi show, carried by the local National Public Radio affiliate WAMU, and appearances on local TV stations NewsChannel 8 and WUSA-TV.
- An all-employee e-mail message from the Superintendent.
- Stories in the employee newsletter, *Supergram*.
- A notice on the home pages of the FCPS Internet and intranet sites.
- A special web page devoted to the bell schedule proposal that served as a clearinghouse of updated information.
- Invitation fliers in English, Spanish, and Korean that were distributed to all principals, parent liaisons and PTA presidents for sharing with families and posted online.
- Stories on FCPS' cable television channel, Red Apple 21, which were also video streamed and posted online.

One week after the survey and community dialogues were completed, results were posted online and sent out by e-mail to dialogue participants who had opted to receive updates and to Keep in Touch subscribers. A follow-up story on Red Apple 21 was aired that featured the Superintendent discussing the results and next steps.

## EVALUATION

- Stories about the proposed change, online survey, and community dialogues were picked up by **all the major Fairfax County and Washington, D.C., area newspapers, and television stations and a majority of radio stations**. Some stories were also picked up by media outlets across the country, as far away as Miami and Los Angeles.
- The online survey was completed by **94,129** respondents: 29,286 students, or 36 percent; 49,583 parents, or 30 percent; 12,925 school district employees, or 58 percent; plus 2,335 community and business members (universe unknown). Parent respondents also included 621 in Spanish and 368 in Korean. All four groups indicated strong opposition to changing school start times.
- A total of **1,592** parents, staff members, students, and community and business members participated in the seven community dialogues; attendance ranged from 162 to 313 at each dialogue, with an average of 227 participants. In addition to identifying pros and cons of the change to better inform the School Board, the participants indicated a strong opposition to change the bell schedule and indicated it would be difficult or very difficult to do so if the School Board moved forward.
- School Board members received at least **3,000** e-mails on the issue (conservative estimate).
- The School Board received a complete analysis of survey and dialogue results on March 9, 2009, in time for its vote on March 19, 2009, on the decision to change school start times.
- Decision Impact: The School Board carefully considered the results from the survey and dialogues and voted 10-2 to **reject the proposed bell schedule** and confirm the existing structure of bus transportation and scheduling.