



Shrewsbury Public Schools

Sleep Health Advisory Committee

Report from the Practices in Other Districts Task Group

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Several factors should be considered when looking at sleep health and a possible change to school start times. One of these factors is the practices in neighboring school districts. The Practices in Other Districts Task Force, a sub-committee of the Sleep Health Advisory Committee, examined practices in several school districts, some of which have recently changed start times to include a later start time for their high schools, others of which considered a change but did not move forward with adjusted times, and a small sample of districts where a change was made and then reversed. This report will provide details regarding the experiences in those districts as reported by their administrators, school staff, and school committee members.

Stakeholder feedback was gathered through a brief Google form survey, phone conversations, and follow-up emails. Districts included in our inquiry were: Ashland, Franklin, Grafton, Marlborough, Newton, Northborough/Southborough, and Westborough, Massachusetts; Barrington and Newport, Rhode Island; Hamden and Norwalk, Connecticut. 29 stakeholders responded to the survey. Of the 29 stakeholders, 18 (62.1%) were administrators, six (20.7%) were school committee members, and five (17.2%) were educators/staff members. In regard to their level, four (13.8%) represented elementary, four (13.8%) represented middle school, ten (34.5%) represented high school, ten (34.5%) represented the district level, and one (3.4%) represented “other”.

The table below reflects elementary, middle and high school start times before and after changes that were made in those districts.

District	Elementary start time before changes	Middle School start time before changes	High School start time before changes		Elementary start time after changes	Middle School start time after changes	High School start time after changes
Ashland, MA	8:45	7:40	7:40		Gr K-2 9:00 Gr 3-5 7:40	8:20	8:20
Franklin, MA	8:30	7:20	7:35		No change	No change	No change
Grafton, MA	7:55 and 8:25	7:25	7:25		No change	No change	No change
Lexington, MA	8:30	8:00	7:45		9:00	8:00	8:30
Marlborough, MA	8:50	8:00	7:20		9:00	8:00	8:00
Newton, MA	8:20	8:00-8:30	7:40		8:10	7:50-8:20	9:00
Northborough/ Southborough, MA	8:00-8:50	7:50	7:20		8:30-9:10	7:45	8:00
Westborough, MA	8:50	7:30	7:30		8:50	8:10	8:10
Barrington, RI	8:40	7:50	7:40		7:45	8:40	8:30
Newport, RI	8:30	8:00	7:30		reverted	reverted	reverted
Hamden, CT	9:00	8:30	8:00		No change	No change	No change
Norwalk, CT	8:15-9:00	8:15	7:30		reverted	reverted	reverted

Districts That Changed School Start Times

Survey responses were reviewed and analyzed for emerging themes across respondents. 19 (65.5%) respondents were from the following districts that recently changed start times: Westborough, Northborough and Southborough, Marlborough, Newton, Ashland, and Barrington, R.I.

The School Committee members for districts that changed the school start times to allow high school students to start later overwhelmingly indicated that the change was a positive one and

that they had “no regrets” about making the change. It was reported that students appeared to be “doing better” and the change fit with the district’s focus on social and emotional learning.

The School Committee respondents indicated that busing costs were the initial issue with regard to adjusting start times. Multiple school districts reported working with their busing vendors to come up with creative solutions to make the start time change work.

School committee members also reported initial community resistance to change, but after a year with the new schedule people grew accustomed to it and things “settled down.”

The negative feedback received from School Committee members in districts that made a start time change included declines in after school help support as students need to get to jobs and/or sports practices, bus routes experiencing more traffic with later dismissal times, and elementary students with later start times having difficulty attending to learning later in the day.

Administrators from districts that changed school start times noted positive changes to students' well being. Specifically, administrators' responses stated that students exhibited less stress, seemed better rested, and were more engaged in their learning. Similarly, educators reported that students were more awake and alert. Administrators also expressed that the change was “mostly positive” and that the frequency of tardies decreased at the high school level.

Administrators reported stakeholder complaints in regard to the late end time for high school, especially in relation to how the later end time impacted student work schedules and opportunities, as well as a shift in the athletics schedule. Moreover, due to the change in start times, administrators noted an increase in athlete dismissals and a reduction in participation in after school activities. Administrators commented on other challenges about transportation, including an increase in cost, an increase in discipline issues because of more students riding the bus, and less bus availability for extracurricular activities.

Hence, positive outcomes due to a change in start time included:

- Student outcomes related to mental health and well being
- Students were reported to better rested, more engaged, and alert

Whereas negative outcomes due to a change in start time included:

- Conflicts with logistics affecting after school activities
- Challenges related to transportation

Seven respondents of the initial survey responded to a follow up inquiry about how the change was received by both students and families. The majority of respondents noted that the change was received well by parents and students, emphasizing the importance of engaging in clear communication with stakeholders during the change process. Respondents also reported that students who were initially against changing the start time have since positively adjusted to the change. Respondents commented on several issues that resulted in negative reactions from

parents and students, including the provision of both before and after school care, the impact of after school jobs, especially for families in need of socioeconomic support, and the disruption of after school extracurricular activities and athletics.

Districts that adopted the change reported the importance of open communication with stakeholders throughout the planning process and the use of multi-means to both acquire and share information. Communication included the following:

- Stakeholders communication at the district level via the superintendent, school committee, and focus groups
- Stakeholder communication at the individual building level through building administrators
- Stakeholder feedback and input through surveys and public forums
- Sharing of information through presentations and district social media

Districts That Researched but Did Not Adopt School Start Time Change

Survey responses were also reviewed and analyzed for emerging themes for districts that considered a change but did not move forward. 10 (34.5%) respondents were from the following districts that considered a change but did not move forward: Grafton, Franklin, and Hamden, CT.

With regard to school districts that did not make a change to school start times, School Committee members reported that childcare and transportation costs were the main issues why a change was not made. It was noted that many parents in the community were against adjusting the high school start time because they relied on their older children to be home first to care for younger siblings. It was ultimately decided that changing the start times was not feasible because of cost and the impact on families.

Administrator and educator responses from districts that considered changing school start times but did not adopt the change noted similar reasons in regard to transportation costs and the financial impact of families. Specifically, administrators and educators noted that transportation logistics would have required additional buses, resulting in a significant increase in transportation costs, which was not feasible for their district. Additionally, administrators and educators reported that both the potential early start time for elementary and late end time for high school would negatively impact families due to increased childcare costs. Lastly, administrators also reported that a change was not adopted because of conflicts with high school athletics and extracurricular activities.

Thus, the three common themes for not adopting the change were the following:

- Busing costs and logistics
- Financial impact on families
- Impact on athletics and extracurricular activities

Districts That Changed but Reverted Back

Newport, R.I. and Norwalk CT initially changed school start times and have since reverted back. Information from both districts was obtained through direct communication with members of their district team.

With regard to a district that made a change to start times and reverted back, a School Committee member with the Newport, R.I. district shared that parents were unhappy when start times were changed because their work schedules were impacted by later openings and later dismissals. Additionally, the later start times interfered with sports, students' jobs, and students were arriving home quite late. Additionally, communication of the change in start times was noted to be an issue. Most communication concerning the start time change was via email, which many parents in the district did not have. The district reported having a sizable Spanish speaking population which felt out of the loop with regard to the start time change. Furthermore, it was reported that many of the high school students did not support the change.

The direct feedback and published documents from the Norwalk school district show some distinct similarities, parallels and differences that need to be understood as part of the larger start time analysis that Shrewsbury is undertaking.

Similarities:

- Community stakeholder involvement through surveys, focus groups and other efforts to elicit as much feedback as possible prior to a final decision¹
- Logistical reviews to address concerns with transportation, athletics and other co-curricular activities
 - A 2020 traffic survey was to be completed by the Norwalk district which was shelved due to the pandemic.

Differences:

- Lack of diversity within the committee directly advising the Norwalk Superintendent
 - Committee was made up entirely of school faculty or administration; no outside influences were part of the direct advisory group
- Length of time between the start of the analysis and the implementation of Norwalk's plan
 - The Norwalk committee started meeting in the Fall of 2018 and presented their decision in June of 2019. The recommendation was to implement this plan in the Fall of 2020 - a full year **after** the decision was made to move forward
 - This ensured that teams had time to review and plan appropriately for the start of the Fall 2020 term.

¹ [Norwalk Start Time Committee Presentation](#) (begins on page 56)

- This allowed the athletic director to communicate and plan an appropriate calendar based on the adjusted start time
 - Shrewsbury is looking at doing the same level of effort in a ~6 month window of time

Parallels:

- Focus on the mental health and well-being of high school students was a major factor in the decision making of the Superintendents committee
- Concerns included transportation and logistics, impacts to staff and scheduling of extra-curricular activities

Additional Context:

Once the 2020-2021 school year started and the start times had been implemented, a follow-on survey was provided to students and families at the 4 impacted high schools (Norwalk High, Brien McMahon, P-Tech and CGS). This constitutes approximately 4,000 students of the 12,000 total in the district. The returns of the survey are significant in that there were 3,139 responses (79%) to the survey.

- **62%** of the student responses wanted a **return** to the 7:30 AM start time
- **67%** of the families surveyed were in favor of a return to the 7:30 AM start time for high school students

Identified factors which led to the start time reversal:²

- Faculty unhappiness with the new schedule
- Impacts to instructional time due to transportation issues
- Faculty/staff increase in daily commute time, affecting family time and personal obligations
- Students reported waking at the same time as they had before the change was implemented due to traffic issues and getting to school on time

Additional Thoughts:

- The pandemic interfered with the implementation of the start time change
 - Prevented a traffic pattern analysis which was to be completed in 2020 that may have provided better insight into the traffic patterns that affected the implementation of start time change
- Norwalk Public School district is significantly larger than Shrewsbury. Norwalk School district includes 4 high schools, 4 middle schools and 13 elementary schools with total enrollment at approximately 12,000 students
- Norwalk also has geographic restrictions that Shrewsbury does not have to deal with (Long Island Sound) which does hamper the logistic efforts of the district.

² [Nancy on Norwalk - A look at the decision to reverse NPS start time](#)

Using Norwalk as a measuring stick, the critical components to a successful start time change:

- Stakeholder buy in, specifically the staff and faculty of SPS and students who are most affected by this change
- Transportation and logistics reviews to ensure no unforeseen unintended or negative outcomes
- Communication with the entire Shrewsbury district, across multiple mediums and platforms, is absolutely necessary

Conclusion

Overall the school districts that made a change to school start times reported that the change was a positive one. The districts reported that there was an adjustment period for the community, however, once the students, educators, and families became accustomed to the new start times, the change was viewed favorably. Educators in districts that made a change to high school start times were generally supportive of the change as high school students are more rested, less stressed, and more engaged. Busing costs and impacts on childcare were the main factors that prevented districts from making a change. The districts that did change start times worked with their busing vendors to come up with solutions to make constructive changes to busing schedules that were affordable. Districts that made a change also reported that stakeholder involvement in various forums concerning the study of the start time issue and effective communication of the change to the start time was key to the successful implementation of start time adjustments.