

WESTON BOARD OF EDUCATION

Weston, CT

Meeting Date: December 16, 2019

Information Only

Action Requested

Agenda Item Subject: School Start/End Time Task Force Update

Submitted by: William McKersie

Document Summary/Purpose and/or Recommended Action:

Dr. William McKersie will update the Board of Education on the work of the School Start/End Time Task Force. Attached is a document compiling as of December 16, 2019 all current updates on the Task Force. These four different updates were shared with the Board of Education between October 11 and December 6, but not as a formal part of a BOE Meeting Agenda. Three of the updates were included in Super Notes (October 11, 2019, November 15, 2019 and December 6, 2019). The other update was in the form of the introduction to the School Start/End Time Options Survey, which was distributed to WPS families and staff, as well as 6th-12th grade students, on December 10, 2019.

Dr. McKersie will be joined by Dr. Craw, Ms. Wolak and Ms. Kaddis in his update to the BOE on Monday, December 16, 2019.

For more Board of Education Meeting and Committee Meeting Information, visit:
<https://meeting.cabe.org/public/Agency.aspx?PublicAgencyID=47&AgencyTypeID=1>

School Start/End Time Task Force Update¹

William S. McKersie, Ph.D., Superintendent

December 16, 2019

I. Background

The Weston Public Schools (WPS) has been considering the idea of changing school start/end times for the past several years. In November 2017, the Board of Education (BOE) received a comprehensive statement on the pros and cons of changing start/end times. (Document available at this link: [11-14-17 School Start/End Times Document.](#)) In Spring 2019, comprehensive surveys were conducted of WPS parents and employees, which indicted support for continued exploration of changes to start/end times. (The full report on the survey is available at this link: [WPS Spring 2019 School start/end times Survey.](#))

Most recently, in September 2019, the BOE was presented with the work plan for the School Start/End Time Task Force, an advisory body to the Superintendent established to help develop a recommendation on changing the district's bell schedules. The Task Force work plan spells out organizational details (membership, resource groups, guidelines and schedule) and an analytical framework (guiding questions, analytical priorities, research and information base). The September 2019 memorandum is available at this link: [9-23-19 School Start/End Time Task Force Work Plan.](#)

The Task Force members:

- Bill McKersie, Superintendent
- Ken Craw, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction
- Phil Cross, Director of Finance & Operations
- Laura Kaddis, Principal, Hurlbutt Elementary School (Lower Schools Perspective)
- Lisa Wolak, Principal, Weston High School (Upper Schools Perspective)
- Mark Berkowitz, Athletic Director
- Erin Merrifield, First Grade Teacher, WTA Representative for Lower Schools Perspective
- Stacy Slater, WHS School Psychologist, WTA Representative for Upper Schools Perspective
- Kim Spangler, Para educator, AFSCME Representative
- Kristen Ancker, PTO Representative for Lower Schools Perspective
- Jenny Walsh, PTO Representative for Upper Schools Perspective

¹ All of the content for this update is gathered from four different updates between October 11 and December 6. Three of the updates were included in Super Notes (October 11, 2019, November 15, 2019 and December 6, 2019). The other update was in the form of the introduction to the School Start/End Time Options Survey, which was distributed to WPS families and staff, as well as 6th-12th grade students, on December 10, 2019.

- Joe Parciasepe, Program Director for Weston Parks & Recreation, Town of Weston Representative

II. Leading School Start/End Times Options

Working diligently since late September, the SS/ET Task Force has helped the Superintendent identify a series of leading options for school start/end times. Drawing on research and experiences in other districts and communities, the leading options balance three broad considerations:

1. Findings from medical research on the optimal school start time for adolescents -- Research suggests starting middle and high schools as late as 9:00-9:30 a.m. However, districts dedicated to later start/end times have typically focused on start times ranging from 8:00 a.m. - 8:30 a.m. Start times later than 8:30 a.m. have usually been ruled out due to negative consequences for instructional time, co-curricular and after-school programming, non-school youth programming, and family evening schedules.
2. Educational structural requirements and needs -- The daily bell schedule substantially shapes the ability to provide robust curricular and co-curricular programs. Structural elements linked to bell schedules include academic schedules and instructional time, after-school program schedules and time, district transportation effectiveness and efficiency, town and regional traffic effectiveness and efficiency, and school and district financial resources.
3. Family schedules and needs -- Families are dependent for their own healthy functioning and the management of job obligations on the daily timing of school, including before-school options, the formal school day, and after-school programs.

The Superintendent has concluded, with confirmation from the Task Force, that a major non-negotiable shapes the range of school start/end times options for Weston: the WPS must retain the current two-tier school and transportation schedule, with at least 45 minutes between tiers. One tier groups the lower schools (HES and WIS) by bell schedule and busing; the other tier groups the upper schools (WMS and WHS) by bell schedule and busing.

Two factors make the two-tier structure non-negotiable: finances and traffic. In terms of finances, adding tiers, or collapsing them to shorter spacing (less than 45 minutes), would require more buses, which each cost approximately \$75,000. We know from several years of analysis (by Weston and regional experts) that our bus runs cannot be reduced below the current 45/50-minute timeframe. In terms of traffic flow, we have a significant impediment to more tightly coupled tiers. School Road is the only way to reach all schools, and there are only two access points to School Road, requiring ample time between tiers to minimize traffic congestion on

campus from cars and buses. (Other local districts and communities—namely, Norwalk and Greenwich—have adopted new start/end times with collapsed tiers and bus schedules. They have been able to handle the added financial cost—annually \$450,000 and \$1.2 million, respectively—and the dispersed locations of their schools mitigate the types of on-campus traffic problems that would result from tightly coupled tiers in Weston.)

Specific Options

The five leading options for school start/end times in the WPS are listed below in detail, including the first and last bus stops. Based on the work of the Task Force, the original four options were expanded to five (as is explained in *Section III – Task Force Updates*). The addition is Option 4 (a 30/35-minute delay from the current schedule, allowing the upper schools to start at 8:15 a.m. and the lower schools at 9:05 a.m.) The ordering of options should not be seen as a priority—instead, the ordering starts with the current schedule, moves to the “current schedule flipped” and then is followed by three options arranged from the earliest to latest start/end time for the upper schools.

Option 1 (Current Schedule) (Length of School Day = 6:45)

WMS/WHS 7:45 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. (First Pickup: 6:50 a.m.; Last Drop: 3:15 p.m.)

HES/WIS 8:30 a.m. - 3:15 p.m. (First Pickup: 7:45 a.m.; Last Drop: 4:10 p.m.)

Option 2 (Current Flipped) (Length of School Day = 6:45)

HES/WIS 7:45 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. (First Pickup: 6:50 a.m.; Last Drop: 3:15 p.m.)

WMS/WHS 8:30 a.m. - 3:15 p.m. (First Pickup: 7:45 a.m.; Last Drop: 4:10 p.m.)

Option 3 (15/20-minute delay) (Length of School Day = 6:45)

WMS/WHS 8:00 a.m. - 2:45 p.m. (First Pickup: 7:05 a.m.; Last Drop: 3:30 p.m.)

HES/WIS 8:50 a.m. - 3:35 p.m. (First Pickup: 8:05 a.m.; Last Drop: 4:30 p.m.)

Option 4 (30/35-minute delay) (Length of School Day = 6:30)

WMS/WHS 8:15 a.m. - 2:45 p.m. (First Pickup: 7:20 a.m.; Last Drop: 3:45 p.m.)

HES/WIS 9:05 a.m. - 3:35 p.m. (First Pickup: 8:20 a.m.; Last Drop: 4:30 p.m.)

Option 5 (45/50-minute delay) (Length of School Day = 6:45)

WMS/WHS 8:30 a.m. - 3:15 p.m. (First Pickup: 7:35 a.m.; Last Drop: 4:00 p.m.)

HES/WIS 9:20 a.m. - 4:05 p.m. (First Pickup: 8:35 a.m.; Last Drop: 5:00 p.m.)

III. Task Force Updates – Fall 2019

School Start/End Time Task Force Update – October 11, 2019

The School Start/End Time Task Force held its first meeting on October 10, 2019. We had nearly full turnout and immediately started productive work.

We started by reviewing a worksheet that will be the basis of our inquiry and identification of action steps. The worksheet lines up the major analytical considerations against the four current school start/end time options (listed now as Options 1, 2, 3 and 5 in the above list). Three of the current options are from the Preliminary Work Plan (September 2019), while the fourth is a more general look at the possibility of “collapsing bus routes,” which would be costlier, but has been a

solution some communities have selected. (Subsequently, this last option was dropped, due to the recognition of the “non-negotiable” discussed above.)

Task Force members agreed to come to the table with an open mind and to seek out and represent the range of perspectives on this topic. We are taking as a “powerful given” the medical research supporting later bell-schedules for adolescents. Consensus emerged quickly that we should focus our analysis on specific options to determine to what extent school start/end times may work well in Weston. The agreed aim is to spend time on action analysis and planning for Weston.

A key part of the first meeting entailed representatives dividing into like role pairings to highlight what aspects of the worksheet (aka: the major considerations) would be most important for them to address (for instance, the PTO representatives focused on how to ensure parent outreach and input; Athletics and Parks & Rec representatives focused on analyzing the impact of, and possible solutions for, later school end times on afternoon and evening athletic and recreational activities). While we agreed not to become bogged down in literature reviews, we want to keep ourselves current on the evolving topic. Thus, we also agreed to share with the full Task Force a “top article or resource” from a district or community going through the school start/end time process.

The agenda for the next meeting (October 29, 8:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m., WHS Conference Room) has been set to delve into three major topics:

- Information from SWC Districts on their school start and end times, and the impact of these schedules relative to the four options, as well as any information from these districts as to considerations for changes to bell schedules.
- Preliminary Information from Parks & Rec on the range of before and after school programs to consider as we explore changes.
- Preliminary findings from a recent Traffic Study, provided by the Weston Police Department (Captain Brodacki will present summaries of the study).

Indicative of our work approach, each of these three topics fit within the analytical priorities (on the worksheet), and will be reviewed against the four options.

We will be asking First Student this next week to begin running “dummy routes” for the first three options. We will ask them for creative thinking on the fourth option (collapsed routes), despite the obvious increases in cost. The goal would be to have preliminary information to share at a November 2019 Task Force Meeting.

In a related step, CES has agreed to host a SFCSA Superintendents Roundtable on School Start/End Times. I called for such a roundtable, my peers have agreed and Chip Dumais (CES Executive Director) stepped up to host and facilitate. This should provide a rare space for superintendents to “think regionally” on this opportunity. I did not have such a group when I was leading Greenwich through considering and committing to a change in school start/end times.

School Start & End Time Task Force Update – November 15, 2019

The School Start/End Time Task Force continues to work diligently. We met this week, keeping to our every-other week meeting schedule. The agenda at this week’s meeting followed the

critical analytical themes we are considering in examining the viability of recommending a change to bell times in Weston. The topics included:

- Parent Focus Groups – A focus group was held last week for upper school parents. It followed a structured protocol for the 15 participants (intended number) and produced valuable insights on how a set of upper school parents view the potential change. A similar focus group for lower school parents is being held the first week of December. We will review the preliminary findings and insights from the second focus group at the next Task Force Meeting. We have clear documentation of the process, insights and findings for the upper school focus group, which we also will have for the lower school focus group. All of this information will be shared when I make my final report and recommendation to the BOE.
- Athletics– Mark Berkowitz presented additional analysis on the time, transportation and schedule issues to consider with various changes to the bell schedule. He has gathered comparative information across all SWC districts on bell schedules, length of day, whether or not school start/end time changes are being considered, length of the academic day, typical times for contests, travel time from Weston to each SWC district and availability of lighting. All of Mark’s exhibits and materials will be part of the final report.
- After School Programs – Joe Parciasepe presented additional analysis of the impact of later school end times on the range of after school programs the Town and other agencies provide. Joe has charted the number of programs, their start and end times and the number of WPS staff involved. Joe’s exhibits and materials will be part of the final report.
- Transportation – Phil Cross updated us on budget implications of the various school start/end time options. At this point, the most prominent options are budget neutral, but more analysis is pending on alternative options, and the need to consider now unknown transportation costs if we are releasing students later for athletics. Phil’s exhibits and materials will be part of the final report.
- Norwalk Public Schools Decision & Report – The Norwalk Public Schools recently decided to have their two high schools start at 8:30 a.m., as of fall 2020. Dr. Steve Adamowski and Norwalk administrators, staff and parents, with consultant help, produced an extensive report as part of their recommendations. It is a good resource document for the Task Force. We took time to reflect on what aspects of the report and recommendations apply to our considerations of determining the viability of a similar change in Weston.
- SFCSA School Start/End Time Roundtable – The superintendents’ roundtable had its first meeting two weeks ago, which I reported on to the Task Force. There will be another session next week; unfortunately, I will have to miss the roundtable due to disciplinary hearings in Weston. A related addition from this is that I have been asked to be part of a “thought team” with two other superintendents to guide Hanover Research on

a new study of the impact of school start/end time changes. This will be a “quick hit, front-end” engagement.

At the Task Force’s next meeting (12.6.19), the agenda will include the following:

- **Schedule Considerations** – The Task Force has recognized that any significant bell changes will affect the overall schedule. Ken Craw, Lisa Wolak and Laura Kaddis are starting to examine scheduling implications and options. They will start to share ideas and analysis at the 12.6.19 meeting.
- **Survey Plans** – The Task Force has recognized that a focused, option-specific survey of parents, staff and upper school (middle and high school) students will be essential. We will discuss plans for such a survey on 12.6.19.
- **Student Focus Groups** – The Task Force may recommend we conduct one or more student focus groups, primarily for athletes and those who have after school activities likely to be affected by later school end times.

School Start & End Time Task Force Update – December 6, 2019

The School Start/End Time Task Force met on Friday (12.6.19), continuing its comprehensive work and every-other week meeting schedule. As explained in my last update (11.15.19), the Task Force agenda follows the critical analytical themes we are considering in examining the viability of recommending changes to school start/end times in Weston. The lead topics on Friday included the three I listed in my update in *Super Notes 11.15.19*.

- **Reconsidering School Schedules** –The Task Force has recognized that any significant bell changes will affect the overall schedule. Ken Craw, Lisa Wolak and Laura Kaddis have been examining scheduling implications and options for preK-12. On Friday, they presented the Task Force with a robust set of findings and several new options to consider for bell schedules. Their work seeks to balance the desire for later start times for adolescents with the critical needs of ample instructional time and flexibility for before and after-school co-curricular and non-school programming. A preferred option from their analysis will be added to the set of leading school start/end time options put forth for review and comment via surveys, forums, discussions with the BOE and ultimately decision-making. (This preferred option is Option #4 in the above list of leading school start/end time options.)
- **Survey Plans** – The Task Force has recognized that a focused, option-specific survey of parents, staff and upper school students (middle and high school) will be essential. A draft of the survey instrument was reviewed on Friday, following testing of it by Task Force members and central office staff ahead of the meeting. Using the Survey Monkey platform, it is a lean survey, taking roughly seven minutes to complete. Task Force members also reviewed the cover memorandum that will go with the survey. The survey will be sent to all parents and staff this week, as well as to all middle and high school students. We will push to have responses completed in the remaining two weeks ahead of Winter Vacation. The survey “is not a vote,” but it will give the Task Force insights

on how to organize the final phase of its work and will be an important set of information for any recommendations and BOE deliberations and decisions.

- Parent Focus Groups – A second focus group was held this past week for lower school parents. It followed the same structured protocol that had been used for the first focus group for upper school parents. The focus group had to be delayed one day due to Monday’s snow storm, resulting in a drop in participation from the intended 15 parents to six parents. Nevertheless, the focus group produced good feedback and information on how a diverse set of lower school parents view the possibility of changing school start/end times. Each of the focus groups has reviewed the leading options being considered, to ensure that discussions and feedback are grounded in real possibilities. The PTO leaders organizing the focus groups agreed that additional sessions may be necessary after the survey is released (we anticipate it will spark greater attention to the issue, and will give ideas for questions and topics that could be probed in follow-up focus groups). Repeating what I emphasized in my last update, the process, insights and findings for both focus groups will be shared when I make my final report and recommendation to the BOE.

- Staff Focus Groups – Teacher leader members of the Task Force shared their plans for conducting focus groups for teachers in each of the four buildings. They plan to have the focus groups completed by early January 2020. They will follow the same format as was used for the parent focus groups.

- BOE Reporting – I shared with the Task Force plans to provide an update to the BOE on the work of the Task Force at the December 16, 2019 BOE Meeting. They agreed that the update should be part of the formal agenda, so that it is in the public record as a listed agenda item. They know that I have been providing updates as part of these *Super Notes*, as well as the Superintendent’s Report near the end of each BOE Meeting. We discussed a new schedule for bringing a recommendation to the BOE. It would be as follows:
 - December 2019 and January 2020 BOE Meetings – Updates on the work of the Task Force in relevant BOE Committees and Full Board Meetings
 - February 2020 BOE Meeting – Recommendation on School Start/End Times for WPS, effective Fall 2020
 - March 2020 and April 2020 BOE Meetings – BOE Deliberations in relevant BOE Committees and Full Board Meetings
 - April 2020 Meeting – BOE Vote on School Start/End Times for WPS, effective Fall 2020

I will discuss the rationale for this schedule when I provide an update at the December 16, 2019 BOE Meeting.

- Regional Update – I provided the Task Force new information on the status of school start/end time in area districts and at the state level. The information was drawn from the annual CES Legislator Breakfast, which was held on Friday, December 6 (coincidentally right before the Task Force meeting), as well as from separate outreach to area districts.

Among multiple topics discussed at the CES breakfast (see Item #3 below), school start/end times was raised near the end of the session. The discussion underscored the ambivalence legislators, school board leaders and administrators feel about the issue. Nobody appears to doubt the medical research, but nearly all are concerned about the structural and financial barriers to making viable changes to school schedules. Several of the legislators, nevertheless, advised us that the issue will be a topic in the upcoming “short session” in Hartford. How it will conclude as law or policy is not clear, with a couple of the legislators indicating they would support the issue, but not as a mandate.

Among the attendees, only one other district besides Weston indicated that there is active work on the topic with potential changes in the offing for the next school year. (I told the group that Weston is working on the issue, but with no indication at this point as to how it will be resolved.) New Canaan is the other district actively working on a change. A final decision has not been made in New Canaan, but the emerging plan, which is public, would be as follows: 7:45 a.m. start for the elementary schools (with bus pick up no earlier than 7:06 a.m. and most at 7:20 a.m.); 8:30 a.m. for the high school; 8:35 a.m. for 7-8th grades (middle school), and 9:15 a.m. for 5-6th grades (middle school). I will update the BOE on December 16 with more details on the New Canaan approach and status.

The next Task Force meeting is Monday, December 16.