



# Watertown Public Schools

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October 23, 2017

To: The Watertown School Committee  
From: Deanne Galdston, Superintendent  
RE: School Start Time Forum and Survey Feedback

The Watertown Public Schools' mission is to provide all of our students with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes. One way to promote learning and improve outcomes for students is to ensure that school-age children get enough sleep before coming to school. For many adolescents, getting sufficient sleep is challenging for a variety of reasons which include homework, extracurricular activities, technology, and generally busy lives. But it isn't just the activities that keep teenagers awake. Their natural sleep cycles are different than younger children and adults, which makes going to bed early a tremendous challenge. In order to maximize learning for students and to promote health and wellness for our teenagers, WPS must consider all options that would promote improved health and academic outcomes.

Over the past several years, research has mounted about the benefits of later start times for adolescents. In 2014, after considering the research regarding the impact of school start times on the overall health and wellness of American youth, the American Academy of Pediatrics published the following policy statement regarding school start times:

The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes insufficient sleep in adolescents as an important public health issue that significantly affects the health and safety, as well as the academic success, of our nation's middle and high school students. Although a number of factors, including biological changes in sleep associated with puberty, lifestyle choices, and academic demands, negatively affect middle and high school students' ability to obtain sufficient sleep, the evidence strongly implicates earlier school start times (ie, before 8:30 AM) as a key modifiable contributor to insufficient sleep, as well as circadian rhythm disruption, in this population. Furthermore, a substantial body of research has now demonstrated that delaying school start times is an effective countermeasure to chronic sleep loss and has a wide range of potential benefits to students with regard to physical and mental health, safety, and academic achievement. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly supports the efforts of school Districts to optimize sleep in students and urges high schools and middle schools to aim for start times that allow students the

opportunity to achieve optimal levels of sleep (8.5–9.5 hours) and to improve physical (eg, reduced obesity risk) and mental (eg, lower rates of depression) health, safety (eg, drowsy driving crashes), academic performance, and quality of life.

The available research includes quantitative and qualitative studies, along with longitudinal studies and meta-analysis reports. Much of the research highlights the benefits of later school start times, which moved the conversation in Watertown forward.

During the 2015-2016 School Year, the Watertown Wellness Committee-- comprised of community members, wellness professionals, educators, administrators, parents, and students-- conducted a review of the relevant research regarding school start times, administered a survey, and made a recommendation to the School Committee to consider moving start times for secondary students in Watertown ([see the following presentation from the Watertown Wellness Committee](#)). Subsequently, a School Start Time Task Force was formed to determine the feasibility of changing start times in Watertown and to propose potential solutions for changing start times, beginning in the fall of 2018.

As outlined in its report, The School Start Time Implementation Task Force unanimously recommended that establishing healthy school start times would be beneficial for Watertown students and should be implemented ([see the following report- Implementation Task Force Report](#)). The Task Force proposed two scenarios. In both, high school and middle school start times are proposed to be at 8:30 a.m., consistent with the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychological Association guidelines. Middle school would end at 3:00, with high school ending at 3:05. In Scenario 1, all elementary schools would start at 8:15 and end at 2:30. In Scenario 2, all elementary schools would start at 7:50 and end at 2:05.

The School Start Time Implementation Task Force recognized that changing start times would impact the school community in terms of logistics, space, time, and convenience. They believed, however, that the potential benefits to our students' well-being outweigh the challenges. According to the report of the Task Force, they "encourage the school committee to adopt one of the two options proposed, take into account the possible concerns and opportunities outlined in the document, and work to partner with stakeholders and inform and educate the community throughout the implementation process." Based upon the work of the Wellness Committee and the School Start Time Task Force, the School Committee requested at its August meeting that the School Department provide information to the larger community and gather their feedback about this proposal.

### **Community Forums and Survey Results**

Four Community Forums were held at the end of September, two in the morning and two in the evening. At each of the Community Forums, at least one School Committee member attended, along with members of the School Start Time Implementation Task Force. Parents from various levels attended the community forums, providing feedback on the two scenarios and later start times for secondary students. The forum provided attendees with background on the impetus for studying later start times by both the Wellness Committee and the Implementation Task Force along with the potential benefits and implications of the two proposals presented. People in attendance were given the opportunity to provide both written and spoken feedback, with their responses being collected. Additionally, the

superintendent answered any questions that the attendees had. The feedback that was gathered has been provided to the School Committee.

Faculty forums were held on three dates, one at the high school in the afternoon, one in the middle school in the afternoon and one in the morning at the middle school. During the faculty forums, several concerns were raised regarding changing the middle school and high school start times. Faculty members in attendance raised concerns about changing start times, especially at the middle school level. They expressed that they were concerned about students who are dropped off early to school, often as early as 7:00 and that the change may be difficult for Watertown families that may have early morning work obligations. Several of our staff members currently commute more than 30 minutes to work as the cost of housing in Watertown and surrounding communities is prohibitively expensive, which may lead to staff turnover. Staff also questioned whether we have sufficient information to assert that this is the best decision for Watertown.

Community members were also given the opportunity to provide feedback via an online form. At the close of the survey on October 16, 260 forms had been received. Based upon people's responses, 32% responded favorably to an 8:15 start time for elementary, 9% for a 7:50 start time for elementary, 21% for later times for secondary schools without reference to elementary school start time. The total of favorable responses to changing start times was approximately 61%. 23% of respondents expressed that they were not in favor of changing start times with 11% not providing a clear indication of their opinions or provided feedback on both sides of the questions.

### **Impact on Programming:**

If the School Committee were to adopt later start times for the middle and high school, the District will have to respond to the potential impact on programs and activities in the District including: before school and extended day programs, middle school afterschool programs, breakfast, interscholastic athletics, instrumental music, and chorus. These changes will require the District to strategically schedule itinerant teachers, plan for reallocating before and after school staff when possible, and provide for opportunities for secondary students to have adequate supervision both before and after school. The District will need to explore options to provide short-term supervised time after school for elementary students who depend on their older siblings to care for them. As for interscholastic activities, the Middlesex League as a whole has committed to exploring options in each of the communities to start school later which should provide for more effective scheduling of games throughout the year. Watertown will also have to consider maximizing field utilization which may require expanding available fields and/or lighting more fields for practice.

### **Impact on Transportation:**

Based upon current School Committee Policy, students in grades K-5 are transported by bus if they live 1.5 miles from the Hosmer, and students in grade 6 who live 2 miles away are bused to middle school. Students who live .75-1.5 miles from the Hosmer can take the bus with an associated fee for service. Currently, that fee is a maximum of \$300 for the year, with various fee considerations based on numbers of children taking the bus in a given family or where you live in relation to the Hosmer. At this time, 276 students are taking the bus, with only 45 students riding the bus for free based on distance. Of the

remaining 231 students who take the bus, 147 students pay a fee to take the bus and 84 students have a fee waiver. All told, the revenue from the bus at this time is just shy of \$40,000.

When considering mitigating the cost of a one-tier busing option, the District can consider several options. One option would be to increase bus fees, which could potentially generate more revenue to offset the one-tier busing system. A second option would be to revisit the School Committee policy, specifically to align it to the state regulation of free transportation for students in kindergarten through grade 6 living 2 miles from their school. A third option would be to try and consolidate runs by bus stop, not by final destination. The buses would drop off first at the Hosmer and then continue on to the middle school. This may or may not impact the cost of transportation depending on the numbers of riders in any given year. If the School Committee moves forward a scenario that requires one-tier busing, the school department will immediately begin looking at options that may mitigate the cost of transportation.

The process that the District has followed to review the research regarding later school start times, to explore later start time implementation in Watertown, and to gather feedback from the community has provided the School Committee with thorough information upon which to make a decision. I look forward to discussing the various scenarios for starting our middle school and high school at 8:30 a.m. and answering question that you may have about the feedback that we received over the past several weeks at the next School Committee meeting.