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Frederick County to review school start times

By Erin Cunningham

Staff Writer Jan 17, 2013

It's not uncommon to see sleepy-eyed high-school students take those last needed sips from a cup of coffee as they walk into school every morning, parent M.C. Keegan-Ayer said.

Drowsy students are commonplace, especially in the county's high schools, which begin classes at 7:30 a.m., she said. "They are all getting out of their cars and finishing that last cup of Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks," said Keegan-Ayer of Frederick, who used to drop her three children off at Frederick High School. "This is not good." Now, Keegan-Ayer, who serves as second vice president of the PTA Council of Frederick County Inc., is supporting a more in-depth study of when the county's public schools begin and end the school day.

The Frederick County Board of Education tasked a committee Jan. 2 with examining the issue. The panel has not yet begun its work, and there is no timeline for when the study might begin, said Tracey Lucas, executive director for school administration and leadership.

Whenever the 15-member committee does begin its work, Lucas said the review will include feedback from parents, educators, staff members and students.

The current instructional day begins at 9 a.m. for elementary schools, except for charter and magnet schools, 8 a.m. for middle schools and 7:30 a.m. for high schools.

The issue of when the instructional day begins and ends in the county has been reviewed before.

High-school start times changed to 7:30 a.m. from a later time during the 2003-04 school year, and the times were discussed again in 2007. A review conducted before the change was approved in the 2003-04 school year found that the cost to change start times ranged between \$1.5 million and \$4.8 million annually depending how many additional buses and new routes were needed.

School board President Jean Smith said a review in the late 1990s found that starting high schools earlier or later did not result in a significant difference in standardized test scores.

The issue was raised again about two years ago, board member April Miller said.

Schools nationwide have pushed up starting times to 8 a.m. and later for secondary school students. And in December, Montgomery County Public Schools Superintendent Joshua P. Starr launched his own study into the issue following petitions seeking to push the start of the high school day from 7:25 a.m. to 8:15 a.m. or later. Miller said she supports another review in Frederick County and is curious to see what the implications are for transportation and after-school activities.

Having had three children who graduated from Frederick High School, the last one in 2011, Keegan-Ayer said her own children woke up at 6:30 a.m. to make it to school by 7:30 a.m. Some wake up as early as 5:30 a.m. to catch the bus, she said. "That's early for kids," Keegan-Ayer said. "I don't know of any high schooler who goes to bed at 9 p.m." Instead, to keep that schedule, Keegan-Ayer said students are using artificial stimulants, such as coffee, to stay awake during their first period of the day.

School board Vice President Joy Schaefer said research has shown that older students might benefit from sleeping in.

Susan Hannon, professor of psychology and the psychology program manager at Frederick Community College, said most research shows that youth need between eight and 10 hours of sleep each night. However, most are sleeping fewer than eight hours, which can affect brain development.

Adolescence is a peak time for brain development, Hannon said. However, that makes the brain more vulnerable to environmental effects, such as a lack of sleep, she said.

Research shows it does not matter when students get their eight to 10 hours of sleep, she said.

Having raised three teenagers, Hannon said she knows from experience it's difficult to get students to go to bed early.

Nonetheless, some educators say they are unsure whether a change would benefit students. "It could be that if you started school later, students would still be a little sleepy because if you start later, they are still going to get up right before they have to be at school," said Marlene Tarr, principal at Gov. Thomas Johnson High School in Frederick.

Tarr said she notices students are much quieter in their first class of the day, and teachers battle student drowsiness with challenging and engaging instruction to keep them focused and alert.

Starting school later also would likely not curb the number of students who are tardy each day, Tarr said.

When Thomas Johnson High opens later for parent conferences or other reasons, the same students often are late to school, she said. "I think the kids who are late to school would still be late to school," Tarr said of changing the starting time. "If you are always running late, you are always running late." Schaefer said she supported a review of start times at the middle and high school level, which could be beneficial.

But Smith said in other districts where the high-school start time has been pushed to 8 a.m. or later, resulting in a later dismissal time, there were issues with school sports. Some families who rely on older students to take care of younger children after school also had child care problems, she said. ecunningham@gazette.net