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TOP STORY

Do St. Mary's public school students start class too early?

By JACQUI ATKIELSKI jatkielski@somdnews.com Nov 10, 2017



Allen

Start times for St. Mary's public middle and high school students are an ongoing discussion for school board members, who say more problems would be caused than solved by shifting start times.

Board member Cathy Allen said in a phone call Monday that transportation costs could increase if school leaders sought to shift the school day later. Students involved in athletics or those who live farther away from their schools could also be affected, she said.

"We transport about 98 percent of our students," she said, adding that the school board doesn't "have enough buses to transport" students if the secondary students started their school day later.

The same buses will make multiple runs to different schools throughout the mornings and afternoons.

"We do the best we can with the constraints" given, Allen said.

The school board budgets more than \$17 million annually for transportation costs, out of its \$232 million operating budget.

Deborah Dennie, Leonardtown Middle School principal, said in an email Tuesday she didn't think "it is either fiscally or logistically feasible for us to accommodate such a change. We will have to think about work schedules, bus schedules, day care" and more, she said, adding that transportation would be one of the biggest issues if start times did shift.

Leonardtown High School Principal Jill Mills said in an email Tuesday there are "pros and cons for both the early and late start times."

While a later start time allows "for more sleep for teenagers who require eight to nine hours of sleep each night ... starting school later pushes after-school activities later into the evening," Mills said.

"This is a conversation that needs to include everyone with school-age students," Mills said. "What might be good for the secondary schools could possibly have a negative impact on families with children attending elementary schools. The best solution is the one that meets the needs of our community."

"It's truly a balancing act," that school staff and parents share responsibility to ensure their students' success, Allen said. "There isn't a single best answer for any of this."

Having secondary students start their school day early is reportedly a harmful practice, Kari Oakes, research and development director with Start School Later, said in a release from the national nonprofit organization that encourages "middle and high schools to follow the science and start after 8:30 a.m."

The bells for the first class ring at 8 a.m. for the three St. Mary's public high schools. Classes at the four middle schools start anywhere from 7:30 a.m. to 7:55 a.m., depending on the school.

Dennie said she doesn't have a problem with the start time "mainly because I am accustomed to it but it is convenient ... because you start early and you finish early."

She said having time after school to attend to personal errands is "what most teachers like about it ... Now I am sure if you asked the students, they would always prefer a later start time. Who doesn't like to sleep in?"

Mills said Leonardtown High School opens its doors at 7:45 a.m., which "is a good compromise. It is usually light by the time the students arrive in the morning. School ends at 2:45 p.m." and allows interscholastic athletic events to begin between 4 and 6 p.m.

"With dismissal time being earlier, it also limits the amount of time students are pulled from class in order to leave for away games," she said.

"Proponents of the status quo often blame teen sleep loss on bad parenting, yet the real problem is trying to fight Mother Nature," Oakes said in the release. "If our circadian rhythms follow a genetic clock, then there's nothing we can do that will make 5 or 6 a.m. a healthy wake time for teens."

Mills said "it is helpful if students follow a routine that promotes a healthy sleep schedule."

Allen said she enforced a consistent schedule and time away from electronics before bed to help her children get more sleep.

"I did my part so they could do theirs," she said.

Allen said "if kids are staying up until 1 or 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, they're going to have a tough time getting up at 5:30 a.m. on Monday."

The circadian rhythm may "contribute to the challenges, but it doesn't prevent them from sleeping," Allen said.

Allen said students involved in athletics could be negatively impacted by a start time shift because they would have even less time in class.

"They don't just show up 15 minutes before the game starts," she said, adding that students participating in sports should have "just as much opportunity to receive instruction."

Mills said "living in Southern Maryland requires us to have longer travel times for our athletes. Some of the schools that we play can be almost two hours away."

In addition, she said "many students rely on after-school jobs ... A later start time will impact how many hours the students can work and also push back when they arrive home in the evening."

Allen said she and other school board members don't want children to spend more than an hour on a bus going to or from school.

And if school start times were to be shifted, students may have to exit their buses and "walk home in the dark," she said.

Parents are responsible for their children while they wait for their bus, until they step onto the vehicle, Allen said, adding that parents are always encouraged to contact the school system's transportation office if they are concerned with a bus stop being in an unsafe location.

Students are required to have so many hours of "seat time" that correspond to the number of days in the academic calendar, Allen said.

With the 180 days of required school instruction, middle school students must complete 1,080 hours and high school students must complete 1,170 hours.

High school students starting their school day later "has been correlated with increased graduation rates and decreased teen car crashes, and hundreds of districts around the nation have adopted healthier start times in response to the recommendations," the Start School Later group's release states.

Organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Association of School Nurses, and the Society of Pediatric Nurses are some of the national health groups that recommend later start times for secondary students, according to the release.

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TOP STORY

Evening school is another choice for St. Mary's public school students

By JACQUI ATKIELSKI jatkielski@somdnews.com 23 hrs ago



St. Mary's public schools Administrative and Accountability Officer Mike Watson

High school students struggling with school can now take classes in the evening instead, and some teachers can pocket extra cash for their efforts, St. Mary's school board members discussed at a Wednesday meeting.

Funds initially approved for an open administrator position will now be used instead to pay stipends to teachers, counselors and administrators for additional work, said Mike Watson, public schools' administrative and accountability officer, adding that no more full-time employees will be hired on for the evening school.

Teachers and administrators are to be paid at the supplemental rate of \$26.50 an hour. Because this is not an increase in enrollment, no additional materials will be needed. While students will be encouraged to arrange transportation for the evening school, there is \$5,000 budgeted for STS bus vouchers.

Starting Monday, Nov. 27, at Fairlead Academy I in Great Mills, school staff will offer evening classes to no more than 80 students who are challenged academically by going to regular high school, Cheryl Long, supervisor of student services, said.

Some children also face responsibilities at home such as watching over younger siblings or earning money to support their households, "that make it difficult to attend" school during the day, she said.

Offering classes in the evening is "an alternative to a current pathway" to graduation, Watson said.

Classes will be offered Monday through Thursday from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Fairlead building on Great Mills Road, Long said.

While Great Mills High School students are the primary focus for the pilot classes, Leonardtown and Chopticon students will also be considered, Watson said, adding that children taking evening coursework will not be able to participate in their home school's athletics or other after-school programs "because class would be going on at the same time," he said.

Board member Mary Washington said this version of evening school has been "updated for the needs of today" by offering blended coursework that students can continue online.

"This is a chance for teachers to earn extra pay in their career field ... because most of them [already] have a second job," she said.

Watson said he plans for more than one teacher to help out with the evening school coursework, and teachers are under no obligation to take on the extra work.

Superintendent Scott Smith said this pathway "is not new, we offered a similar program all through the 1990s and the early 2000s. We moved away from it because we introduced [online] APEX learning and credit recovery," to regular daytime high school, he said.

Smith said the graduation rate at Great Mills High School, at 89 percent, "lags behind" both Chopticon and Leonardtown, both at over 95 percent.

Parents and children will meet with teachers, counselors and administrators to determine their academic needs prior to attending evening school, Long said.

They could also finish high school in three years if they "double up" on their coursework and file for early graduation, Watson said.

Classes to be scheduled include English for all four grades, algebra, some science and social studies courses, as well as a crafts class for a fine arts credit, Watson said. Students can also take classes necessary for the career research development graduation path, he said.

Watson said food will be offered through the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Board member Cathy Allen said offering classes in the evening is a chance to "do something that we have local control over."

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