
Changing School Start Times: Arlington, Virginia



30 Schools • 19,000 Students
Before: High School-7:30 am,
Middle School/Elementary School-
8:10 am, Elementary School-8:50 am
After: Middle School-7:50 am, Elementary
School-8:00 am, 8:25 am, or 9:00 am,
High School-8:15 am

Summary

Arlington Public Schools pursued a change in school start times starting in 1999. After a long and detailed decision making process, a change was implemented in September 2001, which gave high school students an extra 45 minutes of sleep. The district administration commissioned a task force which followed strict guiding principles and very thoroughly studied the change and all its related issues. As a result of their careful planning, the district transitioned smoothly to a late start for high school which was well received.

Profile

Arlington is a large, urban county of 26 square miles, just across the river from Washington, DC. The Arlington Public School system includes more than 30 schools and over 17,000 students. The district had been struggling with transportation resources for several years, and at the time of the change was operating under a 4-tier transportation program, with start times at 7:30 am (HS), 8:10 am (MS/ES), 8:50 am (ES), and 9:20 am (Alternative Schools). Arlington runs a 7-period schedule in the high school, although they considered expanding the day as part of the bell times change.

Challenge

Arlington's administration understood from the beginning that it would face many challenges to achiev-

ing later start times for their high schoolers. It addressed these challenges by forming committees to investigate each. However, there were also several parameters that arose from limited resources. Arlington's major challenge was to incorporate all of the following assumptions into a plan for change: the primary consideration should be to improve instruction and academic achievement; for safety reasons, no school should start before 7:50 am; there should not be significant disadvantage to any other group or school level; no change should significantly compromise participation in extracurriculars; and, most importantly, the number of buses required could not increase.

Champions

The Arlington School Board appoints members to a 50-member Advisory Council on Instruction, which oversees 15 instruction program committees responsible for reviewing and developing system-wide programs. In 1999 this group created a High School Start Time Committee which reviewed research and recommended to the school board that they change start times. In response, the superintendent formed an interdepartmental team to investigate the implementation of such a change. This group was responsible, along with the superintendent and school board who sponsored them, for pushing through the change.

Journey

The start:

The interdepartmental team that the superintendent put together in February 2000 was instructed to prepare for an implementation in September 2001. They started by dividing their work. Two groups were formed, the Working Group and the Implementation Group. These two groups together developed 12 scenarios of changed start times. These were then studied in depth by the two groups and their subcommittees.

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The organization:

The subcommittees under the Working Group included Research, Implementation and Public Engagement. The subcommittees under the Implementation group were Scheduling, Before and After-School Activities and Transportation. They also formed a Steering Committee to guide all of these groups. The school board gave clear direction to each of these groups, while maintaining flexibility in the method of reaching their goals. Arlington understood that it would be essential to involve as many people as possible in the process in order to secure support. Therefore, each group was focused, but open: The Research subcommittee looked not only at the research on high school students, but on the sleep needs of middle and elementary aged students as well. They were searching for factors that should be included in the determination of an optimal start time for each group. This group also interviewed individuals from other schools that had made the change to glean important information from their experiences.

The Public Engagement subcommittee's role was to inform and engage the community in the process. They wanted as much input as possible, but also wanted the stakeholders to be able to make informed decisions and opinions about the sleep needs of the students. In order to accomplish this, the group issued press releases and posted information on the district Web page. They sent letters to the PTA newsletter, the employee newsletter and school newspaper editors. An e-mail account was set up to receive feedback from the community. Representatives attended PTA meetings to share the work that was being done and answer questions.

The Scheduling subcommittee was tasked with determining the impact on the master schedule of each of the alternatives. They contemplated an 8-period day and flexible scheduling at the high school level to alleviate some of the problems with the schedules. They determined the impact on special programs, like the career center. They also investigated the personal impact to families and teachers.

The Before and After-School Activities subcommittee reviewed the potential consequences of a start time change on activities at schools of all levels and the community at large. Some of the programs they considered were: extended day programs for younger students, remediation activities, art and music programs, interscholastic and intramural sports, employment, and family responsibilities.

The Transportation subcommittee examined each alternative for its feasibility within the constraints of the transportation system. Transportation was the driving force in determining what changes were possible. The district hired a transportation consultant to help determine the most efficient system that could be used while also considering the sleep and health of the students.

Getting Closer:

By June, the groups had narrowed the options to four: the current schedule (to not make a change) and three alternatives. These were presented to the community at large for review and discussion. A flyer that detailed each of the four proposals was distributed in back-to-school packets, at the county fair, and at the superintendent's Summer Chats. There were two public forums held to elicit response to each of the alternatives. A survey was developed and administered to the students, parents, and teachers. The committee requested statements from each of the principal groups (middle, elementary, high) and other impacted departments. The result of these discussions was that support for any one proposal was inconclusive. They also, during this period, made some adjustments to the proposals based on input from the various stakeholders.

Then, in early October, the two large groups met to try to rank the proposals. They were unable to reach a consensus, so the Steering Committee met the next day to develop the recommendation to the school board, who only wanted to see one proposal. After much deliberation, they agreed on one proposal that achieved the goal of later start for high school with the least impact to the other schools. The committee also determined that two other options were viable, if the board rejected this one. The Steering Committee presented this option to the board at the end of October. The board then held a work session for staff to review and revise the proposal. Several changes were made to specific schools, and then the staff surveyed teachers to determine how many would leave the district if this proposal were implemented. The results indicated that 14% of teachers would look for other employment, but the district understood that this was probably an overestimation of what would really happen.

The revised proposal was published in December, at which time the PTAs at several of the schools requested a change in start time. The district was able to

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accommodate most of these because there were sufficient requests that a switch was made with no net change to the proposal.

Solution

The board accepted this revised proposal as the final plan for changing school start times. The middle schools would start at 7:50 am, elementary at 8:00, 8:25, or 9:00 am, and high schools at 8:15 am. This meant an extra 45 minutes of time in the morning for the high school students to sleep.

Implementation

The next step was for the staff to develop an implementation plan. A team was put together for this purpose. They first identified all of the issues that were left to resolve, and then assigned someone to investigate possible solutions. An Issue Paper was written on each of these issues, which included a description of the problem and a detailed proposed solution.

At this point, the school board increased their role as leaders of this movement to maintain momentum.

Communication was maintained with the community to ensure a smooth transition. This effort included opening a hotline for questions, but it was very little used because the change was already communicated so well.

Results

Arlington was pleased with the implementation of the change. Because they spent such a long time planning, and had involved so many people, their transition was virtually seamless.

While they did not administer a scientific study either before or after the change, they did distribute surveys to all the stakeholders to evaluate the change. The preliminary results of the student survey indicated that high school students felt more alert and prepared (while middle school students felt less). The high school teachers noticed some improvement in alertness and participation. Although they have been vocal about the personal conflicts they faced, no teachers have left the district as a result. Some parents reported, anecdotally, that their high school students had better attitudes because of the extra sleep.

Reviewed by Arlington Public Schools



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