
Changing School Start Times: Fayette County, Kentucky



53 Schools • 32,000 Students
Before: High School-7:30 am
After: Elementary School-7:30/8:00 am,
High School-8:30 am,
Middle School-9:00 am

Summary

Fayette County, while eventually successful in achieving the late start, took one of the most difficult approaches to getting it adopted. They also eventually saw great results from their change, but because of the high emotional and political nature of the process for achieving the change, there were very vocal opponents for a long time after the change as well.

Profile

Fayette County, Kentucky is a large suburban district that houses over 32,000 students and five high schools. It confronted the issue of school start times when its school board decided to make the high school start even earlier. The resistance to this change initiated a two-year battle between parents to convince the school board of their position on start times. Finally, the board was convinced to delay the start by one hour, and Fayette experienced positive results. Fayette operates on a 4-tier bus system, with elementary schools split into two groups.

Challenge

Fayette County was one of the first to take on the issue of later school start times. While the sleep field had already proven that learning was impaired by sleep deprivation and that later starts would benefit students, there was little direct evidence of the success of such a change. Therefore, little but the heated emotions of the participants backed the discussion that took place. This chaotic and passionate approach to the problem was

one of their biggest challenges.

Of course, Fayette County faced other, more tangible challenges. These included transportation scheduling, limited time for extra-curriculars and after-school jobs, and childcare for younger students. The most vocal opponents to the late start were the parents of younger children who would lose their supervision after school.

Champions

There was a small, but very vocal group of parents who noticed the school board's plan to shift the high school to an earlier start, and were not at all pleased. This group, armed with some of the biological research on sleep and learning, confronted the school board and remained the party which advocated for later starts over the next two years. They were, however, unorganized and had little involvement in the issue other than attending school board meetings to voice their opinions.

Journey

As the result of the addition of a new Magnet school to the Fayette County Public Schools, the school board in 1996 was forced to reconsider the bus schedules. When they announced the plan to shift the high school start times to 7:15 am, 15 minutes *earlier* than the previous start time, a small group of parents was outraged. This group took their concerns to the next school board meeting, where they presented some of the research showing that this was exactly the wrong direction to be going. The board was sympathetic to these arguments, and decided to revisit the whole issue of scheduling school start times, and to do some research of their own.

Then, without consulting any of the other stakeholders, the board too quickly announced their new plan to shift the high school to a delayed start. There was furious opposition to this pronouncement. Coaches, students and parents involved in any sport in town were concerned that they would lose practice time and space.

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A much larger group of parents than the original group came out against the change, mostly because of the difficulties they would then face finding childcare for their younger children. What the school board and the original protestors had not realized was that everything in the community revolved around the school schedule, and many people were concerned about this change!

Unfortunately, due to previous bad decisions and secretive dealings by the school board, the people of Fayette County were already suspicious of this group. This did not help in the process over school start times. Over the next year and a half, the school board switched its position on the start times at every single meeting. The parents in Fayette, unfortunately, approached the issue mostly from an emotional standpoint, and the two sides were never able to engage in a rational dialogue about the possible outcomes. There were no polls taken, no committees formed, no consultation with principals or teachers. They were also tackling this issue so early that they did not benefit from much of the research which has since been published to support the change and to reassure those opposed that the negative effects are minimal.

Eventually, at one meeting, the principal of one of the high schools attended to present his point of view on the issue. He had polled his students and found that they were split evenly on whether they even wanted the change. This principal argued that if the students themselves weren't clamoring for the change there was no reason to make it. In addition, this principal argued that from his knowledge of teens, they would just abuse the extra time anyway and stay up later. One parent who was advocating for the later start also happened to be a scientist whose interests were in the area of sleep. He suggested, in response to this principal, that no matter what decision was made, many people were going to be unhappy. But if they did make the change, they should be sure to collect data both before and after so they could get a better understanding of how this really worked. The superintendent agreed.

Finally, the board made its decision, mostly because of exhaustion with the process. They decided to delay start times for the adolescents, both middle and high school. And that parent who had spoken up did implement a research project to study the impact of the late start.

Solution

Fayette County's final decision was a compromise. The advocates of a later start wanted all students to benefit. Although younger students can handle an early start from a biological standpoint, the logistics of getting the youngsters to school early were not appealing. But the School Board's final plan was a flip between the elementary and high schools. The start times are now as follows: 7:30/8:00 am for elementary, 8:30 am for high school, and 9:00 am for middle school.

Implementation

The most important aspect of Fayette County's implementation plan was time. The decision to make the change occurred fully 10 months before the implementation was to occur. This was essential, because everyone had plenty of time to make arrangements for the new schedule. Of course there were a few bugs the first few days and weeks of the change, especially with the buses, but overall the transition was extremely smooth. People made the necessary adjustments and moved on with their lives.

Results

Now, seven years after the change, you would have a hard time getting Fayette County to go back. Everyone has adjusted to the different routines, and the students and parents appreciate the more healthy approach to education.

The results of the studies that were done both before and after the change were encouraging. Students in every grade from 6-12 averaged more sleep in the year after the change, up to 50 extra minutes in the 12th grade. The percent of high school students getting at least eight hours of sleep per night went from 21%-51%. This study also looked at the rate of traffic accidents in the school system before and after the change to a later start. While the statewide rate of crashes increased 8% over the two years after the change, Fayette County, which was previously one of the counties with the highest crash rates, reduced its crashes by over 15%.



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