
Changing School Start Times: Jessamine County, Kentucky



11 Schools • 7,000 Students

Before: High School-7:30 am,

Middle School-7:40 am,

Elementary School-8:30 am

After: Elementary School-8:00 am,

High School-8:40 am,

Middle School-8:50 am

Summary

Jessamine County is a great example of how to change school start times. Benefiting from the experience of a neighboring community, Jessamine took their time and organized their efforts in such a way as to transition smoothly into a new schedule for their students. The community, especially the teachers, was supportive of the proposed change, and has seen positive results.

Profile

Jessamine County is a rural community with a school system that serves 6,000 students. The main challenge that Jessamine County faced was responding to a very vocal group of parents who opposed the change for personal reasons (scheduling, effect on other kids, athletics, etc). Before the change, the district ran bus tiers by level (High School and Middle School, Elementary School), and classes started at 7:30, 7:40, and 8:30 am, respectively. There is also an Early Learning Village for Pre-K and kindergartners that had an independent bus run.

Challenge

Jessamine County's major challenge was to achieve a balance between meeting the needs of individual students and parents while attending to the greater needs of the entire student body. Jessamine worked hard to educate the community and to involve every-

one in the decision-making process so that people understood the issue and that everyone's concerns could be addressed. Even with all of their efforts, Jessamine faced a vocal opposition group.

Champions

The superintendent of the Jessamine County Schools, Linda France, was aware of the literature about the impact of school start times on student health and learning. She was also connected to the process of changing start times in neighboring Fayette County. France initiated and supported the discussion of reconsidering Jessamine County's bell schedule. France commissioned a committee on the subject. It was made up of 12 members, with a representative from each school. This committee reviewed various sources of material on the issue, surveyed important stakeholders, and finally presented a recommendation to the school board to change the bell schedule.

Journey

Linda France understood from the experience in Fayette County that the approach to the subject of school starting times would be the most important factor, even more important than the supporting data, in getting a change passed. Participants in the debate in Fayette County advised Ms. France and Jessamine County to take their time in reviewing the issue and proposing a change. Ms. France knew that it would be important to keep both the decision makers and the community well informed at every step of the process.

The committee began in January by reviewing the literature on adolescent sleep and school start times. They also requested information from nearby districts in central Kentucky about their start and end times by level. This information pointed out that Jessamine County had earlier start times for the high school by

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at least 25 minutes. This preliminary information was presented to the school board.

The committee then requested and received approval to administer a survey to high school students regarding their sleep habits and schedule preferences. They designed the survey using a combination of the *School Sleep Habits Survey* (Bradley Hospital/Brown University Sleep Research Lab) and the *Fayette County Sleep and School Survey*. The data from these surveys, which were completed by almost 1,100 students, was tabulated by high school math students and then presented to the school board. The results showed that students were not getting enough sleep and that most students felt they could do better work if they started school later.

The community began to get involved in the process as a result of local media coverage. Articles ran in several local papers and gave a background of the issue and the research supporting a later start for middle school and high school students.

Soon afterwards, the district staff shared the committee's work with the school board. The school board then requested that the committee design a survey to be administered to both certified and classified staff. The results were presented to the school board at their meeting in May. At this point, the board recognized that it would be important to continue studying the issue, but asked that a recommendation be made early enough in the next school year that the community would have enough time to prepare for the change.

The committee spent the summer preparing a survey for parents to be administered at the beginning of the school year. The committee chairperson also worked with Superintendent France to make arrangements for community forums to be held in the fall. France focused her summer newsletter on the issue.

Students were involved in the process in several ways in the fall. Math classes used and studied the data from the surveys while learning about graphing and other mathematical operations. Elementary gifted students wrote letters and persuasive essays regarding the issue.

Three community forums were held in November. These were widely publicized in the schools, in the community newspapers and on the Web. Each forum consisted of a viewing of a short video on the basics of sleep, an overview of the national research on sleep and start times and local survey results, followed by a discussion. Each forum was attended by about 25 parents,

which was less participation than had been hoped for, but seemed consistent with similar events in other districts.

The committee presented all of their findings and a recommendation for a change in start time to the board in February. The committee found that they had given ample time and opportunity for all stakeholders to be involved in the process, and that they were prepared to monitor the implementation and respond to unforeseen difficulties.

Solution

The board adopted the recommended schedule to be implemented for the following school year:

Elementary School: 8:00 am - 2:45 pm

Middle School: 8:50 am - 3:35 pm

High School: 8:40 am - 3:25 pm

Implementation

The implementation of the change was very smooth. Because Jessamine took their time in studying the issue and included all important decision makers in the process (including transportation directors), the changes were made easily and with little opposition. No additional drivers were required to make the transportation work. The only complaints were about childcare for younger students. The local YMCA responded by offering before-school care for middle school students who now had the latest start times.

Results

Jessamine County parents and students were very accepting of the results of the change. There were very few complaints about the change, and few problems with the transportation situation.

Reviewed by Jessamine County Schools



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