

Newton school officials still weighing later high school start times

By **Meagan Cox** Boston University journalist, Updated March 9, 2020, 4:19 p.m.



Newton North High School. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

For the fifth calendar year in a row, Newton Public Schools and the Newton School Committee continue to consider adjusting the schedules of Newton's high schools to start later in the morning to reflect evidence that high school students would benefit from the opportunity to sleep later.

Ruth Goldman, chair of Newton School Committee, said that the latest update on the issue is the formation of a committee, the High School Joint Oversight Committee,

composed of half faculty and half high school administration to make another recommendation to the School Committee. The recently-updated teachers' contract includes a clause that leaves open the possibility of later high school start times in regards to teachers' hours, said Goldman.

The working group has already been formed and the School Committee will likely hear its recommendation by early May, but "no changes to schedule or start time will be implemented before the fall of 2021," said Goldman.

According to the Newton Public Schools website, later school start times at the high school level have been actively examined by the city and the Newton School Committee since the fall of 2015. The latest updates listed are PDF documents of the most recent recommendation for adjustment presented to the School Committee meeting in April 2019. This recommendation included a start time of 8:30 a.m., a new block schedule for classes, a slightly shortened school day, and several options for bus schedule adjustment.

Goldman said the conversation began in 2015 at the prompting of a "fairly large group of parents from both high schools" and ongoing evidence about the sleep rhythms of high school students. The first step was to form a working group that conducted surveys of parents, students, and staff, reviewed data, and eventually made a recommendation to the School Committee in March 2017.

However, the recommendation did not lead to immediate change. Goldman said that the evidence for later school start times benefiting high school students is clear, but the issue is more complicated due to traffic conditions in Newton and bus scheduling, as Newton is currently "maximizing [its] transportation opportunities." With the current buses owned by Newton being used to their maximum capacity, a change in high school start times would require substantial funding for additional buses, according to the research presented to the School Committee.

To allow for the buses to continue to pick up and drop off elementary and middle school students on time with the later high school start time, the high school day would have to

end earlier, reducing the total hours of daily education. The recommendation presented to the School Committee in April 2019 proposed reducing a seven-hour-and-five-minute school day to six hours and 41 minutes.

The School Committee hired a transportation consultant who concluded in April 2019 that there is “no good answer for Newton,” according to Goldman.

Overall, Goldman is unsure that a consensus on the best way to implement this change can be reached. “I’m not sure we can get the majority to agree on any answer, frankly. If we go with a community process on changing the start times, I’m not entirely sure where we will end up,” said Goldman.

Other city officials recognize that there are barriers to converting high school start times. “As I understand it, later start times may be beneficial in some ways, but a very difficult puzzle to solve with respect to the overall schedule,” said City Councilor Deborah Crossley in an email statement.

“There is strong evidence that starting high school later is beneficial,” said Jeffrey Pontiff, Newton resident and long-time public advocate for later high school start times in the city. “There’s evidence as far as health issues, mental health issues, traffic accidents.”

According to a 2014 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics, “the evidence strongly implicates earlier school start times (ie, before 8:30 am) as a key modifiable contributor to insufficient sleep, as well as circadian rhythm disruption, in this population.” The study cites effects of this “insufficient sleep” ranging from “impairments in mood, affect regulation, attention, memory, behavior control, executive function, and quality of life” to academic performance, obesity, and “drowsy driving–related crashes.”

“If there is strong evidence for how we can promote our children’s wellbeing, we should be doing it,” said Pontiff.

Pontiff argued that high school is starting early this year “because it started early last year.” He added that “no one, if we’re starting a new school district would say ‘let’s start high school at 7:40 or 7:50.’”

Many high school teachers support later start times, according to Michael Zilles, president of the Newton Teachers Association (NTA). “In principal, the NTA is supportive,” said Zilles in an email statement. “In an ideal world, schools at every level would start at or near 8:30. If that were the proposal, there would likely be strong NTA support.”

However, the NTA has not yet officially supported the transition to later high school start times, said Zilles.

Zilles said, “As a union, we have not even broached the subject with our full membership” because the proposed scenarios presented to the School Committee in April 2019 are “in such a preliminary stage.”

“Until we have a concrete idea of the changes that are proposed, if any, we don’t really know,” said Zilles about NTA support for later high school start times.

Zilles also referred to the High School Joint Oversight Committee. “That committee has just formed, and is still a long way from being able to weigh in on start time. And it can only make a recommendation. Any recommended change would then need to be negotiated between the School Committee and [the NTA] before it could be implemented,” said Zilles. “If such a negotiation were to happen, the NTA would seek the input of all members who would be impacted by such a change.”

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