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Fairfax Plan Would Delay High School Start at No Cost

By Michael Alison Chandler
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[Fairfax County](#) school transportation planners have developed a no-cost proposal to deliver students to high school later in the morning, boosting the case for a change in schedule sought by parents who argue that the 7:20 a.m. opening bell deprives teenagers of sleep they need to be healthy and successful.

The latest proposal, released Friday, marks an about-face for school officials, who have assumed that altering the schedule for one of the nation's largest bus fleets -- delivering 127,000 eligible riders to nearly 200 schools - - would carry a hefty price. Estimates in the past decade have ranged from \$4 million to more than \$40 million.

"Now money is off the table," said Dick Reed, a parent who chaired a transportation task force last school year. "Now the [school] board can debate the merits of later start times, and those benefits will be clear."

Many high schools in the Washington area start before 8 a.m., often because of long bus routes. [Arlington County](#) schools opted in 2000 to move high school start times from 7:30 to 8:15 a.m. But [Anne Arundel](#) and Montgomery county schools considered the issue about the same time and decided a change would be too costly or disruptive.

[Dean Tistadt](#), chief operating officer for Fairfax schools, said money remains an issue. He estimates that schools can save as much as \$7 million by streamlining bus schedules while keeping the overall structure intact -- with high school starting first, then middle school, then elementary school. Tistadt said that bus rides for high school students tend to be longer and that it is less efficient to schedule those runs later in the morning, during rush hour.

School transportation planners will start developing yet another proposal today, to compare alternatives and clarify potential savings. In either scenario, bus routes and start times for tens of thousands of students would change as early as September if the school board approves.

The plan would cut costs by consolidating bus stops, scheduling different bus drivers for morning and afternoon runs and relying on a small group of experienced planners to design routes. The proposal would deliver some elementary students first, then high school students, and then middle school students.

Elementary start times would range from 7:50 to 9:25 a.m. Most high schools would start at 8:30, and most middle schools at 9:40.

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Most high schools in the county start at 7:20 a.m.; most middle schools start between 7:20 and 8:05; and most elementary schools start between 8 and 9:15.

History shows that changing bus schedules and start times can be disruptive and spark "tremendous resistance" from parents, Tistadt said. But the spending trade-offs are clear this year, he said, given that savings in transportation can offset cuts in educational programs or teaching positions.

A parent-led group called SLEEP, for Start Later for Excellence in Education Proposal, has gathered more than 8,000 signatures for an online petition for later high school start times. Sandy Evans, a co-founder of the group, said the plan released Friday would be a "bright spot" for families in a bleak budget cycle.

"At a time when budget cuts are forcing the school board to ratchet back, why not do something that costs nothing and that is a major benefit to our students, rather than eking out a few more dollars from a system that does not work for our kids?" Evans said.

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