

ELEMENTARY FEEDBACK ON CHANGED START TIMES

(Note: The following is an excerpt from the 1998 Report

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INTRODUCTION

With the 1997-98 school year in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) came a change in the starting time for 85 of the 88 schools in the district. The seven comprehensive high schools changed from a 7:15 AM to an 8:40 AM start; the seven middle schools moved from 7:40 to a 9:40 start; and, the starting times for 71 elementary schools were spread among 7:40, 8:40, or 9:40. Three alternative schools' schedules were not affected because they already had flexible hours for their students.

This study was conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota, in conjunction with MPS, to ascertain the impact of start time change on the educational endeavor and on the community. The findings reveal differential impact among the various stakeholders and also reflect that the changes are experienced at the personal level.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through use of a written teacher survey and focus groups conducted on-site in the schools. Participating secondary and elementary schools were drawn from a stratified random sample of schools in order to identify participants for the focus groups. Role-alike groups were conducted with teachers, students, and support/administrative staff at three of the high schools and five of the middle schools. Administrators from each school solicited volunteers and insured that each grade level was represented. While not specifically controlled for in this study, informal attempts

were made to generate a diverse group of participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, and diversity of opinion concerning the start time. Focus groups were also conducted at fourteen elementary schools with teachers and administrative/support staff. In total, the fifty-four focus groups at elementary, middle, and high schools provided a forum for participants to reflect on the impact of the start time change and to identify areas of greatest concern and importance relative to the change.

FINDINGS FROM THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

The fourteen elementary schools participating in this research study experienced various start times. Two of the elementary schools moved from a 9:40 start to a 7:40 start, a two-hour change. All other elementary schools experienced a one-hour shift in start time, either one hour earlier or one hour later than the previous year. Two schools included in the elementary sample were elementary/middle schools serving grades K-8. Elementary teachers from the five schools that moved from an 8:40 to a 9:40 start cited a variety of areas negatively impacted by their later start time of 9:40. These areas included: teaching, busing/transportation, end of the school day, student behavior, meetings, after school activities, safety, and personal schedules.

The topic among the elementary respondents that generated the most feedback was the negative effect that the 9:40 later start had on teaching and learning in the shortened morning, and included concerns about student fatigue and disengagement in the afternoon. With the 9:40 start, academic programs did not often begin until 10 AM, after buses had arrived and students had eaten breakfast at school. Teachers unanimously agreed that third-tiered buses are chronically late. Also, students often came to school already having watched up to three hours of television in the morning, since most young children who go to bed early tend to wake early as well. One teacher described such children as having "eyes glazed over." Clearly to the faculty and staff in

these focus groups, the late start of 9:40 had no apparent benefits for the elementary-aged child.

In contrast to the elementary schools that moved from 8:40 to 9:40, teachers at elementary schools that experienced a shift to an earlier time, moving from a 9:40 to an 8:40 start, reported a positive impact on the beginning and end of the school day. They noted students' energy and learning levels were higher in the morning and lasted throughout the day. The earlier start school start meant fewer before-school transitions for students (e.g., from daycare to school) and seemed to capture students when they are at their learning best. One teacher commented, "Last year I had a student that was in daycare by 6:30 AM. By the time he/she came to school at 9:30 AM, his/her day was over. That's just too long for kids to be up in the morning. I feel this year the kids are much better, ready to learn when they come to school. And throughout the whole school day, I still feel that they are alert and ready to learn, and I didn't feel that way last year."

Responses from support and administrative staff at the 8:40 start elementary schools confirm teachers' perspectives that students are more alert and ready to learn. The earlier start increased morning instruction time, which was viewed as advantageous to elementary-aged students, especially children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Staff reported that fewer students had to leave school early for appointments, resulting in less lost instructional time and fewer class disruptions. Students had more opportunities to participate in after school activities and more took advantage of them. School climate was perceived to have improved from last year when the start time was later; morale among staff was considered to be high and the pace of the school less hectic and more peaceful. Being second, as opposed to being third on the 3-tiered busing schedule, was more favorable and allowed adequate time for staff to manage special events and address parental concerns about their children.

Teachers from the three elementary schools that moved from 8:40 to 7:40 commented on a number of positive effects due to the 7:40 start. Children appeared to be more alert at the beginning of the day and stayed more energized throughout the day. Students experienced fewer morning transitions (i.e., going directly from home to school) and were more ready to learn. Teachers perceived themselves and their students to be more patient and productive in the afternoon. Fewer behavior problems contributed to a calm, positive school environment, and student participation in after school activities was seen to have increased. Being first on the tiered-busing schedule meant that buses arrived promptly at the beginning and end of the school day. The early start was also considered beneficial for afternoon kindergarten classes because children actually arrived to school late in the morning, as opposed to the afternoon.

Elementary teachers from the two schools that experienced a two-hour change in start time, moving from 9:40 to 7:40, reported that the earlier start had some negative impact on student attendance/tardies, especially at the start of the school year. Even with school-purchased alarm clocks provided to some families, students were still often absent. The early start also shortened student field trips at times because the district buses were still out transporting students for other schools which started at 8:40 or 9:40.

The support and administrative staff reported the 7:40 start to have a positive impact on teaching, the end of the school day, and after school activities. These staff perceived students to be “more on task and focused” during the day, and this contributed to fewer afternoon behavior problems. Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were seen to have benefited from the earlier schedule, although some reservations were expressed about the impact on learning due to increased absences and tardies. It was also reported that more students were taking advantage of after school activities, but that bus schedules determined the length of after school practices and events.

The 8:40 start at any of the Minneapolis schools positively impacted after school activities as well. With an earlier school ending, parents were more inclined to allow their children to participate in extracurriculars because they did not have to miss classes to attend events, and elementary students arrived home earlier, lessening concerns about safety. Students are reported to have more time for homework, play, and after school academic help. The 8:40 start has also been positive for teachers' personally and professionally. Most of the teachers expressed that they felt more relaxed, less rushed, and more energized to teach. They had time to supervise after school activities, attend personal appointments and workshops without taking time off from school, and prepare on the front and end of the work day.

DISCUSSION

Clearly, the least desirable and most problematic start time was the 9:40 start at the middle schools and some elementary schools. Teaching and learning was considered to be significantly compromised. Instruction did not begin until late in the morning, pushing academics into the afternoon when students were reported to be less alert and less interested in learning, and teachers dealt with students leaving to attend events and appointments. The later ending to the school day also resulted in more parental concerns about students arriving home late when it was viewed as less safe. A shift in the start time to closer to 9:00 AM might alleviate some of the issues identified above for the 9:40 start schools.

The 8:40 start was seen to capture elementary students' prime learning time. Although there were mixed responses from elementary schools about the 7:40 start, it resulted in fewer morning transitions for students, as they were able to come to school directly from home and arrived better prepared to learn.