

**Fairfax County Council**



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**PTA Survey Shows Overwhelming Parent Support  
For Later High School Start Times in Fairfax County**

More than 88 percent of parents of children at all grade levels believe that Fairfax County's 7:20 am high school start time is too early for teens, and a similarly large majority supports a proposal to start high schools around 8:45 am, according to a new survey by the Fairfax County Council of PTAs (FCCPTA).

The survey, conducted from May 30 to July 7 drew responses from 6,040 elementary, middle school and high school parents from almost all schools throughout the county and representing more than 11,000 students.

A Fairfax County Public Schools Transportation Task Force (TTF) in March recommended starting high schools and secondary schools between 8:35 and 8:55 am, rather than 7:20 am. The proposal also included shifting more elementary schools earlier, putting most between 7:50 and 8:55 am. Currently, Fairfax elementary schools start anywhere from 7:50 am to 9:25 am, but more are on the later end of that range. Middle schools, which now generally start between 7:20 am and 8 am, would be shifted to 9:20-9:40 am under the plan. A range of start times is necessary to make efficient use of buses.

Asked specifically about the Task Force recommendations on school start times, 85 percent preferred the recommended schedule to the current one. That included 61 percent who liked the proposal as recommended and 24 percent who said it was better than the current schedule but could still use improvement. Only 15 percent said the current schedule was preferable.

The strong majority of support held true for parents with children at all school levels, among all races and ethnic groups and at all income levels.

On middle school start times, 81% said the current start times are too early.

“Parents overwhelmingly agree that teens need to go to school later and that younger children would be better off getting started somewhat earlier,” said FCCPTA President Michele Menapace. “This change is crucial to both student health and learning.”

Perhaps because of the wide range in current Fairfax County elementary school start times (7:50 am to 9:25 am), opinion was more varied about elementary school schedules. While 59% said that putting more schools between 7:50 and 8:55 would have a positive impact on elementary students, another 34% said the impact would be neither good nor bad, and 7% thought it would have a negative impact.

When elementary school parents were asked if they would prefer an 8 am start time or a 9:30 am start time for their youngsters (both within the range of the TTF proposal), 59% preferred 8 am and 33% preferred 9:30 am.

*The wide-ranging survey also had these findings:*

#### **Sleep/Wake Time:**

- Fairfax County high school students on average get 7.5 hours of sleep per school night but 11 hours per weekend night. Such a large difference between weekend and weekday sleep time is evidence of weekday sleep deprivation. Sleep experts say teens need about 9.25 hours of sleep per night to be mentally and physically healthy.
- To get a full 9 hours of sleep and get up by 6:00 am, students would have to be in bed asleep by 9:00 pm, but the survey found that only 1.5% of high school students get to bed by that time. Forty-five percent of high school students go to bed between 10 and 11 pm, and 41% at or after 11 pm.
- Parents report that 80% of their high school students have trouble getting up on school days, compared with 75% of middle school students and 41% of elementary school students.

#### **Method of Getting to School:**

- Among high school students, only 41% ride the bus, with 54% getting to school by car and the rest walking or using other means. (Middle school: 60% bus, 33% car. Elementary school: 50% bus, 35% car)
- Parents whose oldest children are eligible for the bus but who get to school by car most frequently (61%) cite “more time to sleep” as the reason.

#### **Breakfast:**

- 27% of high school students don’t eat breakfast at home or school, compared with only 3.2% of elementary school children who skip breakfast.

**Child Care:**

- ☑ About 15% of families use middle or high school students to care for elementary school children after school.
- ☑ Of those who use older students to provide child care, a large majority (62%) said it would be “easy” or “somewhat easy” to find child care to accommodate the proposed schedule change.

**Student Work:**

- ☑ About 31% of high school students work, for an average of 11 hours a week. Of those families, about 5% say they rely on their student’s income.
- ☑ Three-quarters of the parents with working students said the proposed later end time would not conflict with their student’s work schedule, and 80% said that adjusting student work hours to the new schedule would be “easy” or “somewhat easy.”

**Sports Practices:**

- ☑ Nearly half (47%) of all parents of high school athletes report that their students have sports practices of 3 hours or more on school days, and about half report practices of two hours per weekday. (4 hours or more, 11%; 3 hours, 36%; 2 hours, 49%, 1 hour, 4%.)
- ☑ A large majority (80%) of parents at all levels said that time limits should be placed on sports practices for high school students on weekdays.
- ☑ Among parents of high school athletes, 76% favored limits on practice time, with a two-hour-per-school-day limit favored by a majority (another 14% favored a one-hour limit and 10% a three-hour limit.).

A full report and analysis of the FCCPTA survey was prepared by George Mason University professors Dr. Adam Winsler and Dr. Henry Tran and student Drew Solyst. The report is on the FCCPTA website at [www.fccpta.org](http://www.fccpta.org). A summary and complete catalog of comments will be available soon.

The FCCPTA and the Virginia state PTA support later high school start times. In May the FCCPTA general membership also endorsed the recommendations of the Transportation Task Force. For more information, go to the FCCPTA website at [www.fccpta.org](http://www.fccpta.org).

The Transportation Task Force, chartered by the Fairfax County School Board in 2007, consisted of 67 parents, teachers, students, administrators and community organization members. The Fairfax County Public School staff has been working on school-by-school bell schedules that try to accommodate the Task Force’s recommendations to take to the public for review.

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