

# Districts look at start time benefits

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If the 10 school districts participating in a forum Wednesday were looking for reasons why high schools should start at a later time, they came away with plenty of them.

Livonia pediatrician Marshall Blondy presented medical facts and two administrators, one parent and one student from Edina, Minn., gave their views on the positive effects of allowing high school students to sleep in longer on school days.

The Edina school district was the first in the nation to use sleep research to switch to a later high school start time since the trend toward earlier high

school start times began about 20 years ago.

The school districts participating in the Regional Forum Discussion on High School Start Times included Farmington, West Bloomfield, Walled Lake, Livonia, Northville, Novi, Plymouth-Canton, South Lyon, Huron Valley and Clawsonville.

The forum addressed issues school administrators could consider drawbacks to changing start times — transportation, athletics and after-school activities, teachers' schedules, after school jobs and child care.

But the sponsors countered each reason with positive ones. Edina Supt. Ken Dragseth said his school district began looking at later start times after

a 1994 notice from the Minnesota Medical Association asked superintendents to look at sleep studies and the benefits of starting school later for older adolescents.

"After looking at transportation, athletics and our students and staff's work schedules, we said, 'Let's try it, this is about the kids, not the adults,' and it's worked," Dragseth said. "Yes, there are different levels of problems, but they can be overcome."

Before 1995, the Edina High School day began at 7:25 a.m. Now students have to be in their seats by 8:30 a.m.

Dragseth, Edina High School Principal Chace Anderson, student Evan Feige, 17, and his

# Later starts could be costly

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If the Farmington Board of Education eventually approves delaying school start times based on research that teens need more sleep, transportation costs could increase more than \$400,000.

Transportation director Bill Touseley said the district would likely have to purchase four new school buses at \$75,000 each. More than \$120,000 in wages for permanent bus drivers would be needed, not including money for substitute drivers.

This would all come at a time when the district is facing a \$5-\$6 million general fund deficit, due to rising costs and stagnant state funding.

"Some people say, every transportation dollar comes out of the curriculum side of the budget," said Touseley.

Another method of funding later school start times, which is still under consideration, is elimination of School of Choice transportation for middle school and high school students in 2002-2003.

A letter from Janice Colliton, assistant superintendent of instructional services, was distributed in school newsletters to notify parents the idea was under consideration. "A final decision on the availability or transportation will be made no later than Feb. 8, 2002," according to Colliton's letter.

About 225 students could be affected, Touseley said.

The Board of Education approved a School of Choice program for district residents in March 1992 that allows parents to decide where to enroll their children, with certain restrictions. Transportation has always been provided.

Though some people seem to like the idea of later start times, the district must be mindful of declining state aid, said Cheryl Cannon, assistant superintendent of business, finance and operations. "We need to go through our budget process and look at everything," Cannon said.

Walled Lake Central High School, which included representatives from 10 school districts. They heard about a Minnesota district that made time adjustments several years ago and reported positive results.

"I didn't feel we had something that said this is the best thing since sliced bread," said Pam Charleston-Lyons, a counselor at Avondale High School who attended the forum. Charleston-Lyons ran unsuccessfully for school board this year.

She didn't see enough evidence of either an increase in grades or ACT scores when school start times were changed. "I want to wrap my arms around something."

Four Farmington subcommittees will meet separately before they make presentations at the Jan. 7 meeting, which will begin at 7 p.m. Supt. Maxfield wonders whether school officials have the whole picture when it comes to public opinion.

"Are we only hearing from the parents who are most enthusiastic?" he asked at the Dec. 3 meeting.

Jim Whitcomb, who works in police administration for the Farmington Hills Police Department and will serve on the transportation subcommittee said he hasn't seen a relationship between sleepy teens and traffic accidents, a connection proponents of later start times sometimes make.

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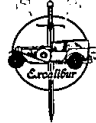
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