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Parents share opinions about changing school start times

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER
sbuck@oe.hometown.com

Everybody has an opinion when it comes to changing the time students start school.

Parents Ann Valade, John O'Brien and Ken Rudberg who attended the discussions for the first time Monday at the Farmington Training Center had no problem sharing theirs.

"I don't want them to start school that late," said Valade who has children at Forest Elementary and North Farmington High School. "I like 7:30 a.m. and I like 8 a.m. for elementary. It's been good for me."

After 7:10 a.m. when she leaves for work, Valade worries about her children getting themselves off to school.

"It just seems that there are so many people here who have already made up their minds that they want the late start time and they don't care," Valade said.

O'Brien finds the facts showing additional sleep is beneficial to students irrefutable.

"They can't be argued," said O'Brien who has children at Farmington High School and Power Middle School. "But, that's not the argument here. The discussion should be, 'Is the implementation of this program prudent and the right decision when we are facing a budget deficit and possibly sacrific-

ing other programs?'"

Ken Rudberg and his wife, Liz, a Farmington school bus driver for 14 years, has some questions about the issue.

"I have a son at Alameda and a son at Lanigan Elementary," Ken said. "I want what's best for everybody."

Using analogies common to the discussion, he said, one of his sons is an owl, late to bed and late to rise. He questioned whether it was beneficial for his son to be up at 6:30 a.m. and down at the bus stop at 7:30 a.m., if elementary time changes occur.

He also doesn't support athletic practices before school because the exertion will make students more tired at the end of the day.

Liz Rudberg felt that elementary teachers who are with the same children all day have a good grasp about which students perform better in the morning and which do better in the afternoon. In high school, where students go from class to class, that may not be as readily apparent, she said.

"I guess if it benefits them and helps them that's OK even if elementary students have to start early," Liz said, adding her children will one day be in high school and the time change may help them.

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early childhood education and high school graduation requirements. The district is also implementing a new accreditation process.

"April is the end of the decision cycle," Maxfield explained after the meeting. "Realistically, after that people are concerned about other things."

Making the decision this spring gives everybody time to iron out any problems, he said.

"Having a year to digest it and making sure the implementation is in place, simply gets parents used to the idea," Maxfield said. "We saw tonight a microcosm of conversations of what has happened all over town. We got a pretty good sense of how it is going to go. If we need to delay it a year to preserve six or seven positions, that's where I'm at."

Before April, officials will have time to hold a town hall meeting and do some surveys, he said.

Decision-making process

Maxfield compared this strategy to others used in connection with previous controversial decisions, like putting lights on football fields and not allowing students to leave the building for lunch. Those decisions were made a year before they took effect.

"My personal feeling is that this is the right thing to do," Maxfield said. "I realize that it is complicated. This isn't an issue we want to sit around forever. I want to do it, but I want to do it effectively."

He believes and hopes this will be the only year the district is looking at no state aid increase so the plan will be more affordable next year.

"It gives us time to know going in that next year's budget will be built around this," Maxfield said.

Next steps

The large committee group meets again at 7 p.m. Feb. 4 at the Farmington Training Center, 33000 Thomas Street, one block north of Grand River in Farm-

■ A community town hall meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Feb. 28 at the William Costick Activities Center located on 11 Mile Road, east of Middlebelt Road in Farmington Hills.

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Barbara Cherem, director of evaluation, assessment and special projects, said counselors at each high school and Dunckel Middle school selected a dozen students representing a cross section to fill out a survey grid. The surveys are due about Jan. 22 with the results available Jan. 29.

"It asks that they keep track for a whole week how they spend their time, what time they get up, do they eat breakfast, do they take the bus, do they drive, extracurricular activities. We're interested in the activities after school lots out. Do they take their sister home, etc."

To do a larger sampling would be too labor intensive and the district may not get the results until next year, Cherem said.

Zan Alley, the Uniserv director for the Farmington-based Michigan Education Association, urged Maxfield not to rush. During a visit to North Farmington High School earlier in the day, teachers told her they felt left out of the discussion.

"My sense was, they were feeling extremely threatened by this," Alley said.

"The questions were, 'When is somebody going to ask us? We teach these kids. They also commented that there were more tardies on late start days than on other days. We need to have a plan to input from staff.'"

From other subcommittee reports:

■ Teaching and learning — recommended high school students start no less than one hour

later. A variety of research material was studied. Concerns were younger teachers would probably prefer a later start time because they have young children, while established teachers may not want to alter their schedule. Athletic practices should not be switched to morning.

"While extensive grade and test score research hasn't been completed to show significant improvements with later start times, we know that national test companies always recommend that students get a good night sleep and eat a good breakfast before taking tests," the group reported. "High achievers don't generally improve their grades with late start times. However, consideration must be given to the thought that better attendance by lower average students may slant grade and test improvement statistics downward from increases made by high achieving students."

Other benefits they found were a lower drop out rate and improved health.

■ Outreach committee — plans are to present "question and answer" guides for frequently asked questions. The district has developed a communication plan for the community during the months of January and February.

■ Co-curricular — a study of after school activities and times was researched including those held at the Costick Center, YMCA, youth services and the ice arena.

Few sports practices are expected to move to a before-school time. There may be increased demand for gym time because gyms are shared. Adjustments can be made, according to Athletic Director Brian Swinehart.

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