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St. Paul schools shake up the class day

## **Classes will start earlier for many students under district's new busing system**

Author: Tad Vezner tvezner@pioneerpress.com

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St. Paul students will have to adjust their clocks this fall after the district decided to revamp starting times for schools across the city.

Under a new "tiered" school busing system, some schools will start classes as much as 45 minutes earlier than this school year. And in three cases, schools will start more than an hour earlier.

Meanwhile, two other schools will start more than an hour later.

The system is expected to save the district \$1.9 million and already is part of the district's budget to be voted on this month.

But some parents are upset that there has been no public discussion on how the new system would affect specific schools - long after they could offer input about the system or even choose which schools their children would attend.

"It would have been great if families had that information before the school choice was due. I know a family that decided to stay at Crossroads specifically for that (later) start time. Now what are they to do?" said Larvel Bunker, who has a daughter at Crossroads Montessori, which will be starting 40 minutes earlier next year - a change Bunker said she could work around.

"My problem with this news is it just doesn't bode well for the district building relations with parents and having parents feeling involved...It just feels to me that we're shown one hand and with the other they slip in the hard stuff."

District spokesman Howie Padilla said a letter about the changes was being sent to parents this week, and district staff already have been notified.

He said an effort was made to get the information out earlier this year and noted that school starting times weren't announced last year until mid-August.

In a statement Thursday, school Superintendent Valeria Silva said: "We understand that this change may be inconvenient for some families, which is why we wanted to give them as much time as possible before school begins in the fall to plan for any needed adjustments to their schedules."

In the letter to parents, Silva said those who couldn't work the new hours into their schedules could contact the district's student placement center "to review other available school options."

Still, some parents said they wish they would have received the information early enough to comment on the new busing system before it was adopted into the budget.

"We just wished that the district would have told parents this was in the works. It just seemed like it came out of nowhere. Where was the transparency? To hear from other parents, and not the school, I think is really poor planning," said Chrissy Snider, who has a fourth-grader and a second-grader at Capital Hill Magnet School.

"People have already signed up for (fall) after-school activities.... There's going to be this huge ripple effect. Everyone is going to be on the phone tomorrow."

Several parents questioned the wisdom of having high schools start before elementary schools, saying elementary school children often wake earlier.

Padilla said the public can still comment on the system June 21 when the board takes a final vote on the budget.

But because the district must adopt a budget by the end of this month, the prospect of delaying the vote is slim.

"I certainly wouldn't promise that," Padilla said.

Jean O'Connell, vice chairwoman of the St. Paul school board, acknowledged that the board did not discuss specific school starting times this week.

"We discussed the overall tier system, we didn't discuss the individual start times," O'Connell said.

"The reality here is that we need to start saving money on transportation, and we're going to start changing start times for schools as we move into the new plan for the future.

"The one really positive thing that's happening is that there are times today where there are kids on a bus for an hour," she added. "The max under the new system is 45 minutes."

O'Connell said it was her understanding only one school would start more than 45 minutes earlier.

However, the district's website shows three schools would start more than an hour earlier:

- AGAPE, 1 hour and 50 minutes earlier.
- Washington Technology Secondary, 75 minutes earlier.
- Downtown High School's Creative Arts, 90 minutes earlier.

Meanwhile, two schools would start significantly later: Chelsea Heights Elementary, 65 minutes later, and River East Treatment K-12, 90 minutes later.

Becky Amidon, who has a daughter at Creative Arts High School, said "her high school has started at 9 o'clock for I don't know how many years, and all of the sudden it's going to start at 7:30....I understand it's not easy, the logistics, but I thought that there were research studies that support the fact that later starting times for high school-age kids is really helpful.

"I have elementary age kids, too. The younger kids, it's no problem for them to start early."

O'Connell noted that AGAPE and Downtown Creative Arts both are moving to new venues but said that she wasn't aware of reasons for the other large time shifts.

Padilla also said he wasn't aware late Thursday of circumstances applying to specific schools.

Eighteen schools have a starting-time change of at least 40 minutes.

"There's several things that go into planning the routes, there's not a single thing that dictates a start time. When you factor in those, this was the best-case scenario," Padilla said.

The new "tier" system will consolidate several school bus delivery times to only three, at 7:30, 8:30 and 9:30 a.m.

The goal is more bus trips of shorter duration. Officials estimate that the district will use 27 fewer buses next year and that the longest a student should expect to be on a bus is 45 minutes.

The changes, along with installation of new route software, are expected to save the district nearly \$1.9 million next year.

Doug Belden contributed to this report. Tad Vezner can be reached at 651-228-5461.

Caption:

Graphic: Pioneer Press

Starting earlier, starting later

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