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## Should School Days Be Later? Here's How New Canaan Is Looking at the Issue

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***Editor's note:** In New Canaan, hundreds of parents have asked the Board of Education to consider later school times, and the board hired a consultant to study what the town would have to do to change school times. The consultant recently presented his report to the town.*

*The idea of starting school later in the morning has come up across the country, with some parents and health experts have urged school districts to start school later for students in the higher grades, particularly high school, citing some studies that say teenagers sleep better when they get up later.*

*The change can be costly and can interfere with after-school activities, particularly sports games and practices. In Greenwich, the change to later school times initially resulted in various glitches. In Darien, nearly all Board of Education candidates in the 2017 election said they didn't like the idea.*

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*There is no active push among Darien parents or others in town to start school later here, but the issue is long-standing and has been of interest to Darienite.com readers before.*

Here's the [NewCanaanite.com article](#), published Tuesday, about the presentation:

Pushing back the earliest school start times by 45 minutes—and doing so without significantly changing the day for those in kindergarten through sixth grade—would cost nearly \$1.4 million annually, a consultant told the Board of Education last week.

The added cost, which would bring the district's total yearly busing expenses to about \$4.6 million, represents the estimated 14 additional school buses that New Canaan would need to change its highly efficient, current system of three busing tiers down to two tiers, according to Mark Walsh of Walworth, N.Y.-based [Transportation Advisory Services](#).

Yet even if the Board of Ed wants to go in that direction, finding additional drivers to operate those buses likely would prove difficult, Walsh told the elected body at its regular meeting, held Nov. 19 at New Canaan High School.

“You have been fortunate that you have been able to have a sufficient roster of drivers,” he said.

“Part of it is because of the labor agreement that they have, and that labor agreement provides for a six-hour day. If in fact you went to a two-tier system, if the district thinks that as a result of this you could cut your day back and go to the contractors and the drivers and say, Oh by the way, we don't want six hours anymore, we now want to do four or four-and-a-half, my experience is that in this area of Connecticut you would have a very difficult time finding school bus drivers.”

The comments came during a widely anticipated presentation from a consulting firm that Board of Ed hired in June to review a handful of options for starting school later. Walsh said that his cost estimates assumed a 182-day academic year and that the length of the school day did not change, focused exclusively on transportation and did not factor in athletics-related busing data.

A standing-room-only crowd of more than 125 parents, overwhelmingly women, filled the Wagner Room for a public hearing that preceded the meeting (more on that below) and nearly all stayed for Walsh's presentation.

Citing the [health benefits](#) of later school start times, hundreds of New Canaan parents have signed a [local group's petition](#) pushing for a change [sooner than later](#), and urged the Board of Ed to [include moms and dads](#) on a would-be public-facing committee studying the issue. Though district officials at the Nov. 19 meeting indicated such a committee could be formed, it wasn't clear just when that would happen.

Eventually, Walsh said, when the Board of Ed “gets to a point that if you determine that you want to make

changes and you zero in on an option or an alternative or a potential program, eventually there will need to be a definitive, detailed routing projection, analysis and procedures established by your transportation department.”

“That is time-consuming and that is a whole lot of work,” Walsh said. “That will be the only way that you ultimately will know the exact number of buses. But we worked with the district. We believe, on an order of magnitude basis, that the number of buses we projected are fairly accurate.”

Here’s a summary of the estimates (the full ‘Bell Time Options” presentation [can be found here](#)):

#### School Start Times: Busing Options

Source: Transportation Advisory Services

- (1) Current three-tiered system
- (2) Two-tiered system
- (3) 15-minute later system in three tiers
- (4) Reversing two current tiers
- (5) Reversing two tiers plus starting later and just 40 minutes between tiers

Currently, the town spends about \$3.2 million on busing students to New Canaan Public Schools, Walsh said. The figure is based on using five 29-passenger vans and 28 77-passenger buses that are deployed in three

rounds of pickups—one for each current “tier” of start times—to collect a total of 3,420 students who ride the bus, he said.

The system is “an extremely efficient way to use transportation resources,” Walsh said. New Canaan Public Schools now is under a contract with the bus company that runs through 2022, he said.

Though a second option for New Canaan may be pushing back start times for all schools by 15 minutes, keeping the current three-tier system, even then the town has “some logistical issues in your community that as you move bell times around,” according to Walsh.

“There may be ramifications to the numbers of vehicles and run-times depending on when your vehicles are hitting the road,” Walsh said.

Saying the options presented by his firm do not represent the only ones available to New Canaan, but rather a sample of what the district may do and at what cost, Walsh also reviewed two-tier busing scenarios under which high school students start later than some lower grades, as well as doing so while shrinking the amount of time between tiers (and thus requiring more buses and drivers).

Board members asked Walsh [his responses are in parentheses]:

—to review the pitfalls of districts who moved to later start times and had problems (mostly logistical issues in areas such as athletics, due in part to driver shortages),

—why he provided a cost estimate for starting 15 minutes later than now but not 30 (because if East and West are finishing at 3:50 p.m., that means some kids are already getting home as late as 4:30 p.m.),

—why he only looked at compressing the bell times for two options but not all four (it’s just a sample and can be applied to other models),

—how many minutes could be saved by improving a difficult high school egress (about three to five minutes),

—what a possible solution to that egress may look like (some districts have suspended non-bus motor vehicle traffic on nearby roads in order to allow buses to get out and

—how does ridership change when school start times are adjusted (every district is different).

[Newly elected](#) Board of Ed Chair Brendan Hayes said it would be important “to understand traffic and the impact this will have on our teachers and all of our staff.”

“We do not want to create a situation where we are making a great change while creating other major problems for the town or staff in terms of turnover,” he said.

Prior to the Board's regular meeting, 26 parents, educators and students spoke during a public hearing, all but two of them in favor of starting school later.

In speaking in favor of later start times, they cited scientific data regarding adolescent sleep patterns, rising anxiety and depression, among other mental health problems, pressures and time crunches with respect to homework, safety concerns with some kids waiting at school bus stops in the dark, and increased risk of substance abuse and car accidents.

Several parents shared anecdotes about their own kids' sleeping patterns, moods and eating habits, including side-by-side comparisons with children in their families who attend local public schools with early start times versus those who attend other schools that start later.

Lucy Dathan of Silvermine Road said she has three kids aged 15, 13 and 11 at both Saxe and the high school. She noted that in June, the [Board decided](#) that in the fall (now, winter starts Dec. 21) it would form a committee of stakeholders, including parents.

"As of today, as far as I am aware, that doesn't seem to have happened and no one from the Board has mentioned it again," Dathan said. "I would like to know what the board would be doing with the information that they hear today, and what is the specific timeline of action is."

Dathan said she herself has been active in the pro-later start time group for two years "and we seem to be no closer to doing the hard work of an implementation plan. "

"I totally understand that we want to ensure that we evaluate the issue properly to ensure success and to learn from the mistakes of a hasty implementation with our neighbors, as I have discussed with Dionna," she said, referring to Board of Ed Vice Chair Dionna Carlson.

"I would also like to know how can we have a healthy debate when all communication appears to be one-way? I believe it is an obligation of the Board to let us know how they are thinking about this important topic, so that our community knows where they stand and can discuss it openly. So, in summary, my question is: What are you going to do next week and next month, specifically, to make a decision on this? And when are you going to form an actual working committee to do this hard work?"

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Bryan Luizzi has said a working group composed of district administrators have taken a lead in studying later school start times. (Such a group, without Board members or parents, is not subject to sunshine laws.)

During the meeting, by way of introducing Walsh, Luizzi said that the district has been seeking "to learn as much as possible about the school start times questions and issues in the context of student wellness."

"We are, as a district, fully committed to doing all that we can for the health and wellness of our students," he said.

In looking at school start times, gathering information has been time-consuming, Luizzi said.

“There has never been an attempt to delay or purposely slow anything,” he said. “This is purposeful work that takes time, conversation, research.”

The process “is not flipping a switch,” he said, but looking at “a complex ecosystem around the school.”

“As proud practitioners in New Canaan, when we bring something forward and we are going to make a significant change, we want to be sure we have looked at all of the outcomes of that, intended and unintended, to be sure that we are most prepared,” he said.

Board of Ed member Sheri West said that parents should know that school board members are listening “and that we heard all of their very clear comments,” and also that they, too, “care deeply about the district” and are “working hard to make the right and best decisions for district.”

Noting that so many parents are deeply engaged with the issue, West asked whether the Board could form a committee with parent representation.

“I know that part of the frustration that we heard from some of the parents was that the fishbowl approach does not allow the bilateral communication that they are seeking,” West said. “So I am wondering, in terms of moving forward, if we should talk about how we engage all stakeholders in the process.”

Hayes said that makes sense so long as it is “done in such a way where we can actually accomplish something.”

It is a “tough thing to set up a body like that” with the “right representation” that still allows “people to come in and really contribute while not making it a complete free-for-all,” he said.

Regarding the formation of a working committee, Hayes later added, “I do not know when exactly is the right time for that.”

Luizzi said that district officials have weighed “lots of variables” already and must understand even more information.

“There are lots of people who have done quite a bit of research in town who believe—and I understand why—that this is the single most important thing and that cost is not a factor,” he said. “And there are other folks that say this is a very important thing and cost is a factor.”

Moving forward will mean balancing such considerations, he said.

“Ultimately it will be the Board making the decision around direction and future and what is the best thing that we can do,” he said. “But having a group together to talk and to surface other things can certainly help.”

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Walsh said “the biggest challenge I find are districts who rush the process” and that the Board of Ed should expect to conduct a “litany” of meetings prior to making a change.

He sketched out broad next steps for the school board, including routing studies and trial runs, meetings with district transportation officials, parents and faculty, and discussions with the bus service contractor about emerging vehicle and staffing needs.