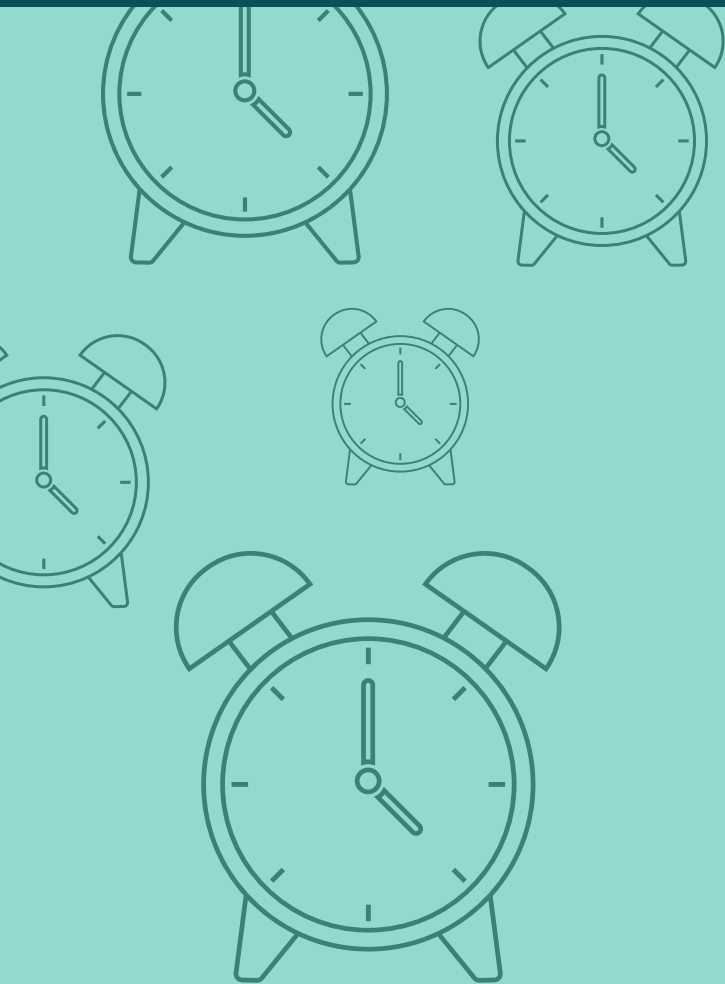




# WAKE UP TO CHANGING SCHOOL START TIMES

5 Critical Concerns to Put You on the Path to Bell Time Change Success



# WAKE UP TO CHANGING SCHOOL START TIMES

## 5 CRITICAL CONCERNS TO PUT YOU ON THE PATH TO BELL TIME CHANGE SUCCESS

School start times are the duct tape of transportation. The impact of a school time change makes it imperative that this complex process include many different voices in order to design a plan that maximizes benefits – while establishing a process for implementation that enhances the opportunity for successful implementation.



School start times are the duct tape of transportation. Changes to these times can help support reducing school transportation costs, addressing the school bus driver shortage, and supporting the Start School Later Movement. The universal nature of this tool makes it critical to ensure how to properly apply a revision of school start times to a specific condition or question that is to be addressed.

Addressing school time changes is fundamentally about how to best establish the demand for transportation services that will be met by the supply of bus drivers and buses. The impact of a school time change on both transported and non-transported students makes it imperative that this complex process include many different voices in order to design a plan that maximizes benefits and mitigates impediments – while establishing a process for implementation that enhances the opportunity for successful implementation.

When embarking on a school time change, considering five critical steps for a successful bell time implementation will put both transportation operations and school districts generally in a position to succeed.

# 1

## DEFINING CONSTRAINTS

First, a school district must create an understanding of the fixed and variable aspects of the actual routing assessment that would support a school start time change. This necessitates designing a framework of available options to understand the ideal bell schedule and how all of the schools and bus routes can fit together. If one bell time moves earlier to accommodate another school starting later, for instance, that will affect what time those students need to be at the bus stop, when they will arrive at school, and what time they will leave from school. For younger students, parents and administrators may be concerned about having them standing at the bus stop too early or in the dark, and likewise, elementary school students may need extra care options after school if released earlier than other students who care for them, such as older siblings or babysitters. On the other hand, older students and their parents may be concerned about end-of-day release and how that may affect afterschool activities, sports and part-time jobs. Administrators at both the district and school levels must consider other aspects such as teacher contracts and the agreed length-of-day stipulations, as well as breakfast offerings or afterschool options for lower socioeconomic status students. When it comes to the school bus transportation itself, bell time changes could shift ride times, stop locations and traffic patterns. In busy cities, for instance, a 10-minute difference in the morning or afternoon could dramatically shift efficiency and how long students sit on the bus.

# 2

## ROUTING ANALYSES

Once school district leaders have defined their constraints, they can begin analyzing routes that may best fit a change to school start times. In particular, experts should look at the numbers around average run times, including when the first student boards the bus and when the last student departs the bus, as well as capacity utilization and how efficiently buses are used and filled. If ride times are typically 30 minutes, for instance, new bus tiers must accommodate those ride times in order to use the buses for more than one route in a school day. An additional layer of analysis can identify the optimal pairings between the tiers by moving around bell times and taking into account the “dead time” between runs. As part of this step, school administrators must also break down the costs of service to understand the true cost of providing school bus transportation and how a school time change could affect those costs. Calculations should include capital expenditures, the fleet, fuel, employee salaries, employee benefits and maintenance. If this can be calculated per year, per day and per bus, the numbers will give a clear indication of whether a change will truly benefit the district. For instance, will

reducing the district's fleet by five buses really make a difference, or will a capital investment in 10 new buses actually improve performance and routes? The analyses in this step should narrow dozens of options to the top best-case scenarios.

# 3

## REFINEMENT AND ASSESSMENT

With the most viable scenarios in mind, district leaders can test new options against the current baseline to measure how real-time performance may change under new school start times. Working with particular constraints, such as traffic patterns or afterschool activities, these projections can show the reality of what may happen when one school shifts earlier and another shifts later. These test runs often lead to important conversations among stakeholder groups, including school board members, staff, school bus drivers, parents, teachers and community members, to make compromises and choose the best option possible. Third-party transportation specialists can facilitate these tough conversations to find consensus and the best fit for the community. At this point in the process, committees with members of each stakeholder group may also form to debate the pros and cons of the top scenarios. It's essential to include various stakeholders in the conversation at this step to ensure that all constraints have been addressed and to build community buy-in before any bell change implementation occurs.

# 4

## DECISION STRUCTURE

As a decision is being made about the change to school start times, a defined structure and a clear, outlined timeline are essential for ensuring order, fairness and efficiency throughout the debate process. It's helpful to have a strong, vocal superintendent and central administration leaders who are willing to guide the changes, be open about the reasons why they're pursuing the idea, and explain to the community how to support it. Financial, operational and medical reasons backed by science have helped school districts across the country to organize and support their proposed changes. To facilitate the process, administrators must also set clear deadlines, hold open meetings and create tailored communications for the different stakeholder groups to keep them informed and on board with the changes. Once a decision has been made and the best scenario has been chosen, administrators must also begin the actual re-structuring of the school transportation plan and re-routing process to ensure that the buses, tiers and bell times will line up accurately. If new buses must be ordered, this is the time to complete financing and purchasing so test runs can occur before the next school year starts. Third-party transportation companies can take on the role of

an “interim route manager” during this step to handle the new routing structure so school transportation staff can focus on the day-to-day demands of the current school year. This “safety stopgap” also ensures that the transition occurs correctly and is organized sustainably.

# 5

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT

During the final step of a successful school start time change, school administrators prepare for the next school year and train school transportation staff to take over the new routes and management. This is also the time to re-engage the community with outreach messages to prepare for the change, which could include communications with local small businesses, young professionals and senior citizens who live near schools and may be affected by new traffic patterns, although they aren't directly involved with the school system on a daily basis. Community members, parents, teachers and students should also talk about final questions related to afterschool care for younger students, afterschool activities for older students, sports events, and extra accommodations for additional groups that need their own routes, such as special needs students, dual enrollment college students, and vocational and technical school students. Third-party transportation consultants can lead these conversations based on other successful bell time changes in different districts across the nation to reduce adversarial tension, minimize pockets of resistance, and build positive engagement.

## CONCLUSION

As sleep research continues to ring clear, school administrators and advocates are acknowledging that students in middle school and high school may benefit from starting school later. Bell times starting later than 8:30AM have been proven<sup>1</sup> to be a better fit for the natural circadian rhythms of adolescents, improving not only health but also their academic performance.

Districts who want to shift their school times should begin with the five critical concerns discussed herein, while creating options and communicating frequently with stakeholders. National transportation consultants can provide the expertise to analyze options, test new routes, communicate clearly to community groups, and facilitate the school time change as school administrators advocate for the cause and continue to fulfill their daily duties.

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<sup>1</sup> AASM position: *Delaying middle school, high school start times is beneficial to students.* American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Par 2, [aasm.org/aasm-position-delaying-middle-school-high-school-start-times-is-beneficial-to-students/](https://aasm.org/aasm-position-delaying-middle-school-high-school-start-times-is-beneficial-to-students/)

With national expertise across a variety of school districts with a broad range of operating conditions and political concerns, TransPar is an organization that can help districts actualize a successful school start time change. Facilitating this effort to minimize the possible confusion, hesitation, or adversarial pushback from key players can be a key role from a non-affiliated, third-party, subject matter expert.

Most importantly, the combination of local expertise and national perspective can make the partnership between a district and a third-party consultant a highly effective strategy to achieve the educational and operational benefits of a successful school time change.

#### **About TransPar**

TransPar is a leading organization that offers an array of products and services representing the most comprehensive and responsible services in the student transportation industry. And we do this all while keeping your students safe and improving the cost and quality of your school transportation operation.

Our experience with student transportation programs of all sizes includes school districts that own and operate their own school bus fleet, school districts that utilize contractors, and school bus contractors themselves, thereby allowing us to provide innovative solutions to the entire spectrum of student transportation needs.

TransPar provides Management and Staffing Services to develop solutions for difficult operational questions and problems; Advisory Services to deliver resources and expertise that transportation contractors and organizations often cannot access on their own; and Fleet Management Services and Technology Products to help customers create the strong foundation necessary to support effective service delivery. So no matter your needs, we are your all-inclusive solution to creating a successful, reliable, and profitable student transportation program.