
Changing School Start Times: Denver, Colorado



148 Schools • 72,000 Students
Before: High School-7:30 am-2:30 pm
After: High School-7:30 am-4:15 pm

Summary

Denver Public Schools have adopted a change in high school start times that is a bit unusual. As a result of a change in the transportation system, Denver's high school students now have a flexible schedule and can choose their start and ending times. This movement was led by their superintendent and planned and implemented by district staff. The only major barrier was convincing parents of the safety of public transportation.

Profile

Denver is a large urban district. Denver Public Schools runs 13 high school programs and a Career Education Center that together serve over 17,000 students. Denver has always prided itself on its varied and flexible programs. The district allows each school a lot of local discretion in determining the internal schedule and the programs that it will offer. However, all high schools have always started at 7:30 am. Prior to the change, Denver Public Schools provided transportation to all students who attended neighborhood schools and lived at least 3.5 miles away. They also provided transportation to all students attending magnet schools across the district, to special needs students and for all athletic programs.

Challenge

Denver initially met a lot of opposition to the idea of mandating a later start time. But once they had solidified their proposal of switching to public transportation and a flexible schedule, the main concern in the community was about the safety of the public transportation for students.

Champions

The superintendent of Denver Public Schools proposed that this district look at two issues: bus transportation and school start times. The staff then researched these and developed the idea of switching to public transportation and allowing flexibility in scheduling. While they did have opportunities for public comment and maintained a steady flow of information, the district staff was responsible for all of the planning for this change.

Journey

After the superintendent proposed that transportation and scheduling be studied, the district staff produced an information report. They found research on sleep and school start times and talked to other districts that had made changes in either system. The staff was convinced that later start times were important for high school students. But after presenting this plan they met immediate opposition from parents and students who were worried about extracurriculars, jobs and childcare for younger children – all the issues that commonly surface in the discussion of later start times. So the district backed off of this proposal and looked for another solution.

They decided to investigate the impact of switching from a yellow bus system to Regional Transportation District (RTD) services. The district looked at different factors such as ridership, ride times and distance from bus stops in both systems to determine the feasibility of the switch. What they found was that for many students ride time would decrease, and the overall district average was an increased ride time of only three minutes. Students were also very close to the RTD bus stops. They also determined that based on current ridership, the district could actually save money by paying for the bus passes for students to ride RTD and canceling the yellow bus runs.

Parents who were concerned about safety on the RTD buses were comforted by several facts. The current

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voluntary student ridership on RTD exceeded the ridership of yellow buses, indicating that it was a safe and reliable mode of transportation. Principals reported very few problems with this transportation. RTD also has one of the lowest crime occurrence rates in the country.

All of the high schools did surveys of their students about what schedule and time frame they would prefer. The results indicated that very few students wanted the change because they were committed to their activities after school. But the district predicted that these numbers would go up over the years as new students entered the schools who were not conditioned to the system of early start times.

At the February 5, 2004 school board meeting, a proposal to switch to RTD buses and to open the high schools from 7:30 am-4:15 pm, allowing students to choose a schedule appropriate to their needs, was presented. The issue was discussed at two subsequent meetings, one public hearing and one with presentations by the high school principals about their views on the proposals and the results of their discussions with students and parents. On March 18, 2004, a final report for action was presented to the board and adopted.

Solution

Denver's 12 high schools are now open from 7:30 am-4:15 pm. While each student has a minimum number of hours that he or she must be at school, each student can choose when they will start and end their day. This was possible because the students were now able to ride the public buses at any time during the day.

The district provides RTD passes to all students who live more than 3.5 miles from the neighborhood school that they attend and to students attending magnet schools across the district. The yellow buses still run for special needs students, athletes and elementary and middle school students. The district also established a set of parameters involving ride time, number of transfers, and the difference in ride time from the old system. In cases where these parameters were exceeded, where possible, the district has provided a different transportation option such as an express bus pass, or paying to have additional buses added to certain routes.

The number of classes offered at the high school at a particular time is based on student demand.

Implementation

The district and RTD worked together to find a plan that would be at least cost-neutral. The final plan

benefits both because RTD had higher ridership, and the district saved about \$750,000 annually on the transportation budget. They were able to get rid of about 60 buses.

Schools were flexible about athletic practices, which were scheduled either before or after school or during the last two periods of the day.

Teachers were given the opportunity to choose to change their schedules. Enough teachers were willing to shift to provide for the number of classes that moved. No new teachers were hired, and no teachers had to be paid more.

The district and RTD combined resources to provide information to families about the change. Question and answer sheets were posted on both Web sites, as well as sent home with students to their parents.

Results

The transportation aspect of the change went well. The few logistical problems were solved within a month. There were very few complaints, even though the change affected thousands of students.

In the first year, about 20% of high school students chose a later start to their school day (after 8:00 am), and almost 10% chose to start at 9:00 am. The district expects, however, that this number will go up over time, as students see the benefits and new students enter the schools.

The district anticipates being able to implement many new programs as a result of the success of this change. These include making computer and science labs more available for student use; providing tutoring opportunities, study skills classes and ACT/SAT prep courses; and allowing students to take extra classes to graduate sooner or catch up.

The bus passes that students were issued can be used in the evenings and on weekends without any additional cost. This means schools can host activities at these times and students have an easier time getting there.



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