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Will JM Students Get to Sleep In?

By Sophie Braccini

For several years, Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School principal Joan Danilson has hoped to build a consensus around the idea of starting the day at JM later than the current bell time of 7:50 a.m. Backed by scientific research, Danilson believes the time change would not only increase student academic performance, but it would simply make the students happier.

In spite of seemingly high parent support, key factors still need to be analyzed, such as the allocation of Lamorinda bus resources.

Of the three Lamorinda middle schools, JM students arrive at school the earliest. Most middle schools in the state and across the country start school after 8 a.m., with some starting as late as 9 a.m. Locally, Orinda Intermediate School starts at 8:45 a.m., Stanley Middle School in Lafayette starts at 8:15 a.m., and Walnut Creek Intermediate at 8:25 a.m. JM school psychologist Kathleen Day, Ph.D., noted during a parent presentation on Feb. 25 that not following the natural sleep pattern, or sleep phase delay, is linked to poorer academic performance, poor long-term memory and decision making, increased risk in traffic accidents, as well as depression.

"Children are asked to wake up earlier as they transition from elementary school, right when their circadian rhythms start changing, their melatonin production shifts, and they naturally go to sleep later," said Day. In a Stanford study called Summer Sleep Camp, elementary, middle and high school aged children lived in quarters with no natural light or indication of the time of day. "The results showed that children needed the same amount of sleep, between eight and a half and nine and a quarter [hours]," said Day, "but starting around 10 and 11 years of age, they fall asleep later and wake up later." Pre-teens and teens have a hard time falling asleep before 10 or 11 p.m.

"It is important for school districts to regularly test existing conditions per research and engage our stakeholders in discussions about what is best for student learning," said Moraga School District Superintendent Bruce Burns. "The district's charge at this time is educate students, staff, parents and the community about sleep research and a possible later start time at JM, and to solicit their feedback."

In the most recent parent-student-staff survey in Moraga, 20 percent of the parents believe that the present 7:50 a.m. start time is the best option, while the remainder favored a later start time, with 8:20 and 8:40 a.m. being the top two favorite alternatives. Among the students, 32 percent favored the present 7:50 a.m. start time, with the favorite alternatives being 8:20 and 8:50 a.m. Thirty-eight percent of the children expressed concern that a later start time would affect their extra curricular activities. Among staff, 42 percent rejected the idea of a change in schedule; one of the teachers' major concerns was that students have a hard time focusing after lunch.

The parents who attended the Feb. 25 meeting expressed support for a later start time. One parent said he would adapt his schedule, while another said she would make the needed adjustments for the benefit of her children. Another parent noted that after-school time would not be impacted since getting up later would mean that the students would also be able to stay up later.

The main difficulty of changing the bell schedule, according to Danilson, is the busing of students. She said the Lamorinda School Bus Program would not have enough buses to add new routes for JM. The buses that service Moraga currently travel more than one route at pickup and dismissal. "There needs to be a 35- to 40-minute difference between the elementary and middle schools start bell time so the buses can drive two consecutive routes," said Danilson.

When one mother asked how Orinda and Lafayette managed the system within the Lamorinda School Bus program, Danilson indicated that in Orinda there was a 40-minute difference between the elementary and middle school start time.

According to the Lamorinda School Bus Program website, www.lamorindaschoolbus.org, which provides the bus route schedule for all the Lamorinda schools, elementary and middle schools in Lafayette start at roughly the same time and enough buses are provided to accommodate them. Lafayette has eight bus routes total, Moraga has 10, and Orinda has 10 for the middle school alone,

and eight routes for the elementary schools.

The school board will hold a special public meeting regarding the question of the possible change in the bell schedule on March 22. Follow-up surveys will be conducted after the meetings. The school board will hear an update and recommendation in April. The board will be in charge of making the final decision regarding the possible change in bell schedule.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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