

From the Superintendent...

As this calendar year draws to a close, I realize that school has been in session for less than 60 days yet many of us are already turning our attention to next year. Not to 2007 but to the 2007-08 school year. I hope you will make time to read school committee member Susan Iuliano's article about the FY08 budget process that is in the newsletters and on our web site this month. For many of us, we are also looking at next year's school schedules, space utilization, hiring needs, and addressing new state and federal mandates.

A driver (no pun intended) in many of our decisions is home-to-school transportation. It is a significant part of our budget and we are often limited in what we do, or how we do things, by the bus schedule. I know people have heard me say on more than one occasion that busing is the "tail that wags this dog."

First let me say that I firmly believe that providing bus transportation for students is the safest, most efficient way to move thousands of young people in the morning and afternoon from home to school and back home. While it is not part of our core academic mission, it is part of our responsibility to ensure all students get to and from school safely and on time.

Second, I believe that the drivers, dispatchers, and managers at First Student Transportation, the company we contract with for our transportation services, are caring, competent and safety-oriented people. Their job is very difficult under the best of circumstances and the responsibility they assume every time they get behind the wheel is tremendous. Given the hours and miles driven each year, often under very difficult conditions, their safety record is stellar and I applaud their service.

Despite all efforts, there are glitches and problems that regularly occur around home-to-school transportation. For as much as these frustrate you, we are equally frustrated.

Student behavior issues too frequently occur. The safety of our children is something we will not compromise on, especially when it comes to behavior that distracts the driver and puts everyone's wellbeing in jeopardy. We ask that parents continually reinforce the need for good behavior of their children at all times on the bus.

There are the missed stops, late buses, combined buses when a driver is absent, wacky-Wednesday due to the L-S schedule, student bus lists that are not current, late parent calls changing a student's plan to ride or not ride which all lead to potential problems, delays and frustration.

Every year we work to improve the system and to prevent the glitches from reoccurring. However, there is one factor that has become obvious this year more than ever before. I now have serious reservations that we will be able to meet the start/dismissal times of our schools with the number of buses for which we currently contract. Adding buses and the related labor costs is very expensive and not an option given the tight budget that we face and given that the state no longer reimburses school districts for transportation costs. Bus fees generated when families within a 2 mile radius of the school opt for bus transportation only offset a portion of the

actual cost. So we are now looking at adjusting the school times for 2007-08 as a possible, minimal cost solution to the problem.

To clarify, this change is not related to any adjustment to the school calendar or the number of early release days that may be adopted for next year. From our analysis of the route system, the number of riders and stops, the distance traveled, and the Route 20, town center, Concord Rd, Hudson Rd traffic pattern, it appears likely that we have to adjust school times to make the busing system work. We want to end the situations where elementary students are waiting 30-40 minutes for a bus after school (with teachers volunteering to supervise beyond their work day.) We want to ensure that the students arrive at school on time and in a frame of mind to begin learning.

Interestingly, if you look back 10-15 years, our school times haven't changed much. In 1993-94 for example, Noyes and Haynes were our only elementary schools and they started at 8:55 a.m. and dismissed at 3:10 p.m.; Curtis' hours were 8:05 a.m. to 2:10 p.m. These are approximately our school times this year. In 1999-00, the year Loring reopened our current school times were set in place. However, our enrollment was only 2,739 students compared to 3,302 today. Even with more buses on the road, transporting 21% more students than we did in 99-00 (and 43% more than in 95-96) to two more schools, across a route system with more miles, more traffic and more special circumstances, and doing it within the same time frame, is just not possible.

To that end, I want to give you an early alert that school times for next year may change. For some schools the change will likely be minimal, for others it may be more significant. Hopefully in January we will have worked out the details and will share them with you so that you can make the necessary accommodations. Like almost every decision we make, I know that some of you will love the change and others will find it most inconvenient. Please understand that we appreciate what a change in school times can do to a family routine. That is why it is not done often and will be announced early.

We will endeavor to keep any change as minimal as possible, but we believe we can no longer ignore the structural problems that exist. We can no longer try to solve the problems one symptom at a time. Altering school times will not solve all transportation problems, but maybe the wagging tail at least will no longer be a barrier to this dog moving forward.