



July 7, 2023

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Michael J. Martirano, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Subject: School Start Times and Transportation Updates

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide Board members with extensive information related to the decision to change school start times and updates to the work currently being done in advance of our School Start Times Update at the July 13, 2023, Board of Education Meeting. Additionally, I will provide responses to questions recently submitted by Board and community members.

The Decision to Change School Start Times

On April 15, 2021, the Board of Education [directed the Superintendent](#) to review and evaluate the current student school start times and to prepare a recommendation of suggested new start times for the 2022-2023 school year. On February 10, 2022, the Board [voted to approve the recommended timeline](#) to develop adjusted school start times for anticipated implementation during the 2023-2024 school year. As part of the process to make the changes feasible logistically and financially, the Board [approved necessary changes](#) to Policy 5200 – Student Transportation on May 26, 2022. Finally, after a comprehensive Board process that was led by a consultant from Decision Support Group, the [Board approved making changes](#) to school start times for the 2023-2024 school year on February 23, 2023.

The driving purpose behind the Board’s decision to push back the start of school to a later time was because of the overwhelming data and research that indicates later start times allow students more sleep, positively impacting their ability to remain alert during the instructional day. I continue to support the purpose behind the Board’s decision, and we were able to make a decision that is being considered in districts across the nation.

Modifying Policy 5200 – Student Transportation

To make the desired adjustments to school start times in a no cost or low-cost manner, [Policy 5200 - Student Transportation](#) required modification. The most significant change to policy was an expansion in non-transportation areas. The changes made to non-

transportation areas make them comparable to other districts and are as follows:

- Pre-K: from .50 to 1 mile
- K - Grade 5: 1 mile (unchanged)
- Grade 6 through Grade 8: from 1 mile to 1.5 miles
- Grade 9 through Grade 12: from 1.5 to 2 miles

Additionally, for elementary school students, distance from bona fide residence to school is now based on measurements from residence property line to school property line. Previous policy language measured distance from bona fide residence property line to school entrance/door. For middle and high schools, however, the bona fide residence property line to school property line was already current practice. An adjustment was also made to the upper allowable limit of distance to a bus stop in such a way that the walking distance from a student's bona fide residence to an established school bus stop is no greater than the eligibility for transportation distance as outlined in Section III.F.1. With that said, we do not currently have any bus stops further than 1 mile from the students' residence.

Finally, the policy now allows for a transportation registration process to be instituted in order to establish an efficient student transportation system.

There are several benefits of the policy changes made by the Board, including:

- Enabling an adjustment to school start times in a low cost or no cost manner while considering the ongoing driver shortage,
- Ensuring efficient use of transportation resources, and
- Maximizing transportation service effectiveness.

Additional Information Related to Student Transportation

Next, I will provide updates and information on several items related to student transportation and the start of the 2023-2024 school year.

Alternative Vehicles

Our contract with Zum allows for up to 50 vehicles to be used that are not buses and do not require the driver to have a Commercial Driver's License. This is another tool in our toolbox to address challenges that may arise due to the changes being made to routes and the inability to run double-back routes. Having this available contingency provides me with additional confidence that we will be able to support students throughout the county this school year.

Meeting with Zum

I am scheduled to meet with representatives from Zum on July 12 and look forward to receiving a progress update on the number of drivers that have been hired and the number of applicants they have currently. I will provide Board members with an update following that meeting.

RTA Services

A reminder that Howard County will once again provide free bus passes to Howard County students, and we will market that opportunity to families through our system and

school communications channels. Additionally, I am grateful for the RTA who agreed to provide posters to middle and high schools where students have easy access to existing RTA routes. School staff will be sure those posters are displayed in visible areas throughout the school where students can easily access the information.

Meeting with Columbia Association

I met with representatives from Columbia Association to discuss the current walking paths in Columbia. The purpose of the meeting was to confirm understanding of the school start time initiative and ensure walking paths were properly maintained for safe travel for students and families. Additionally, Columbia Association will be prioritizing clearing the pathways students use to travel to school on days when there has been inclement weather.

Free Bikes 4 Kids

HCPSS has a partnership with Free Bikes 4 Kids, a non-profit organization that collects new and gently used bikes, restores them, and distributes them for free, along with a new helmet, to children in need. We are so grateful for their partnership and the wonderful resources that bikes can be for so many of our students.

Answers to Board Member and Community Questions

Several questions have been posed by Board and community members and I will address each one.

Q. Are we able to revert *Policy 5200 – Student Transportation* to its previous form, or at least the non-transportation zone distances?

A. I want to be very clear that any changes to the non-transportation areas, distances to bus stops, or transportation registration changes made in Policy 5200 on May 26, 2022, will require all school start times to revert back to the 2022-2023 school year schedule. Otherwise, it is likely that thousands of students would not be able to receive transportation due to the significant increase in drivers and buses that would be necessary.

Staff have considered this question very thoroughly and believe it would require approximately 528-548 bus routes to be able to implement changes to school start times under the previous version of Policy 5200. This is 50-70 more than the 478 routes currently being anticipated in the current form of Policy 5200. It would also likely require approximately three months to make the changes.

As we have experienced a driver shortage of between 85-95 drivers for several years, it would not be possible to make a change successfully that would require any more routes than the 478 being planned.

There is not a viable solution that allows changes to school start times to be implemented and changes to Policy 5200 to be reverted to its previous form.

Q. Is it possible to keep changes to school start times if only elementary non-transportation zones were reverted back to the distance in the policy's previous form?

A. Due to changes made to Policy 5200, there are approximately 1,200 students from pre-k through grade 5 who now live in non-transportation areas. Making a change for just elementary students would result in the need for approximately 24 additional bus routes. As was stated in the response to the previous question, an increase of any routes above 478 would not be able to be implemented successfully.

Q. Can we continue with the new start times if we change the measurement of the campus to home?

A. Since only the measurement from campus to home changed for elementary schools, this question is nearly identical to the previous question and the answer is the same. An increase of any routes above 478 would not be able to be implemented successfully.

For informational purposes, Policy 5200 states: Transportation services will be available to students when the measured distance between their bona fide residence and the home school is greater than the following, except as otherwise specified within Policy 5200, Implementation Procedures. Utilizing transportation software, **measurements will begin at the property boundary or the school/school campus from the closest adjacent suitable pathway and end at the property line of the bona fide residence:**

- Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5: 1.0 mile
- Grade 6 through Grade 8: 1.5 miles
- Grade 9 through Grade 12: 2.0 miles

Prior to the policy change, the measurement for elementary schools was from bona fide residence door to school entrance/door.

We estimate that approximately 24 additional routes would be necessary just to serve elementary should this part of the policy be reverted to its old form.

Q. Is there anything written into the Implementation Procedures of Policy 5200 that the Superintendent can do to provide transportation to more students while maintaining the new school start times?

A. The Implementation Procedures of Policy 5200 does not permit the Superintendent to reduce the demarcation line, which is the action that would result in transportation to more families.

Q. What is the status of the appeals made by families in non-transportation areas who believe they should receive transportation service for issues of safety?

A. There are currently 78 total active appeals from communities representing a total of 15 schools as of 7/5/2023. Decisions for appeals will be communicated to the appellant by August 1, 2023. The Office of Transportation is working through the process detailed in the Implementation Procedures for Policy 5200 as quickly as possible, understanding that

this process requires the Student Walking Route and Bus Stop Review Committee, made up of government agencies and a community member, to consider the appeal.

However, we understand that a formal appeal is not the only process families may use to voice concerns. The changes to Policy 5200 moved approximately 3,500 students to non-transportation areas. To date, the HCPSS Office of Student Transportation has received complaints from approximately 230 families and has responded to all of them. Families have also called their child's school, sent emails, and testified at Board of Education meetings. We have investigated all safety concerns that have come to our Student Transportation Office through those various methods of communication. Again, I want to reiterate that staff from our HCPSS Office of Student Transportation have responded to all concerns they have received. Staff will continue to monitor the process of the Student Walking Route and Bus Stop Review Committee as they work to resolve the 78 appeals, they have received.

Q. Would additional funding help with solutions to provide transportation to more families?

A. Additional funding would only be beneficial if we believed that additional buses and drivers would be available to run more routes. However, we have no indication from our contractors at this point that they would be able to exceed the 478 routes anticipated to provide transportation to students who live in transportation areas and registered for the service. We have had positive dialog with the contractors and anticipate we will be able to fulfill the 478 routes, but it is important to reiterate that we have experienced a significant shortage of drivers for several years so receiving additional funding for additional routes is not a solution.

Instead, this would likely result in routes not being covered due to the inability to conduct double bus runs to schools. This would create significant hardships for families expecting a bus that is unable to be provided.

In short, additional funding is not a viable solution and may result in other unintended consequences.

Questions from Community Members

I received several questions from community members and will provide the Board with information in response to these questions. Note: In some cases, the wording of the questions is not exactly as submitted, but the intent of the questions is intact.

Q. Why was a broad request for input not requested prior to changes that will affect the daily life of thousands of students and their families.

A. The most recent adjustments to Policy 5200, which occurred in May 2022, did not undergo a full committee review, but instead was adjusted by the Board as a policy modification. When a policy does not receive a full committee review and is modified only, a public hearing is not typically held or required. The Board chose to pursue this modification process because the adjustments to the policy required to implement later start times had already been identified and a full review was not deemed necessary.

Q. Why did the Board of Education choose a more expensive out of state school bus contractor rather than give raises to local school bus contractors that have been reported by news media as being significantly cheaper? Additionally, why wasn't broad public input requested for this decision?

A. Even with the historically locally held contracts of past years, we have had a significant shortage of bus drivers necessary to cover all of the required routes for the past several years. Again, that number fluctuated between approximately 85-95 drivers, short of what was required.

Additionally, there was language in the existing contracts and RFPs that greatly limited the school system's ability to adjust or cancel contracts that were not being fulfilled. This alone required a new RFP to be created and issued.

The RFP was posted, and all transportation companies (new and current providers) had the ability to submit a proposal and were encouraged to do so during meetings with HCPSS staff. HCPSS staff reviewed the submissions and chose the contracts that were best for the needs of our district. This included Zum, which is based in California. This company serves several major districts across the country and is confident they are able to fill all required routes because of their competitive pay and the benefits packages they offer drivers. Only one local company, Tip Top Transportation, put in a bid and they were also awarded a contract. These two companies will serve 288 routes and the remaining routes will be served by other local contractors we will continue to use under their existing contracts to fulfill the routes that the newly awarded contracts will not be able to cover.

The newly awarded contracts are inclusive of fuel, mileage, summer school, special education, athletic events, field trips and other bus services. In addition, the new contracts give us the flexibility to increase or decrease the number of buses up to 10% within the existing pricing structure while the previous contracts required a new bid or temporary contracts and did not guarantee service for those adjustments.

The RFP process is not one where public testimony is sought. The Board of Education sets the budget, and the public is able to provide testimony on the entirety of the budget. Once it's approved, the RFP process is done publicly and all awarded contracts are approved during a public meeting of the Board, but without a public hearing.

Q. Why were some hazard buses cancelled despite promises that hazard buses would not be cancelled with revisions to Transportation Policy 5200.

A. Hazard buses remain. There were a few instances of identified hazards that did not transfer to the new routing software. However, those instances have since been evaluated with the County and planned for accordingly. Where hazards were confirmed, transportation service has been reinstated to those families.

Q. Please provide a list of safety provisions that you will make for children and adolescents walking on heavily wooded paths with poor access to help in attempts of sexual abuse and assault.

A. Even before the recent adjustment to the non-transportation areas, we had thousands of students who lived in non-transportation areas and used our county roadways, sidewalks and paths to get to and from their school building each day. As mentioned earlier, I recently met with Columbia Association staff to discuss safe pathways for travel throughout Columbia. Additionally, I want to remind the Board and community members that a benefit to implementing later start times is more daylight during the morning commute.

We have found that parents, guardians, neighbors, family, and friends do a wonderful job of being sure the children in their communities are able to travel to and from school safely and we work with the Howard County Police Department to ensure safety throughout all of the pedestrian walkways located throughout the county.

Additionally, families have received a [link in recent communications](#) that include tips for our student pedestrians to stay safe.

Q. Please provide to families receiving a safety assessment at least one route that was determined by the Transportation Office to be safe enough for walking to school and meeting the distance requirements in the new non-transportation areas.

A. Staff in our Student Transportation Office are happy to provide this information to families that request it.

In many cases, there are several ways to travel between home and school and we believe parents/guardians are able to make the best choice for their child, whether that is car transportation, public transportation options, or walking one of several routes.

Q. For schools affected by school bus cancellations that are already overwhelmed with backed up car rider lines, please provide a plan to hire police, crossing guards and/or additional staff to ensure daily child safety at drop off and pick up times.

A. As has been described at public Board of Education meetings, the Office of School Management and Instructional Leadership is working with every school principal to evaluate their bus and car loop procedures to ensure all arrival and dismissal processes are safe and efficient. School administrators sent surveys to the community in the spring and are using the collective feedback to inform and refine the arrival and dismissal process. Additionally, staff from central office and the County are assisting schools as needed through this process. Principals will continue to evaluate processes for improvement at each school as students return at the start of the school year.

Q. Please describe what resources are available to parents/caregivers who neither have the time nor money to hire help transporting children to and from school after school buses are cancelled.

A. As mentioned earlier, this is not the first year the school system has had non-

transportation areas.

An example of ways that families have been resourceful and creative has been a “walking school bus” where parents, guardians, friends, family members and neighbors took turns escorting a group of students from a neighborhood walking to and from school each day. Families may reach out to their schools or the Department of Program Innovation and Student Well-Being for more information and support for implementing similar initiatives in their neighborhoods.

Q. Please describe the system that is in place to track and report student injuries, sexual abuse, assault, and/or deaths that occur during walks to/from school or during school drop off/pick up. Please describe how this information will be made available to families.

A. Our close relationship with Howard County Police Department results in awareness when students from our school are involved in an incident both during the school day and outside of the school day. I am confident that we will be made aware by police or family members should a child experience some sort of trauma so we may be able to provide the appropriate supports and resources to that student and family.

Additionally, we will continue to follow our processes for providing information to our school communities that we are permitted to share to be sure all families are informed, and all students are safe.

We will also continue to share the [link to families](#) of tips for our student pedestrians to stay safe.

Q. Please describe the membership of the "Student Walking Route and Bus Stop Review Committee." How are community members chosen to serve in these roles? How do you ensure that parent concerns are addressed appropriately without bias?

A. This committee has been in place for years and consists of 3 members: the Howard County Bureau of Highways Traffic Engineering Division, the Howard County Office of Transportation, and a community citizen. Staff from HCPSS are not part of this committee, which is intentional to maintain impartiality.

We are sure to avoid any conflicts of interest with individuals selected to serve on this committee as HCPSS policy states, “Persons with a pending student walking route and school bus stop appeal will be temporarily prohibited from participating in related activities of the Student Walking Route and School Bus Stop Review Committee.”

Q. Many parents need to hire before and aftercare to care for children due to school bus loss. Most programs are already booked for next year. Are you working with Parks & Recreation to create more spots? What other solutions are you making available to families?

A. As the school system does not provide before and after care, we support the providers that utilize our schools for this service and work with them to accept as many children as

their staffing and the location can safely allow. This will continue and I know these programs wish to serve as many children and families as they can manage.

Finally, Board members, I would like to provide an update on staffing the open positions in our Office of Student Transportation. The Office of Student Transportation continues to work closely with the Division of Human Resources to fill the approved positions. This week, we are conducting interviews for two Routers, an Area Field Specialist, and an Area Manager. We are also finalizing an offer for a Transportation Specialist in the coming days. The Technology Analyst position will need to be reposted as the candidate declined at the last minute from the start date of July 3rd. An analyst position needs to be posted to backfill an internal promotion. However, let me assure you that the required work is being completed with existing staff.

In closing, **I will reiterate once more that changes to reduce the non-transportation areas identified in Policy 5200 would require the reversal of the Board's decision to change school start times and I do not recommend that action.** We understand that change can be difficult and one of the primary reasons the decision to change school start times so far in advance of the start of the 2023-2024 school year was to provide families with sufficient time to adjust to the changes. We will continue to be responsive to families throughout the summer and the school year.

I hope the information contained in this memo is helpful as you work to amplify the messaging, we have been sending to inform your constituents and families in Howard County.

Copy to: Executive Staff
Board of Education Office