

Superintendent's High School Schedule Communication

INTRODUCTION

In a year of uncertainty, Norwell Public Schools' community of teachers, students, parents, administrators and Committee members have worked hard to provide instruction to students. We have learned we are better at some things than others as we balance ever changing state safety guidance, new state regulations for mandated instructional time, and negotiate new agreements with the Education Association of Norwell (EAN) on working conditions. We have all learned that changes to health metrics could be made at any time for a variety of reasons. Those changes in data and science, not political pressure, determine whether we are all in school, learning remotely, or in a hybrid model. We have worked collaboratively with the EAN for years to benefit the education of our students. Among the things we have learned recently and over the years is that we must be prepared to assess decisions made along the way, consider new information or evidence, and be prepared to change what is either not working well or not in compliance with modified rules or regulations.

Norwell Public Schools has a strong educational system based upon instructional practice and what happens in the classroom between our teachers and our students. Every year we build a schedule of classes to maximize educational offerings for students. Because many students at the High School are experiencing extended absences due to quarantines and the nature of the schedule, last Monday the School Committee directed the school administration to review and make recommendations to change the High School Schedule. Since that time frustration and concern have been expressed by teachers and students regarding the High School schedule change.

Although not everyone will agree with how this has been handled, or what our recommendation will be, we owe people an explanation of how we have arrived to this point.

HISTORY

The High School Schedule was one of many important pieces needed in order to reach an agreement to return to school in the hybrid model.

Many models were considered. One of the driving factors was how to limit transitions and maintain cohorts as we entered school in accordance with the state guidance we were given.

On August 12, the EAN presented the current schedule with the understanding that the teachers were in favor of the 5 period a day rotating schedule. The schedule was accepted with the understanding that there would be unforeseen implications created by the schedule with two drop periods.

Initially this created situations where ten teachers were required to teach five courses in a row on certain days without allowing for a preparation period. The administration quickly addressed the issue by alleviating duties for these teachers on the day after they taught 5 classes in a row. On November 16, the negotiations between a School Committee subcommittee and EAN leadership were established to discuss considerations for full in-person learning transitions and

other types of adjustments that could be made to improve teaching and learning for students and teachers. The high school schedule was specifically identified based upon concerns regarding the consistency of student learning exacerbated by the two period drop schedule.

The first formal meeting took place on November 23. Nine negotiation meetings have taken place between November 23 and 25. At the first meeting, one of the topics discussed focused on the High School schedule and making adjustments for more consistency in learning. We wanted to explore student workload, student remote days, and the difficulty of tracking and entering curriculum, attendance, and assignments for teachers in the Schoology platform.

We all agreed that conversations regarding the High School schedule with teachers were needed. It was agreed that given the myriad of adjustments that teachers were navigating up until that point, along with the end of the first term, the upcoming Thanksgiving and winter holidays, parent conferences, and professional development schedule modifications, we would hold off on these conversations with teachers until the first week of January.

Unexpectedly, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, issued changes to the Student Learning Time regulations on December 15 with a required implementation date of January 19, 2021.

When teachers returned during the first week in January, they were asked to consider making changes to meet the new student learning time regulations. Teachers were also asked to take a teacher survey regarding the return to full in-person learning - while positivity rates were consistently rising. High School teachers were also asked to process implementing a new schedule. There were many factors to process in the first week returning from winter break.

The High School teachers voted to maintain the current schedule on January 6 and this was acknowledged on January 8.

We continued to examine the effects of the schedule on learning time more closely. This process led us to analyze individual student schedules and look for patterns. As more information was learned, we were able to identify how student learning time was being affected. Our examination revealed we were not in compliance with asynchronous hours at the High School. This was a result of the way students had been registered for classes and because of the two drop periods created by the 5 period rotating schedule.

A meeting was scheduled for January 22 to apprise the EAN of the findings and negotiate the High School schedule by requesting to reopen the MOU due to changes in regulations. This meeting was abruptly ended with a denial of the request.

On January 25 the School Committee directed the school administration to address the High School schedule and support/instruction for students on extended absence due to quarantine for implementation on Monday, February 22, 2021.

DATA

The concerns around the 5 period rotating schedule with two dropped periods a day are as follows:

- Prior to the determination of a schedule, every effort was made to limit class size numbers and alter elective courses from full year to half year to provide more access with limited numbers of students in each course.
- This created student schedules with more study halls and less credits than in a traditional school year.
 - This year the average credit load for all students in grades 9-12 is 28.75 credits; the usual average is nearly 32.5 credits. The effect of this is that many students have an additional open period in their schedule per semester
 - The grades most affected by this are freshmen, seniors, juniors, then sophomores, respectively
- While teachers are teaching their full schedules on a daily basis, students are not seeing all of their courses on a daily basis.
- For every dropped period, the student and teacher will only meet for in-person instruction every 4th day. With any schedule interruption such as a holiday, or early release day, the in-person meeting may extend to 5 or more days. For example a student having an in-person geometry class on Wednesday will not see their teacher until the following Tuesday.

Additional information can be found in the document titled,
The Effects of Schedule Structure on Student Learning Time in a Hybrid Model.

SUMMARY

The goal was to address student learning time and consistency. We recognize it has been extremely difficult to make timely adjustments during a pandemic. It was our sincere hope to continue to have productive negotiations with the EAN regarding additional findings about the High School schedule.

We have striven to balance the needs of our students, faculty and community, and make decisions based on what is in the best interest of our students.