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## Now or Later...the summer update WPS 8-1-24

Word count for this update: 698

Approximate Reading Time: 3 minutes

A colleague of mine mentioned a practice that she recently adopted of starting each update with an approximate reading time and word count so that readers can best decide if they want to read it now or later. It sounded like a good idea to me, so we will give it a try.

Even though we still have plenty of summer left to enjoy, the new school year is just around the corner. I am always excited about the start of a new school year with all of its new beginnings and discoveries. However, this is the first summer update that I have struggled crafting. I can't ignore the elephant in the room of the specific challenges this new year brings as we spent so much time in difficult budget discussions last year. We now find ourselves transitioning into the scenarios that were projected for this school year. Most specifically, as schedules are being finalized and class lists developed, the class sizes we are seeing throughout the district and across various grades are higher than we have typically seen and will be something with which everyone will need to adjust. Many of our elementary sections will be in the 24-26 range while some levels of courses in grades 6-12 might reach as high as 30 students in a section. We also know that FY26 will present similar challenges and we encourage families to follow budget information in our public meetings. Even with these challenges, we remain committed to our mission and vision:

We value the development of curious lifelong learners who are responsible, empathetic members of the community, demonstrating innovation through a wide variety of opportunities within inclusive, joyful learning environments that embrace their variability and honor their diversity.

We believe in preparing our students for active, positive participation as both local and global citizens by developing and fostering creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking.

While the number of students within any given class can certainly complicate that, it does not make that commitment impossible. Our wonderful Westford Public Schools staff will continue to focus on building positive relationships that provide the foundation for those inclusive, joyful environments.

Finally, something many people will be excited about...admittedly some will not...both middle schools will be piloting a new program designed to help support social emotional engagement. Prioritizing mental health and wellness for our students and staff has been one of our initiatives within our Strategic District Improvement Plan. This fall, in an effort to better support that initiative, both middle schools will explore establishing themselves as cell phone free environments. Data is clear that the increased dependence and frequency of cell phone usage negatively impacts students' ability to be fully present within those learning environments and contributes to the majority of conflicts and social anxiety that exists. Over the years, many different strategies have been implemented in trying to reduce the distractions and influence that these devices have on our young adolescents during the school day yet the temptation to use them and the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) grows. After the school year gets started and both middle schools have been able to share information about the new expectations and logistics of this pilot program with their students, the plan is to use Yondr cell phone pouches to secure the devices during the school day. Everything will be fully communicated prior to the implementation including the reminders of how families can get in touch with the schools if necessary as texting will no longer be an option for students during the day. It might seem odd to invest in such a pilot after expressing concerns about our operating budget, it is important to note that the cost for this program will be supported by our School Choice account and not impact the FY25 or FY26 budgets. Our initial plan is to pilot this program at the middle schools this year as Westford Academy has been exploring other options to reduce cell phone usage over the past year and will continue to adjust their practices based on what they have found to be successful and best support their students.

Sincerely,

Chris

Christopher Chew, Ed.D

Superintendent of Schools

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