



Washington Township Should Have Never Swapped the High School & Elementary Schools' Start & End Times

September 24, 2022 by Educator Barnes

My husband, sons, and I attended the Washington Township Parent Council Network (PCN) meeting on Wednesday evening. I hadn't attended one of those in person since before the

pandemic. PCN is an outside organization that seems to have insider access to district leaders and officials. I selectively attend their meetings when there are issues that are of interest.

Attending was a last-minute decision. I really just went to give my teacher stare to Mr. England, the outgoing transportation director ... okay, let me be right. I also went to hear the transportation department explain themselves, and I wanted my boys to see the real process of interacting with people in leadership. I never want them to be afraid to show up and be seen. I also needed district leaders to have to do their canned presentation in the presence of children who were harmed by their failures. I explained at great length on my Educator Barnes' Facebook page the actions that led up to their bus driver shutting the door in their faces and driving off, and leaving them at the bus stop. Apparently, the bus driver received consequences. The consequence was not termination or suspension since she was there the next day. However, on that day, she didn't bother my children. She found out that my family was not here for the foolery, and she apparently didn't want to continue to mess around and find out (the real ones know what "mess" should really be).

I didn't ask any questions, but I took in a lot of information and shared a recording of the meeting with parents who were unavailable or nervous about attending. Honestly, those other parents were a strong motivator for my attendance because I wasn't expecting to hear much that I already didn't know. There were a few key takeaways:

The district should have never switched the elementary and high school start times. Before this school year, the school levels started the day in this order: high school, elementary, and middle. This school year, it is: elementary, high school, and middle. So, why the change? After surveys to families and research being shared about secondary students doing better with a later start time, the school times were shifted to ensure middle and high school students had a later start time. As a former middle school & high school English teacher, I was already familiar with the research. My personal experience with teaching secondary students with a late start time versus an early start time also confirmed that the research was accurate. Regardless of what the research says, implementation is critical. The research doesn't say secondary students can't learn when their school start time is earlier; it states that it could be helpful to start school later.

Washington Township has eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school. The district spans the northeast side all the way to the northwest side. The high school is in the middle of the district, but it is on the northeast side. Families like my family, whose boundary elementary school is Crooked Creek which is the school that is on the farthest end

on the Northwest side, have one of the longest distances from their homes to the high school. Last school year, the buses started at the center of the district at the high school, and then the following routes were at the elementary level, where half of the schools are on the northeast side, and half of the schools are on the northwest side. From there, they went to the three middle schools where one is in the center of the district, one is on the northeast side, and one is on the northwest side. Since the buses were already coming from an elementary school, they were not too far from their middle school routes.

Enter this school year. Now the buses start across the district at the various elementary schools, go to the center to the high school, and then back out to the middle schools. Before the district leaders even put swapping the elementary and high school tiers, simple math should have told them that there is not enough time for drivers to drive those distances since the district goes across the north side, from east to west. I can get from my house to North Central on a light traffic day in 20 minutes. Usually, traffic is not in my favor, including before all the road construction began. On average, it typically takes 25 minutes, and if you add in the construction, it can take 30 minutes or more. That is me driving from one location to the next. However, somehow Washington Township leaders thought school buses could leave the center of the district at North Central stop multiple times and get my children and other families' children to Westlane Middle School. The math ain't mathin' as some of the young folks say.

The next takeaway is that **some parents do not consider how their questions and concerns impact others**. I was waiting for white moms to bring up concerns that ... well, to be frank, put their needs above others or request something that wasn't in the district's control. This is based on my experience at previous PCN meetings which tend to be mostly attended by white women. As predicted, they centered themselves and their needs. One white woman complained about an intersection (insert facepalm). A district representative had to explain they had no control over the streets, the lanes, or how quickly a stoplight changes.

Another white woman complained about the fact that two buses come into her neighborhood around the time her children are scheduled to go to school. One of those buses had few students. This white lady went on to complain that she questioned whether some special education students needed to be on a bus with fewer students and wanted to know if a kid in her neighborhood bus could be switched to her kids' bus, so two buses weren't coming into her neighborhood. Then she noted that her kids get picked up on the second, more crowded bus. Even though this might sound like she is trying to help to ensure that all kids going to the same school ride the same bus, which might help shorten the times of a couple of routes, all I

heard was a desperate mom trying to mess with another student's transportation needs to benefit her family. Who does that? The audacity! Dr. Taylor, assistant superintendent of Washington Township, explained that if a student receives special education services and their individual learning plan (IEP) states the student needs to ride a bus with fewer kids, the district has to comply because IEPs have legal ramifications if not followed.

Then there was the white lady who asked how bus drivers could get help with children who act like "heathens." Since I'm sure she wasn't including her own children, I wonder which children in the district she thought were heathens. Dr. Taylor informed her that Washington Township students are not heathens.

Last, it was abundantly clear that Mr. England was the wrong person to be the transportation director compared to the incoming director, Marla Palacios. Both were present at the meeting. Ms. Redd, Washington Township assistant director of human resources, shared with families some of the feedback from Washington Township bus drivers and the steps the district was going to take. Personally, I would have found it challenging to sit at a meeting where a list of concerns was read from people I supervised. Mr. England sat right there and didn't seem to be phased much by the commentary. Some changes that will be made are that Palacios, the incoming director, will have an open-door policy, ensure communication from drivers is responded to within 24 hours, and provide more support for bus drivers. Each time Palacios spoke, it was with confidence, and she shared some of the solutions she has implemented to improve transportation, although Mr. England is still in charge until October 3. It is unclear whether he is leaving the district at that time or will be shuffled into another role.

At the end of the day, transportation services this school year have been abysmal. They have caused hardship to families, including impacting parents' work schedules. Most importantly, it has snatched away instructional time. It does not matter if secondary students do better with a later start time if they miss instruction.