The members of the School Start Time Committee are aware that there are those who are concerned about proposed changes to school configurations and start times. We will leave the issue of grade and building arrangements to those who have spent their time on how to best address our district’s space constraints. We do want to respond to concerns noted re: changing school start times. But before doing so, it is important to make clear that the district reorganization plan was not decided in order to make changes to school start times possible. The two committees came to their conclusions separately. In fact, the SSTC recommended the change in start times be made for 2016-17 while the reorganization plan was for 2017-18. Jim Adams advocated holding off on school start time changes precisely because he felt it would be less disruptive to make both changes at the same time.

First, we would like to acknowledge that change is always hard. There is no easy way to make adjustments. As has been noted by opponents to the recommendation: “[C]hanging a school’s starting time provokes the same kind of emotional reaction from stakeholders as closing a school or changing a school’s attendance area. A school’s starting time sets the rhythm of the day for teachers, parents, students, and members of the community at large. The impact of changing that starting time is felt individually, and the individuals who are affected need to have their views heard and legitimized so that the discussion can move forward in search of common ground.” The significance and impact of any potential change was always central to the work of our committee as we did our work.

As also advocated in that article, we understood that it was essential to seek input and perspectives as part of our process of determining what was “appropriate and feasible” for Ashland. We solicited input from community members, high school students, and school staff through open forums, surveys, personal conversations with a range of stakeholders, and frequent publicity of the issue that also included our willingness to hear from anyone in our community about this issue. Our recommendation was not made in a vacuum; our process was decidedly informed by the guidance that “only through open discussion of their concerns can stakeholders develop a shared understanding of the facts that will lead to a reasonable—but purely local—decision.” We feel that our exhaustive work over 17 months shows that we understood the need to move thoughtfully and carefully and to consider both the research but also potential challenges.

After a thorough and in-depth review of the scientific literature, the committee came to the unanimous conclusion that the science and research on adolescent sleep cycles, as well as the benefits of adequate sleep on the emotional and physical health of adolescents, clearly and unequivocally supports later school start times for high school and middle school students. While cell phones and other screens are challenging all of us in getting appropriate amounts of sleep, the scientific research is clear there are significant biological differences for most adolescents in the shifting of their sleep cycle later which definitively affects their sleep when asked to rise early. Most problems have more than one factor contributing to them. Moving start time later for adolescents is one significant thing that schools can control to address adolescent sleep deprivation in order to improve student health and well-being.
Data from districts that have moved to a later school start time has also disproven the frequent argument that moving start times later will just have student’s starting homework later and getting the same amount of sleep. A large amount of research has determined that is not the case; rather, because a later schedule better fits most students’ sleep-wake cycles, students do indeed sleep more and are then more efficient and productive with their time.

Concerns have also been raised about having grades 3-6 arriving home first before grades 7-12, which may result in some families experiencing an increased financial burden since older siblings will not be able to watch younger ones after school. The committee strongly considered this issue as noted in our final report. While we are sensitive to financial implications for families, we felt that the need of adolescents for more sleep was so compelling that this had to be the main driver of our decision making. It is also important to note that when we did our survey of parents we did not find a significant number of parents who noted this issue as major concerns for their own families.

There have also been concerns noted regarding high school students’ ability to participate in athletics, other school activities, and after-school employment. There are many parts of the country where high schools begin later and students there are well able to participate in after-school activities and to have jobs. Regarding school sports specifically, we consulted with Ashland’s Athletic Director and while there would be some arrangements to work out with other districts, it was not felt to be an insurmountable challenge. And there were expected to be only a handful of instances where it would be necessary for student athletes to leave school a bit early to travel for games.

Another area of concern that has been noted is for the possibility that the proposed plan will result in increased bus costs. A key principal governing our work was to come up with a plan that would not result in increased cost. Combining grades 7-12 on one bus route starting in 2017-18 at the same time as reorganization of grades would NOT result in increased cost. And waiting until 2017-18 when the bus contract would be renegotiated would allow for re-drawing of routes so that travel times can be similar route-to-route. With regard to financial costs to the district, any potential loss of revenue due to shorter windows for field/facility rental or increases to field lighting costs were considered by the committee but not seen as more important than the health and well-being of our students.

A proponent stated “that steps need to be taken to ensure this is the best bell schedule for the community of Ashland.” That was also the intention and goal of the SSTC and of Jim Adams in making the recommendations. After 17 months of careful consideration of the overwhelming body of research to support a change as well as the potential issues in making such a move for our community, soliciting feedback and involving stakeholders, we feel that we did indeed take such steps in coming to our recommendation.

Ashland Public Schools School Start Time Committee
March 1st, 2016