

Stanly County Schools
2019/2020 Bell Schedule Q&A

Late arriving school buses coupled with inconsistent pick-up and drop off times result in frustrated parents, students, and school administration, and often leads to students missing instructional time. With the changes we are seeing throughout the world, safety is a major concern not only at school but at the bus stop. The bus driver shortage is primarily responsible for problem. The leadership recognized this problem a year ago. We took action then. We had not allowed certified staff to have dual employment. Why? The many nuances in the way we are budgeted make this difficult to separate pay and adhere to fair labor standards. Our team reached out to our legal staff and other districts to find a way to address this. Simply, we have begun allowing teachers, coaches, and other certified staff to drive.

Even with this change in policy, we continued to see issues. We asked our local legislatures to voice these concerns that we were beginning to see across the state, and bus driver pay was increased. Again, this has not encouraged enough people to apply due to the lack of hours. We have worked with child nutrition, principals, asked for input from other districts, and have been able to offer dual employment where possible and do have some teachers, coaches, and child nutrition personnel, driving.

In addition, the Stanly County Schools (SCS) Transportation Budget Rating is less than 90% which requires a local budget contribution of \$264,000 annually. SCS Administration is researching solutions for these issues that resolve the issues and result in the least amount of change for parents, students, and schools.

The (SCS) Administration/Board of Education is considering a change in bell schedules for the 2019/2020 school year to address these issues. The recommended solution involves implementing a staggered bell time system for SCS. The following Q&A's are intended to address questions and concerns that may arise over the course of discovery, planning, and implementation of a staggered bell schedule arrangement.

Q. What is the definition of a staggered bell time system?

A. A staggered bell time system strategically establishes bell times for schools that allow school buses to be used at more than one school. Some schools will have start times that are earlier in the morning (for example, 7:30 a.m.) while others will have start times that are later (for example 9:00 a.m.).

Q. What are the proposed bell times?

A. The following bell times are proposed for SCS:

High Schools: 7:55 a.m. – 3:10 p.m. (North Stanly, South Stanly, and West Stanly – **No change**)

- Albemarle High: 7:45 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
- Stanly Academy: 8:00 a.m. – 2:27 p.m. (No Change)
- Stanly Early College: 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (No Change)

Middle Schools: 7:55 a.m. – 2:55 p.m. (North Stanly, South Stanly, and West Stanly – **No change**)

- Albemarle Middle: 8:50 a.m. – 3:55 p.m. (**An alternate option is under consideration**)

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Elementary Schools: Staggered bell times as follows:

- **7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.** (Norwood, Badin, East Albemarle, Endy, and Locust)
- **9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.** (Aquadale, Richfield, Central, Millingport, Stanfield)
- Oakboro Choice: 8:30 a.m. – 3:15 p.m. (**Unchanged**)

Q. What is the most important key to successful operation of a staggered bell schedule?

A. Design of the bell time schedule. There must be sufficient time between schedules (both morning and afternoon) to allow buses to run their routes and arrive on time. This concept, known as Run Time Window (RTW) is the most critical aspect of implementing staggered bell schedules.

Q. What are the objectives of implementing the SCS staggered bell time system?

A. District objectives are as follows:

- Ensure safe and on-time transportation service.
- Resolve the bus driver shortage; provide full time (FT) benefits to existing bus drivers.
- Increase the transportation budget rating.
- Change as little as possible to minimize impacts on students, parents, and staff.
- Reassign supervision of bus drivers to the Transportation Department.

Objective: Ensure safe and on-time transportation service.

Q. How will staggered bell times improve service levels?

A. Staggered bell times will allow fewer buses to operate, requiring fewer school bus drivers. Utilizing current school bus driver staff will be sufficient to cover all bus routes which will stabilize and improve service levels. It is important to design bell times that allow enough time for buses to arrive on schedule.

Q. How does changing bell schedules protect instructional time?

A. A lack of bus drivers has created inconsistent bus service resulting in late arriving buses on school campuses and students that are not picked up or are picked up late by their buses. When buses arrive late, students are not as prepared for learning as they would otherwise be if they were on a consistent schedule. Actual class time may also be missed when buses arrive late. Staggering bell times will reduce the number of bus routes/drivers needed and thus improve Transportation's ability to ensure buses are on schedule daily.

Objective: Resolve the bus driver shortage; provide FT benefits to existing bus drivers.

Q. How does a staggered bell time system resolve the bus driver shortage?

A. By staggering bell times, SCS will be able to park between approximately 20 school buses. Those buses will no longer need drivers. The Transportation Department will work to ensure the remaining buses have drivers assigned to every bus. SCS currently requires newly hired teacher assistant positions to obtain a bus license.

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With fewer buses operated and the requirement for these non-certified staff to have a license, the district will have ample bus drivers to meet the current demand.

Q. What are the other options available to SCS to address the bus driver shortage?

A. The bus driver shortage is not just an issue within SCS; it is a statewide and national problem. Raising pay is often suggested the best way to resolve the crisis. Just last year, bus driver pay was increased by the General Assembly in an effort to address the shortage; although greatly appreciated by current bus drivers, the pay increase has not resulted in any significant increase in available bus drivers. SCS already requires dual employment from TA's, so that is positive and results in SCS being in a better position related to bus driver availability than other districts without this requirement. The only other feasible alternative is to reduce the number of buses within the district, thereby reducing the number of drivers needed to operate those buses. Thus, the staggered bell time solution is the only feasible alternative.

Q. Why is recruiting bus drivers so difficult?

A. Recruiting bus drivers is difficult for the following reasons:

- Early a.m. and late p.m. work.
- 9 months of employment
- 6 hours per day or less for most drivers bus drivers
- Lack of FT benefits
- Low wages
- Lack of support from school administration/discipline related concerns
- Difficulty in getting/maintaining school bus licensure

Q. Will all school bus drivers receive 6 hours per day and receive full time benefits?

A. Yes; all bus drivers that are driving a bus as part of a dual employment arrangement (custodial, cafeteria or TA) are either already eligible for/receiving benefits or will become eligible under the new arrangement. Bus drivers that are employed as a bus driver only will be offered FT status under the new schedules so long as their hours worked is 6 hours or more.

Objective: Increase the transportation budget rating.

Q. How does a staggered bell time system resolve the budget rating issue?

A. The current budget rating issued by the NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is 89.35%. Local funding in the amount of \$264,706 is needed to support the Transportation budget. (Source: DPI). Operating fewer buses improves transportation efficiency as measured by DPI. According to the budget rating simulator, parking 20 buses will result in a 100% budget rating. The rating includes an increase in benefits cost of \$175,000 for bus drivers that move from part time to full time status (30 hours per week). Hiring Transportation Coordinators will require that additional buses be parked to preserve a 100% budget rating – (Estimated 3 - 5 buses).

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Q. What other ways are there to increase the budget rating?

A. The budget rating is made up of three core factors: the number of buses operated, the amount of money spent to support transportation operations and the number of students transported. Reducing operating cost increases the budget rating; the addition of students to buses also can increase the budget rating.

- Adding 464 additional student riders would result in a 100% budget rating. (Assumes all other factors remain the same, which is unlikely; adding additional riders will increase route time which also affects cost, so it is likely that these numbers would have to increase to achieve the desired goal).
- Decreasing cost by \$400,000 would result in a 100% budget rating; reducing cost by this amount is not feasible.

Implementation of a staggered bell schedule is seen as the best option to gain budget rating efficiency.

Objective: Change as little as possible to minimize impacts on students, parents, and staff.

Q. How important is the concept of changing the fewest bell schedules possible to obtain district objectives?

A. Change is often difficult, no matter how large or small. Fact is that the smaller the change, the less difficult the change becomes resulting in fewer impacts are on the control group. SCS looked at a number of bell schedule options; the option to primarily adjust Elementary bell times is the option that satisfies SCS objectives with the least amount of change in bell times.

Q. Why adjust Elementary bell times as opposed to High school or Middle school?

A. High school and Middle school service territories are geographically larger resulting in longer bus routes. In order to ensure success with a staggered bell schedule, there has to be enough time between schedules to run the routes and arrive on schedule at another location. With the length of routes for High schools and Middle schools, there is not sufficient time between bell schedules to allow for buses to arrive on time. Consider the following route time information:

- High/Middle schools: Average Route Time – 84 minutes; Run Time Window Available: 75 minutes
- Elementary schools: Average Route Time – 66 minutes; Run Time Window Available: 90 minutes

Thus, Elementary schools have sufficient time between bell schedules to support a staggered bell schedule whereas High/Middle schools do not (with the exception of Albemarle High/Middle Schools).

Also, length of instructional day figures into the available RTW. High schools have a length of day of 7 hours, 10 minutes; Middle schools – 7 hours; Elementary schools – 6 hours, 55 minutes. The current proposal preserves the length of day for all schools.

Q. Why not separate High school and Middle school students to allow these students to be transported on separate bus routes. Can we pair High schools and Middle schools similar to how the Elementary schools are paired?

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A. Separating High school and Middle school bus routes will require the districts longest routes to be run twice daily instead of on the current schedule. It is true that fewer buses would be used, but those buses would not be able to arrive on schedule because of the current length of route for those buses.

The most efficient use of school bus resources that allows for on time arrival is already in place with High school and Middle school students riding the same buses. Leaving these schools bell times as they are satisfies the objective of minimizing changes in bell times.

Q. Is it possible to allow all High school and Middle school students to start early (7:30 a.m.) and Elementary schools to start at 9:00 a.m.)? Or could we flip that schedule and allow Elementary schools to start early and High/Middle schools to start later.

A. The RTW problem is the same in either of these scenarios as it is in the question above. High/Middle school routes are too long to pair them with other schools, except in the case of Albemarle High and Albemarle Middle.

Q. What factors were considered for each school when changing that schools bell time?

A. Below are the factors considered for each school:

Elementary schools

- Elementary schools were paired together based on geographic location
 - Norwood (Paired with Aquadale)
 - 7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.
 - Aquadale (Paired with Norwood)
 - 9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.
 - Pre-k Program is at Norwood starting at 9:00 a.m.
 - ***Badin (Paired with Richfield)***
 - ***7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.***
 - ***Further away from North Stanly Middle School***
 - ***Richfield (Pair with Badin)***
 - ***9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.***
 - ***Closer to North Stanly Middle School (allows for built in route coverage)***
 - East Albemarle (Paired with Central)
 - 7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.
 - Offsets potential traffic congestion issues with Albemarle Middle
 - Central (Paired with East Albemarle)
 - 9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.
 - With 5 buses, built in back up support is needed more for the later start time
 - **Endy (Paired with Millingport)**
 - **7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.**
 - **Millingport (Paired with Endy)**
 - **9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.**

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- Pre-k Program is at Millingport starting at 9:00 a.m.
- Locust (Paired with Stanfield)
 - 7:30 a.m. – 2:25 p.m.
 - Locust routes are longer with fewer buses
 - Traffic congestion is potentially worse with a later start time
- Stanfield (Paired with Locust)
 - 9:00 a.m. – 3:55 p.m.
 - Having more buses allows for more backup
 - Stanfield has an EC program, which allows for more transport time
- *Oakboro Choice (No Change)*
 - *Only 1 bus serves this school*
 - *County wide magnet/long route disqualifies school from pairing*

Middle schools

- No change recommended for Middle schools with the exception of Albemarle Middle.
 - Albemarle Middle was paired with Albemarle High since they share the same service territory.
 - Routes are short enough to be able to stagger bell times and arrive on time at both schools.
 - Offsets potential traffic issues with East Albemarle.

High schools

- No change recommended for High schools with the exception of Albemarle High.
 - Albemarle High was paired with Albemarle Middle since they share the same service territory.
 - Routes are short enough to be able to stagger bell times and arrive on time at both schools.
 - Value was placed on having all High Schools on the same or similar schedule.

Q. Schools with a 9 a.m. start time may impact the ability of parents to wait with their students for the bus or drop their students off at school due to work or other scheduling obligations. What is being done by SCS to address this issue?

A. Elementary Schools with a 9:00 a.m. bell schedule will open doors at 8:00 a.m. for parent drop off at the school. Normal drop off time will be 8:30 a.m. for those schools, but school administration will work with staff to ensure students are supervised from 8:00 – 8:30 a.m. for those parents needing an early drop off time. SCS will work with staff to offer enrichment programs for students that are dropped off earlier at schools.

Q. What are the benefits of leaving High school and Middle school bell times unchanged?

A. Benefits of not changing High School and Middle School bell times are as follows:

- No impact on athletics, before/after school activities or employment arrangements.
- Instructional time is protected (fewer early releases for athletics/other activities).
- Less change for students, parents, and staff.

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- All objectives can be achieved without changing High school and Middle school schedules with the exception of Albemarle Middle.

Objective: Reassign supervision of bus drivers to Transportation Department.

Q. What benefits will SCS realize from reassigning the supervision of bus drivers from Assistant Principals (AP's) to the Transportation Department?

A. Currently, AP's that are assigned bus duty are responsible for supervising school bus drivers. A significant part of the day is allocated to ensuring drivers are assigned to buses for that day's runs, both early morning and in the afternoons. Shifting this responsibility to the Transportation Department will allow AP's more time to focus on school specific teaching and learning activities. AP's will retain responsibility for disciplinary action, but the management of personnel duties will fall to Transportation.

Q. How much will hiring Transportation Coordinators cost?

A. The district is budgeting \$40,000 per position (salary + benefits) or \$160,000 annually. Much of the cost will be absorbed through gains in efficiency by parking school buses as part of the staggered bell time proposal. The exact amount of how much will be paid by the state will depend on exactly how many buses are parked and final impact on the transportation budget rating.

Q. Are Transportation Coordinators common in other districts?

A. Yes, many other districts employ Transportation Coordinators to relieve AP's of school bus supervisory responsibilities. Cabarrus and Union Counties utilize these positions along with many other districts.

Other Questions

Q. Assuming SCS moves forward with the proposal, what are the next steps in this process?

A. The following additional steps must be taken to prepare for adoption and implementation of the staggered bell schedule for SCS:

- Meet with Principals to share the SCS proposal.
- Educate parents and school personnel on the staggered bell time concept and the SCS proposal.
- Update Q&A's with responses to questions/issues during the education process.
- Work with Transportation personnel to pair routes and drivers and deep dive logistics (driver assignments, benefits, and associated cost, payroll cost, etc.)
- Prepare job descriptions for Area Transportation Coordinators.
- Communicate with bus drivers regarding the proposal and the specific impacts to their jobs.
- Formal recommendation to Board of Education at April Board Meeting.
- Post/Hire Area Transportation Coordinator positions (July 2019).

Questions from the Parent/Community Feedback Sessions

Q. Why was Option 2 in the presentation not discussed in more detail?

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A. The very first Option 2 shared with the Board involved moving all Middle and High Schools to a 7:30 a.m. start time; all Elementary Schools would have had a 9:00 a.m. start time. This question is answered in detail in the middle of page 4 of this document. Route times are too long for High/Middle school routes to allow buses to arrive on schedule at Elementary schools for a 9:00 a.m. start time. Therefore this option was ruled out as a viable alternative early in the evaluation process.

Transportation staff has been working on additional bell schedule alternatives based on the parent feedback meetings. These alternatives will be shared with the Board for consideration.

Q. What will happen to students that are dropped off early at schools? Who will care for them? What will they be doing while waiting for schools to start?

A. A 21st Century Grant will allow the district to structure programming for students dropped off early. Use of TA's for supervision of students will be utilized to help with this issue. Breakfast will be available for students 30 minutes before the start of school.

Q. Will SCS Transportation bus students to/from daycare centers.

A. SCS Transportation will work with both daycare centers and licensed afterschool programs to transport students to/from school so long as the transportation does not create additional cost for SCS.

Q. Churches and Business are concerned about the impact late dismissals at Elementary schools will have on their programming. What can be done/is being done to address this issue?

A. SCS values the input from our Church and Business leaders during the feedback sessions. In addition to working with these organizations to see if school bus transportation can be made available after school to take students to their programs, we are working on some alternate bell schedules for the Board to consider.

Q. Daycares may or may not have the capacity to handle the volume of students needing before/after school care. And even if they can handle the volume, some parents cannot afford to pay for students to attend these programs. What is being done to address this issue?

A. SCS has met with Daycare providers and has offered to partner with them to the extent possible in meeting the needs of our families. Also, SCS will provide a structured environment for parents to drop off students at their school up to 1 hour before first bell. Parents that cannot afford Daycare or prefer to drop their students off at the school will be provided that option.

Q. Comments were made about cost savings and the perceived emphasis placed on cost savings above other considerations. "The cheapest way is not always the best way." Is cost the most important factor in this decision?

A. The question at the top of page 2 lists the district objectives; while efficient use of funding is a desire for the district, providing on-time transportation services and solving the bus driver crisis are the driving factors for the decision to make changes.

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Q. If bus driver pay is such a concern, why not go to the General Assembly and ask lawmakers for more money for school bus drivers? Would that fix the problem?

A. Two years ago, the North Carolina Pupil Transportation Association went to the General Assembly to ask for a pay increase for bus drivers. That pay increase was granted by lawmakers and, as a result, bus driver hourly rates increased statewide. However, the increase is not significant enough to make up for a lack of hours that most bus drivers simply do not have.

Administration will be discussing this issue with our Board and recommending some alternatives to increase hours available for those bus drivers that want additional hours. The goal is to make positions more attractive and to improve retention of bus driver staff.

Q. It seems that the Albemarle city schools are being treated differently or not fairly as compared to the county schools. How does the district respond to this allegation?

A. The initial bell time proposals were based on the ability to transport students within a given window of time. Albemarle High & Middle along with East Elementary and Central Elementary schools have the tightest attendance zones. Attendance zones that are more densely populated and take less time to travel provide an opportunity to do more with school bus resources than do less populated rural areas. Logistics determined the initial recommendations, not a deliberate attempt to treat schools differently based on population or any other metric.

Q. What happens in the event of an emergency that requires the use of school buses (i.e., an early release due to inclement weather)? If buses have to serve two schools, won't that cause problems?

A. The active management of events that cause school to be delayed, close early or not be open at all is, of course, the responsibility of administration. SCS always seeks to be proactive in the management of such events so as not to place students, staff, and families in harms way. As serving two routes takes more time than serving a single route, SCS will consider this issue when making decisions about school operations. SCS will also continue the practice of working with emergency management, law enforcement, and the National Weather Service to make the best decisions possible related to emergency situations.

Q. The presentation indicated that field trips could be affected because of the need to use school buses at more than one school. If that is true, won't that affect the education of our students in a negative way?

A. The use of school buses on field trips will have to operate on a schedule, so use of school buses will have to be used on shorter field trips. SCS authorizes the use of activity buses for field trips that cannot be performed by school buses, so schools will continue to offer field trips as we have in the past so that the education of our students is not negatively impacted.

Q. The presentation indicated that parents and school staff would receive a survey? Has a survey been sent out or will a survey be sent out?

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A. The survey referred to in the presentation consisted of the feedback sessions held on March 13th and 14th. While a paper survey could have been used, such a survey does not allow for open dialogue for input. Therefore, it was decided that feedback sessions would be a better format for collecting information and suggestions related to this project. Bus drivers did receive a survey related to their employment, but the survey was intended to collect specific information from bus drivers regarding their potential employment status.

Q. Will teacher schedules change as a result of staggered bell times?

A. Expectations for teachers will remain the same regarding their professional teaching duties. If a school start time is earlier or later, teachers will be expected to adjust their schedules accordingly.