

Tweak Committee, Consortia Subcommittee

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Background and Premise:

In September, 2007, the Fairfax County School Board (Board) established a new Transportation Task Force (TTF) for the purposes specified in the Charter to include assessment of school bus system reengineering options and community implications and to identify community acceptable adjustments to transportation parameters and bell schedule changes. To better accomplish the purposes of the Charter, the TTF broke into three committees to focus analysis assuming (1) A “flip” of school start times among the three school levels (Flip Committee); (2) A “slide” of school start times to a later overall start (Slide Committee), and (3) reengineering of the system through “tweaks” or modifications of current operating conditions (Tweak Committee). The Tweak Committee subsequently broke into four subcommittees: (1) Alternative Transportation; (2) Out-Of-Boundary Programs; (3) Transportation Department Efficiencies and (4) Consortia.

Consortia Subcommittee Background and Goals:

Approximately two years prior to the TTF, FCPS developed a high school consortia plan wherein all high and secondary schools were organized into five consortia (A,B, C, X and Y), each of which would include an Academy providing career/vocational services. Specialized course offerings (including non-standard languages, IB, career services outside Academies, and other special courses) were also reviewed with the goal of distributing opportunities as widely as possible among consortia as well as among schools within a consortium, adding programs as necessary to facilitate access to opportunity. Transportation issues were a significant motivating factor to the consortia plan and it was also intended that school administrations would be in a better position to make a variety of course and schedule decisions with their consortium partners based on area-specific needs. The Consortia Plan (2007-8) with course offerings is attached as Appendix I.

The consortia plan is new and not without operational “hiccups” but the Consortia Subcommittee considered that expanding a similar consortia program analysis to include programs (mandated and non-mandated) in elementary and middle schools might demonstrate the extent to which each consortium is now, or can be made, self-contained. Self-containment was seen as having a number of possible benefits, subject to further evaluation, including: (1) Regular and program-driven bussing could take place solely within the consortium, reducing distances and time, and increasing flexibility; (2) the Transportation Department and other FCPS administration and staff would have a better context for evaluating routes, conditions under which transportation will, or will not, be provided, alternate transportation possibilities, depot stops, new conditions/elimination of

some program-driven bussing, academy pupil placement, electronic delivery of some courses; (3) Transportation issues could be addressed by consortium, instead of County-wide, possibly leading as well to the decentralization of the Transportation department to five areas, following the consortia, instead of the current three, in hopes this might increase flexibility and efficiency; (4) Providing students with as complete a range of opportunity as possible, closer to home and community, is not only educationally appropriate but also equitable, and (5) Changes to bell schedules (and other transportation and instructional issues) might be more easily addressed on a consortia basis according to applicable variables.

Preliminary Analysis and Limitations:

The Consortia subcommittee analyzed elementary and middle school programs available in each consortia using as a primary source for this preliminary review, the document entitled “FCPS Out-of-Boundary Programs by School by Mandate” (“Mandate List”, available on the TTF website established by FCPS Transportation.) The analyses, which are useful for illustrative purposes but not necessarily dispositive of current conditions, are attached as Appendix II (Consortium A), Appendix III (B), Appendix IV (C), Appendix V (X) and Appendix VI (Y). It is to be noted that the Mandate List (and thus the analyses) is not exhaustive of all programs, only those for which FCPS currently provides transportation; the Consortia Plan (Appendix I) does not discriminate between bus-provided and own-transportation programs. Similarly, there are ES/MS programs which do not provide transportation (such as Language Immersion, Middle School IB) and evaluation of all programs to consider full instructional self-containment (although desirable) was considered beyond the scope of this review. However, the Subcommittee did consider the list of Gifted/Talented and Honors programs prepared by the Out-Of-Boundary Subcommittee as illustrative of other points. (Attached as Appendix VII)

Due to time and personnel limitations, the Subcommittee was not able to review the extent of cross-consortia bussing (as opposed to out-of-boundary which encompasses everything from “border line” to cross-County). It is to be noted that cross-consortia bussing may be limited to high schools and very specialized programs; in the case of elementary and middle schools, to determine the value/availability of self-containment, it would likely be necessary to review by Cluster or even pyramid.

Discussion and Findings:

The Appendix analyses show that there is already a high degree of program/specialized course availability in each consortium so that each consortium could be fully self-contained with relatively few instructional changes. Some highly specialized programs, such as hearing and visually impaired, would likely not be cost-effective to duplicate. As noted above, while the Consortia Plan had a self-containment benefit for high schools, it might be necessary to construct self-containment consortia for elementary and middle schools using a smaller geographic area to achieve the same benefits.

FCPS has in fact been moving toward diffusion of programs for some time (such as establishing elementary GT center programs in each pyramid) and the inclusive classroom model has also led to more special education students receiving services at base schools. Still, transport of GT and Special Education students to schools other than their base schools continues to stress the bus system and FCPS may need to do a non-

traditional cost/benefit analysis for those non-school based programs given transportation problems and delays. Some will likely need to remain in any event but any reduction in special bussing would be desirable for the system, and likely welcomed by parents and students involved.

It is also to be noted that FCPS has moved, over the last 15-20 years, to much larger enrollment schools than was the norm. There are many reasons for this (not the least of which is cost of new schools vs cost of additions) but there is little doubt that the belief that larger schools were able to provide a wider range of programs was a significant factor, although issues remain as to maximum/optimal size.

However, there has been high cost to transportation since larger schools mean a wider attendance area and therefore more busses running longer routes in ever-increasing traffic. Exacerbating the problem is that transportation issues have not always been adequately factored into instructional and placement decision-making, nor reviewed as circumstances change. Education is the business of FCPS and instructional needs must be pre-eminent but transportation concerns should not be at the bottom of the pile nor viewed as an immutable given. Nor should parent convenience trump all.

The greatly increased quality of differentiated instruction for students at all achievement levels, together with mainstreaming of special education students with in-classroom support, expansion of ESOL programs to nearly all schools, expansion of high school career programs and delivery of some courses by electronic means, and expansion of GT and honors programs (see appendix VII) may belie the past assumption that large schools and/or centralized special programs (with transportation) are automatically needed to meet diverse needs.

The Subcommittee, as noted above, also recognizes that the existing consortia, set up to facilitate high school needs, encompass a wide area. Inefficiencies no doubt exist and consortia may need to be realigned or further parsed into Cluster or Pyramid.

Recommendations

1. FCPS should continue and accelerate the process of decentralization and diffusion of special courses and programs, as well as the use of electronic instruction, so that all students have opportunities available in either base schools or close locations so as to reduce bus rides and/or make any requirement to provide one's own transportation less onerous and more equitable. While program decentralization is not without cost, reducing bus costs, reducing length of rides, preserving communities, and reducing overall traffic and environmental impact may be viewed as offsets. Instructional benefits from shorter rides, timely arrival and increased parental involvement in the base school may also follow.
2. FCPS should consider extending the consortia model to elementary schools and middle schools, perhaps with further delineation into Cluster or Pyramid, in order to accomplish the purposes of recommendation 1. above. As a corollary, FCPS should continue improving the delivery of differentiated instruction so that students' needs can be better met in base schools thereby increasing parent confidence and decreasing demand for programs.

3. Given the wide range of programs already available in each Consortium and certainly as the range is increased, any cross-consortia bussing for mandated programs should require a clear showing of instructional necessity for the student. Cross-consortia bussing for non-mandated programs should not be permitted or permitted only under appropriate conditions such as minimum numbers of students or depot-only (primarily high school programs including TJHST). If self-containment (i.e. consortia) areas are separately created for elementary and middle school, similar rules should apply.

4. Consortia members, with clear direction from central offices and input from transportation staff, should work co-operatively, collegially and with flexibility to distribute course and program offerings, set bell schedules, facilitate student access to educational opportunity and address consortia-specific situations and requirements (including drop-off/pick-up times and bus parking), as well as any other issues which affect the ability of students to access opportunity, arrive at school in a timely, safe manner, participate in activities, and go home in a similar manner.

5. Particularly if the Consortia Plan includes all school levels, the Facilities and Transportation Department should consider decentralization into areas paralleling the Consortia, determine operational advantages and disadvantages, and present a plan detailing resources needed including facilities and parking areas.