

PEABODY

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Schools divided on hours

City rejects grant, Malden accepts it

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | November 24, 2005

Two local school districts were awarded \$25,000 state grants to plan for expanding classroom time. But only one of them will be using the money.

Malden plans to use its grant to prepare for a possible expansion of educational time at the Salemwood and Forestdale schools, which run from kindergarten to eighth grade.

Peabody, however, has turned down the grant, citing a lack of support from parents as one factor.

The two communities were among 16 selected by the state Department of Education last month to take part in the new grant program aimed at helping districts prepare for extending school time by 30 percent starting in the fall of 2006. Schools can meet that goal, which is intended to enhance learning, by lengthening the school day, the school year, or both.

A third area city, Lynn, applied for a grant, but was turned down.

Peabody applied for \$107,000 to plan for extending the school day by two hours at Brown and Welch elementary schools. But the School Committee on Nov. 9 voted not to move forward with those extended hours next fall, and not to accept the \$25,000 awarded by the state, according to Superintendent Nadine Binkley.

"You hate to turn back money from the state under any circumstances," Binkley said. "Money is not easy to come by these days. But I think it was very clear that parents were not interested this time in a two-hour extended day."

Binkley said school officials based that conclusion on recent feedback, including responses they received on a questionnaire distributed at a Nov. 3 forum for parents of elementary school-age children on the extended day program. Of those

responding, 60 said they did not think the district should move forward with the initiative, while 37 said it should, and 20 were undecided.

Further input came from a survey that Binkley included with a subsequent letter she wrote to the parents of all 3,500 elementary school-age children in the city about the extended day initiative. Binkley said only one quarter of the 550 parents responding to the survey said they would be interested in sending their children to the Brown or Welch schools to participate in such a program. (Peabody has an open enrollment process in which children can transfer from their neighborhood school to another school in the city.)

In written comments included with the surveys, some parents expressed concern there would not be funds to implement the longer day. And a number of people said that "the school day is long enough and 'my children need time to be children,' " Binkley said.

Apart from parental sentiments, Binkley said school officials were concerned about the proposed timeline, as dictated by the grant program.

"You are committed to seriously investigating starting" in the fall, "and also to begin negotiating with all the unions. And we didn't want to start that process unless we had every intention of moving forward with it," she said.

But she said the city remains interested in the concept of extended learning time. Mayor Michael J. Bonfanti, has pledged to find another source of funds, if needed, to look at the idea.

"People are very, very interested in extending the school day, because we feel it's something necessary to provide more instructional time," Bonfanti said. But the state grant program "didn't look . . . like a real good fit for the city of Peabody." He said there were too many "what ifs," including the uncertainty of state funding to implement the program.

Peabody had applied for the grant because of a desire to provide for more structured learning time. That same concern prompted school officials to shorten recess at the elementary schools last year, a move that brought heated opposition from some parents.

Heidi Perlman, spokeswoman for the state Department of Education, said it is not unusual for a community to turn down a grant.

"This grant in particular will require a tremendous amount of work. . . . It's a wonderful opportunity if they have the support and if they have the community participation in this that is going to be required for it to be successful. But if they don't, then it's good the district is being honest about that and not setting itself up for failure," she said.

Malden School Superintendent Joan Connolly said her district, which applied for a \$67,000 grant, would use the \$25,000 to "help us explore what this change would be for us and to educate all of us -- the School Committee, teachers, parents, administrators, business people" about it. That effort will include sending teachers to visit schools that have an extended day, and bringing in experts to speak with parents and teachers.

"Whether we actually implement this will depend on the response we get from the stakeholders," she said.

"There is research that suggests a redesigned, extended day will lend itself to improvements in student learning, and it just makes sense. . . . But we need to let people know what the research says, and to let people have input into the design," Connolly said.

Connolly said Malden is focusing on extending the school day as the way to expand school time by 30 percent at the two targeted schools. But "we are also keeping open other options," she said.

Lynn applied for \$35,000 to prepare for possible expansion of school time at several schools, most likely a K-8 school, and one or two elementary schools, said Jaye Warry, executive director of curriculum for Lynn schools.

She said state officials indicated a major reason the city did not receive a grant is it did not specify schools that would be involved.

"We envisioned the selection of schools as part of the planning," Warry said.

Warry said the district was disappointed about the grant. She added Lynn officials would continue to discuss the idea. ■

