

School-day study to proceed

Superintendent: Addition of hours not a done deal

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By Peter Martin, Globe Correspondent | November 20, 2005

Reading school officials have decided to go ahead with a study on lengthening the school day at the town's two middle schools despite concerns expressed by parents in a series of public sessions held to discuss the idea.

Some parents have said that extending the school day by as much as two hours would cut down on after-school activities such as religious groups and private music lessons and diminish family time and free time for children. They also fear the proposal would go forward despite their input.

But school Superintendent Patrick A. Schettini Jr. said he and other school officials have made it clear to parents in a letter and the public meetings that the study in no way means that the longer school day will actually be implemented. Schettini said the district will accept \$25,000 in state funds for the study. He has assured parents their voices are being heard on the matter.

"We had to get through a lot of misconceptions, the feeling that this was a done deal," said Schettini. "We had to make it clear that this is a research and development grant, and we're going to look at our middle schools and how we can possibly improve them."

But at least one parent, Karen Bunch, president of the Parker Middle School Parent Teacher Organization and an opponent of extending the school day, is not sure if school officials have gained the trust of parents.

"There is a lot of concern that once the ball is rolling on this, it can't be stopped," said Bunch. "We're worried that the decision, if left up to the superintendent and School Committee, could be made without the consent from parents."

Reading is one of 16 school districts to receive grants to explore the possibility of lengthening school days. The Department of Education has given the districts until Jan. 15 to decide whether to apply for funding to implement the longer day next

September. The department is offering up to \$1,300 per student in matching funds to help finance a lengthened school day for at least next year.

A department spokeswoman said last week the deadline might be extended if the state law that set up the longer school day program allows such flexibility.

"We want the plans to succeed, and schools to develop plans that will work, so we'll try to be flexible," said Heidi Perlman, communications director for the department.

Schettini said extending the deadline is important. "You can't do valid, real, honest research in eight short weeks; it's not doable," he said.

The School Committee favors exploring the addition of more school hours for many reasons, including increasing test scores, filling in the hours between 3 and 5 p.m. when unsupervised children can engage in risky behavior, and better equipping students to compete in a global market place.

"Our children are no longer competing with students from Winchester and North Reading," said Rob Spadafora, the School Committee's chairman. "They're competing with people in India, Japan, and other nations for jobs."

Those who support the study stress that the grant money will be used to gather information to properly assess if extending school hours is something that will work in Reading middle schools.

"I can't say if I'm for it or against it, because I don't know enough about it," Schettini said. "Answering questions is a big part of the study."

Gael Phillips-Spence, a parent and newly appointed member of the Expanded Learning Grant Planning and Research Team, said, "We should look into it more. How can you be in favor or opposed until you know exactly what it is?" The team is a group of teachers, administrators, and 13 parents who will study the longer school day idea.

Some of the \$25,000 will be spent on paying five teachers extra money to participate on the research team, formulating and conducting a parent-student survey, and making site visits to excelling middle schools, said John Doherty, the assistant superintendent who wrote the grant request.

School officials believe that, at the very least, the grant money provides an opportunity for the community to gather valuable information about learning, even if Reading

decides not to seek additional state funding to help finance more school hours. ■

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