School official: Change almost certain

Staff working on recommendations for school hours, bus routes

By KEITH MATULICH
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Some East Baton Rouge public school students almost certainly will have different class hours when the next school year begins in September, a school system official said on Monday.

The school system's staff has been working on a set of recommendations on how the system will cope with an extra hour of class that has been added to next year's school day to comply with the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education's recently-adopted graduation requirements, according to Associate Superintendent Graydon Walker.

The staff will present those recommendations to the School Board's Administrative Services Committee on Thursday, and a change in school hours is almost inevitable, Walker said. The staff is looking at changes in the hours for all elementary, middle and high school students, but he said the recommendations the staff will make may include changes in any one or any combination of them, depending on which change will allow for the most efficient bus operation.

The big question facing the committee and the board will be what time schedule it will choose.

"That's the big thing, the times," Walker said. "But even when we change the time, it will require more buses. We just want to keep it to a minimum."

Walker refused to discuss what schedules the staff was considering. But he said staff members were looking at proposals that would start the school day earlier and later and studying what effect the proposals would have on students.

A change in the school schedule is "almost a necessity" because adding an hour to the present high school without modifying school schedules would mean that the School Board would have to come up with more buses, he said. The extra buses would be needed because it would mean that high school and elementary schools would be on a different schedule.

"We can't use too many additional buses," he said. "It would cut into our spares, and we don't have enough of them."

A schedule change seems to be the best way to cope with it, he said.

Other options would include changing bus routes so that they would be more efficient, buying more buses or using more spare buses, officials say. The board could decide to adopt any combination of those.

Transportation Director Tom Ed McHugh was in Cleveland, Ohio, last week to consider new bus routes on the Ecotran computer bus routing service. Ecotran has done contract work for the board to design bus routes.

On Monday, McHugh said that he had turned over a large amount of information to the School Board staff on the bus situation, but he declined to discuss what was included in it.

East Baton Rouge Parish now has 665 buses in operation which run about 25,000 miles per week, according to maintenance department figures. The School Board ordered 47 new buses this year, but maintenance officials say they still are 18 buses behind for the 60 buses they must replace.

According to new BESE regulations, students are required to be in class for six hours per day. The School Board voted last Thursday to increase the high school instructional time from five 50-minute periods to six 60-minute periods.

The board did not make any changes in the middle school day, which consists of a seven-period day with six 50-minute periods and a seventh for electives.

Currently, both high school and middle school days begins at 7:45 a.m. The high school day ends at 2:05 p.m., and the middle school day ends at 2:30 p.m. The elementary school day begins at 8:45 a.m. and ends at 3 p.m., with a few minutes' difference in some schools, Walker said.

Those times made it easier to accommodate students and work out efficient bus routes, according to Pat Cosper, assistant director of transportation.

"We work on a tiering system - the first tier was high schools and middle school routes and the second tier was elementary schools and non-public schools," Cosper said. "We'll have to reopen those tiers in the schedule."