

The Newport Daily News

Friday, October 18, 2013

NEWPORT

Schedule helps boost high school attendance

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

Rogers High School Principal Jim Nelson had a surprise for Newport School Committee members this week, when he told them the truancy rate at the high school is running at about 10 percent.

"Did you say 10 percent?" asked Jo Eva Gaines, the committee's vice chairwoman. "That's low compared to what we've had."

While the number still is too high for school officials, it is a lot better than in recent years. In the 2011-12 school year, 38 percent of Rogers High School students were absent more than 18 days, defined as chronic absenteeism, according to the 2013 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook.

The chronic absenteeism rate for all Newport students was 26 percent in the 2009-10 school year. That was significantly higher than the statewide rate of 16 percent that year.

Nelson said he cannot guarantee the good attendance would continue, but he and school staff are working on it. He credited much of the short-term turnaround to a new schedule that went into effect when the high school opened in September. For Nelson, the schedule is only the first step in changes he would like to see at the high school.

Mondays and Fridays now are seven-period days at the high school, meaning students go to all their classes on those days and teachers see all their students on those days.

For example, a student could have five core classes, such as English, math, social studies, science and a foreign language, as well as two more classes in areas such as art, music, physical education, math support group, special education or some other elective. Each class meets for 49 minutes on these two days.

Tuesdays through Thursdays, the students have five-period days, with each class lasting 69 minutes. Classes generally meet four times a week.

The advisory period for students always is at the same time on Thurs-

days, not rotating like it did in past school years, which is important,

ATTENDANCE A6

Nelson said. For example, mentors from Salve Regina University can count on seeing their students on the same day at the same time each week.

In the past school year, there were five-period days Mondays through Fridays, with set schedules for Day 1, Day 2 and Day 3. Those three daily schedules rotated continually over the five-day week and into the following weeks. That meant, for example, during a two-week period, the Day 1 schedule would fall on a Monday and Thursday the first week, and on a Tuesday and Friday the second week.

Nelson said he likes the predictability of the current schedule and especially likes the fact that students see all their teachers on Mondays and Fridays, which allows teachers to monitor problems quickly.

"I do think the schedule this year is better than the schedule we had last year," Superintendent John H. Ambrogi said.

That's where the agreement between principal and school superintendent ended, though. Nelson proposed considering a later start time at the high school to further cut truancy and reduce tardiness.

Classes begin at 7:30 a.m. at the high school.

"Buses roll at 6:30 a.m. for the high school kids; it's too early," Nelson said.

But, Ambrogi countered, "If you start shifting times, little kids will get home in the dark. It would be very difficult for the community to change."

"You won't be here in January, Jack," Nelson told Ambrogi, referring to his pending retirement.

Ambrogi turned to Colleen Jermain, the incoming school

superintendent, who will assume the position in early January, and said, "Thank God I won't be here for this discussion."

Jermain did not take a position at the meeting.

Ambrogi was referring to the staggered starting times for the different schools, which parents depend on now. While the high school starts at 7:30 a.m., Thompson Middle School starts at 8 a.m. and Pell Elementary School starts at 8:30 a.m.

If the high school starts later, the other schools would correspondingly move to later start times unless the school district hired more buses. That, Ambrogi said, would be a "huge expense."

Since the School Department currently is running a \$400,000 deficit, that option seemed closed to Ambrogi and others at the meeting Wednesday night.

Nelson received support from Gaines.

"The kids don't function optimally at 7:30 a.m.," she said. "Research shows improvements in attendance and attentiveness when there is a later start to the school day."

School Committee member Rebecca Bolan pointed out that St. George's School in Middletown moved to a later start time, from 8 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., a change that became permanent in the 2009-10 school year.

The school reported better student performance, reduced tardiness to first-period classes, improved health and provided a greater likelihood of students eating breakfast in the morning.

Schools including St. George's have drawn on the research of Dr. Judith Owens, who is currently director of sleep medicine at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Owens, who was a professor

in Brown University's Division of Biology and Medicine and a resident of Portsmouth when she addressed St. George's parents and students on the issue, has studied the subject of sleep extensively over the years. Studies show teens do not get the rest they should before beginning the school day, and a later school day brings better results, she has said.

Gaines and Nelson said they did not underestimate the difficulty of moving to a later school day in the Newport schools for reasons that go beyond the expense of buses. For example, the times of sports teams' games must be considered, as well as practice times. Scheduling also can affect the number of students who participate in other extracurricular activities, such as band, orchestra and chorus.

"It would mean a shift of enormous proportion," Gaines said.

"It's huge," Nelson agreed.

There are consultants who specialize in optimum school scheduling practices, and School Committee members including Robert B. Power said it may be worthwhile to hire one temporarily.

"We should look at it," he said. "Things get dismissed and they don't get done."

However, the consensus of the committee was that existing school staff could review scheduling proposals, and that it was not the time to incur a new expense.

"We are being told to cut our budget, cut staff and cut programs," School Committee member Sandra J. Flowers said. "We can't spend a good chunk of change to bring someone in."

Amy Donnelly Roche, director of special education, said there is excellent computer software available to the School Department to set up optimal scheduling, but employees need professional training on how to use it.