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Wilmette Parents Object to Orchestra Schedule

by *Emily Spectre* (<http://jwcdaily.com/author/emily-spectre/>) • March 15, 2017

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Highcrest orchestra students performing.

WILMETTE – Some Wilmette parents are concerned that orchestra students are being left out of a proposed schedule change in District 39, which includes a later start time for Wilmette Junior High School students.

The proposal, which was presented to the school board on Feb. 27, would push the junior high start time to 8:25 a.m. from the current start time of 8 a.m. A later start time would allow band students who practice at the junior high five mornings a week before school, a later start time of 7:30 a.m. or possibly 7:40 a.m.

But orchestra students, who rehearse at Marie Murphy Middle School, would continue to start at 7:05 a.m. according to the current proposal. This schedule would cause some lag time between the end of rehearsal and the beginning of school. The district is considering the possibility of sectionals being taught during that lag time.

Parents of orchestra students are unhappy with the proposal. A group of 32 parents sent an email to Superintendent Ray Lechner to express their concern that orchestra students would not reap the benefits of a later start day. The parents noted that the district's reliance on studies that show students of this age group benefit from later start times should also apply to orchestra students. They further noted that many parents would likely pull their students from orchestra – a loss both for the program as well as for the students – if the start time is not changed.

“I think it is very demanding for the kids to start this early in the day,” Maja Kos, a parent of a sixth grade orchestra student, told *DailyNorthShore*. “Especially when the changes in the schedule are based on medical reasons, I don't see how it shouldn't benefit all students,” she added.

While Dr. Lechner has responded to a number of emails sent by parents, Kos said she feels that his responses have been vague. Lechner noted in an email that the district was unable

to change the orchestra start time because of its “long, and happy relationship with Avoca.” Currently, junior high students participate in orchestra through Marie Murphy Middle School’s orchestra program, and Marie Murphy students take band classes at the junior high.

Kos believes now is the time for District 39 to break from Avoca and form its own orchestra program, just as Marie Murphy students will no longer be able to participate in the junior high band program under the proposed schedule changes. While Dr. Lechner told parents at a meeting on March 9 that the district has the funds to create an orchestra program at the junior high, it would be a large undertaking that requires planning and couldn’t be implemented this year.

But parents believe otherwise. They think that if the district moves forward with a later start time — the school board is slated to vote at a special meeting April 3 on this issue— then the orchestra program should be moved to the junior high. Kos told *DailyNorthShore* that she would like to see a committee of parents formed, who will work with the district to create a program that would start in the 2017-18 school year. She worries that without swift change, many students will drop out all together. “I just feel sad because a lot people will drop out because of the inconvenience. It shouldn’t be that way for families,” she said.

While Dr. Lechner initially appeared resistant to any change, in an email he suggested a meeting with parents which they hope will happen some time soon. “I feel encouraged because his position is evolving and he is feeling the pressure,” Kos said.

Whether the proposal to change start times goes forward at all still remains to be seen. While a longer K-4 day was the impetus for the schedule changes, the district postponed a school board vote on the issue until April 3, after parents raised concerns about changing the K-4 start time, according to a District 39 media release dated March 13.

“We remain committed to the importance of additional instructional time in our K-4 buildings. The new schedule was designed with teacher input to improve student learning. However, we listened to our parents and are rethinking the best way to implement this change,” Dr. Lechner stated in the media release.

The district is currently revising its proposal and is scheduled to present those changes at the March 20 school board meeting.

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