

An open letter to JCPS school and district leaders:

I appreciate the passion you have for your students and for safeguarding the opportunities they have. The vast majority of you are capable, committed, and skilled leaders that JCPS is lucky to have.

This only adds to my frustration and disappointment in the messages many of you have communicated to a large number of people regarding transportation and school start times. Among other things, aspects of these message have been, unintentionally or not, misleading and are contributing to a damaging narrative about JCPS.

As I'm sure you're aware, JCPS has half the number of bus drivers we had only ten years ago. This is a reality that the board and Dr. Pollio are powerless to change in the near term. In fact, school staffing challenges will almost certainly intensify in the coming years. Among other things, this means we must eliminate transportation to many schools, we must have three start times, and schools must be fairly evenly spread out among the start times.

I can't imagine any school wants to forego transportation and it seems clear that virtually no school wants to start later than 9 a.m. Thus, decisions that the board must make will necessarily be unpopular with many people. There is no way around this and pretending like there is some other magical path the board could choose, as many of you have done, is simply absurd, destructive, and not in good faith.

Faced with staffing challenges, the board has three choices: 1) we eliminate transportation to many more schools; 2) we start many schools at 6:30 a.m. or even earlier; or 3) many schools start around 9:30 a.m. or later. Please feel absolutely free to tell the board and Dr. Pollio if you would like to eliminate all transportation to your school and the other schools you would choose or if you would like your school to start at 6:30 a.m. or earlier and the other schools that should as well.

Let's be clear: there was no option three presented last night. Whomever started or contributed to this misperception significantly damaged the board's ability to stay focused on the most salient factors as we deliberated an extremely difficult issue. In reality, there are always a huge number of options the board can choose from. Last night, the board could have voted to start many schools at 4 a.m. and it would have been Dr. Pollio's job to figure out how to make it work.

In the lead up to last night's meeting, board members discussed at least seven different options with JCPS staff, and JCPS staff likely explored many additional options. Dr. Pollio recommended the board choose from two options however, within the bounds of the law, it is the board and no one else who ultimately decides what will happen.

Other than the bus driver shortage, the only incontrovertible fact that JCPS cannot change is that it is better for older students to start school later and for younger students to start school earlier. While there are many other factors to consider, JCPS can adapt to them, as I confirmed with JCPS staff last night at the board meeting. Adapting will certainly be challenging and require imagination and innovation, but that is precisely why we have skilled and capable leaders who are, to be frank, very well compensated. Even if it stems from concern for students, a knee-jerk reaction based on fear of change is seldom a wise course of action and not one I would expect from leaders at the level of school principal and above.

I am concerned that many of you are simply dismissing the science behind later start times for teens because it is an inconvenient truth. I urge you to consider how you might feel about others who dismiss inconvenient scientific truths and ask yourself if that's a group you want to be a part of. The benefits of later start times for teens are scientific fact supported by a deep body of evidence presented in numerous peer-reviewed studies. It worries me deeply that leaders of academic institutions might so casually dismiss the unambiguous findings of academic research because it creates challenges for you.

Perhaps most concerning, many school leaders are implying or even stating outright that maintaining the quality of your schools is entirely dependent on an early start time. I wonder if you appreciate that this sentiment makes it seem like your success as a leader is based upon a fairly arbitrary schedule and not the talents, skills, abilities, and dedication of you and your staff.

Due to staffing challenges, K-12 education will be undergoing many more significant changes in the coming years. I would encourage you to consider your options in the face of this fact. I certainly hope you commit yourself to work together, to be imaginative, and to innovate in ways that benefit the greatest number of students possible.

However, if you feel that you are not up to the task of leading through what will be a rapidly evolving environment then please consider that it may be best for you and for the children of Jefferson County that you step aside and allow someone to lead who will embrace the opportunities that crisis presents.

The board has one employee: Dr. Pollio. The board cannot hire you or fire you or promote you or discipline you, nor do we want to. You should know, however, that many of the sentiments expressed and actions taken by several of you regarding transportation and start times reflect very, very poorly on Dr Pollio. If I was Dr. Pollio, I would be apoplectic with several of you whom Dr. Pollio has himself hired, promoted, or kept on through the years. The board is in the process of conducting Dr. Pollio's annual evaluation. In my view, many of your actions over the last few months are likely to result in a far less positive evaluation than I would have thought possible.

Sincerely,

Chris Kolb
JCPS Board of Education, District 2