

January 25, 2012

Dear Students, Staff, and Families,

As most of you are probably aware, I recently charged a committee of students, parents, teachers and principals to study our current high school schedules with the purpose of creating and recommending a common high school schedule to implement in the near future. After almost four months of intense work, committee members were unable to recommend a common schedule, but they developed key findings about the elements that make up a more optimal schedule for all students. With the committee's report in hand, I am announcing there will be no significant changes to the schedules at any of our high schools for 2012-2013; however, I am declaring action steps that must be taken at our high schools between now and the beginning of the 2013-14 school year to address and rectify the problems that were affirmed, clarified, and unearthed during the committee's work.

The goal of a common schedule is important because it will allow sharing of resources, an improved educational experience, standardized professional development and comparable expectations around pacing and instruction, and potential for increased opportunities for all students to access courses and programs that do not exist in a student's home school. Through the action steps that I outline below, our high schools will move in the direction of a more common schedule that better aligns with our growing understanding of what makes an optimal high-school experience. While I believe this is one of our most pressing issues, I want to make sure that we take the time to comprehensively plan, prepare, and move forward with the needs of each unique school community in mind.

In the committee's [final report](#), two issues emerged as the focal points: 1) Student/teacher contact time, and 2) Opportunity/access to more courses. Here is how my action steps address each:

Required Action Steps

1. Student/teacher contact time (LIBERTY HIGH SCHOOL)

As stated in the High School Schedule Committee's final report, state regulations require 150 hours of classroom instruction in order for a school to award one high school credit; or, if less than that, the school must ask for an exemption from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Because of Liberty's eight-period block schedule, it is currently approximately 24 hours under the requirement and approximately 36 hours below Issaquah and Skyline High Schools, which have six-period schedules.

More importantly, a common amount of instructional minutes per class provides our students with equivalent exposure to their teachers who play such a critical role in our student's

learning. The quantity of time that our students spend with their teachers should not be inequitable based on a student's zip code. Significantly less time with well-trained teachers using quality instructional materials equates to an unfair disadvantage to students, staff and families at Liberty High School, and our schools' data suggests there is a correlation. Therefore:

- I am directing the Liberty High School principal to work with his staff to complete the exemption process. A copy of the exemption request will be submitted to my office prior to submission to the state which has a deadline of May 1.
- Along with the exemption request, I am directing the Executive Director of High Schools to work with the Liberty Principal to develop a plan for Liberty High School to transition to a new schedule that will take effect at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year. That plan should be created using a process similar to that of the district High School Schedule Committee and should include opportunities for community input and participation. Aligned with the final criteria of the High School Schedule Committee, the new Liberty schedule must have a minimum of 150 hours of contact time per class while balancing opportunities for students. This might include innovative ways to stretch coursework within the traditional school day using technology and staffing flexibility. A copy of the transition plan will be submitted to the Superintendent by the end of this school year.

2. Opportunity (ISSAQUAH, SKYLINE, TIGER MOUNTAIN)

Because of their six-period schedules, Issaquah and Skyline High Schools have fewer opportunities to access more classes than at Liberty, with its eight-period block schedule. Steps have been taken over the last three years to open up more opportunity and flexibility for all students, which have mainly benefited Issaquah and Skyline students.

These steps include: Elimination of pre-requisites during the registration process, allowing more students to accelerate; creation of an online learning department, allowing students to take courses that may not fit into a traditional schedule (the bulk of enrolled online students are from Issaquah and Skyline); expansion of the summer school program to include acceleration opportunities and access to electives; and increased opportunities to meet high-school graduation requirements while in middle school. These efforts continue.

While these steps are a good start, I am directing the Executive Director of High Schools to work with the Issaquah and Skyline principals and staff to take the following steps before the end of this school year:

- First, I want to know how much our efforts over the last few years have met the needs of our students and families who desire more opportunity. I want a survey conducted to find the answer to this question.
- Secondly, I want a plan submitted to me—informed by the results of that survey and aligned with the final criteria of the High School Schedule Committee—on what future steps need to be taken to increase opportunity at those two high schools while not falling below 150 hours of contact time per class. This, too, might include innovative ways to stretch coursework within the traditional school day using technology and staffing flexibility.

In terms of Tiger Mountain Community High School, the High School Schedule Committee recognized the uniqueness of a school that serves students in an alternative education environment. The Tiger Mountain staff members have played a critical role in helping to raise our district extended graduation rate to one of the highest levels in the state. With the potential for a new facility in the future, there is the possibility of diversifying the course offerings at Tiger Mountain in the future. New course offerings not only could benefit the current Tiger Mountain students, but could also provide options for other high school students in the district. Therefore:

- I am directing the Executive Director of High Schools to work with the Director of Career and Counseling and the Tiger Mountain principal and staff to create a plan to be submitted to me by the end of the school year proposing future courses at Tiger Mountain.

Conclusion

By taking the steps I have laid out above, we will be moving towards a more common educational experience in all of our high schools. This plan will ensure ample contact time between teachers and students while offering more flexibility and opportunity than our current system allows. Our high school students face a world that is changing and evolving at a rapid pace. They must have a strong foundation in the academic core areas along with an opportunity to explore and pursue passions. We are fortunate to have very high performing high schools in this district with hard-working students, dedicated teachers, and supportive parents. Together we will continue to constantly strive to provide the optimal high school experience for the students of the Issaquah School District.

Sincerely,

Dr. Steve Rasmussen
Superintendent, Issaquah School District