

Rationale for proposal to increase teacher and staff collaboration time

Providing students with deep, meaningful learning through exploration and inquiry is the core of the educational program at ANCS. Our own assessments and the feedback we've received from students and parents indicates that we are fairly successful in carrying out this work, with well over 90% of students and parents responding on recent surveys that they were happy with the ANCS experience and students were engaged in meaningful learning. Yet sustaining this approach demands lots of time for teachers and staff to collaborate together for the creative process of developing curriculum, assessing projects, and personalizing learning for students, time that currently is only about 10-15% of a teacher's stated work week. A recent survey of our faculty and staff showed that over 50% do not feel they have enough time to effectively collaborate with their colleagues. Coupled with increasing accountability requirements because of changes to state law, there is a heightened need to configure our calendar and schedule to provide for more and better collaboration time for teachers and staff so that we may create the best school possible for our students—all of which is why this is an area of focus in the school's recently-approved strategic plan.

The school's leadership team and governing board explored this topic last year. We learned that in considering changes to the use of time in our calendar and schedule we first need to provide opportunities for input and discussion among the full community of parents and faculty/staff before final decisions are made. A small task force was formed by the board in the spring, and, in consultation with the school's leadership team, the task force is brought forward an initial proposal for the 2015-16 school year to increase teacher and staff collaboration time through adjustments to the calendar and schedule.

Summary of feedback on initial proposal

Feedback about this initial proposal was solicited through surveys of parents and faculty/staff and listening sessions held at both campuses for parents and faculty/staff. 282 responses to the parent survey were recorded and a total of 39 people attended one or more of the listening sessions.

The school's leadership team and task force reviewed the feedback from the initial proposal and identified a few key points that emerged consistently from the feedback:

- Most respondents understand the need for collaboration time and are supportive of the earlier dismissal once per week to achieve it (88% of parent survey respondents); of these, the vast majority are fine with this day of the week being Wednesday (85% of parent survey respondents).
- There's a split among parents about adding days to the calendar in exchange for an earlier dismissal one day per week--about 46% do not want to add days, and of those that do, there is no clear consensus about where to add them. The vast majority of teachers do not feel it is necessary to add days to the calendar. The most commonly cited reasons among those who feel it is not necessary to add days to the calendar are that (1) our students are already in school for more time than most other schools, and (2) the quality of students' experience will be improved to a degree greater than any reduction in in-school time.
- There is a concern among some parents about paying full cost for aftercare on Wednesdays if they only need it until regular dismissal time. Based on the survey responses and the average number of students currently in aftercare at the EC on Wednesdays based on attendance data (about 151), it seems that the approximate number of families who would *need* aftercare until regular dismissal time is about 45-50, though more precise numbers could be gathered in a follow up survey. There is a concern among the aftercare staff that if there is absolutely no cost to

aftercare until dismissal, there would be big challenges logistically for the staff and difficulty securing space for collaboration time.

- There is some concern that's been expressed for the gap between dismissal time on each campus on the earlier dismissal day. Even though it's the same gap as exists on other days of the week (and a smaller gap than between elementary and middle school dismissals for APS schools), some parents have said that it would be more challenging on an earlier dismissal day.

Proposal to increase teacher and staff collaboration time - 2015-16 school year

Initial proposal published November 11, 2014; updated December 11, 2014 with additions in *italics* and deletions in ~~strikethrough~~

Purpose:

To align school calendar and schedule with teacher and staff collaboration time needed for enhanced student outcomes

Why is increased teacher and staff collaboration time needed?

Reasons why regular, consistent collaboration time among the full faculty and staff is needed include:

- the demands of learning about and implementing new Common Core standards;
- complicated new school accountability requirements to which our school is held;
- curriculum is planned by teachers around creative projects that cut across disciplines rather than relying on simple, superficial textbooks;
- to provide high levels of feedback and information for students and parents—through blogs, narrative report cards, conferences;
- there is a higher percentage of students with special needs at ANCS than most other schools which requires more training and more time in which teachers are involved in SST and IEP meetings;
- K-8 alignment—educationally and operationally—across two separate campuses; and
- sustaining a healthy and engaged faculty and staff so we can retain great teachers for many years of work with our students.

How will increased teacher and staff collaboration time be used to improve student outcomes?

Some examples of how this regular collaboration time would be used to improve student outcomes:

- looking together at student work to norm what “meeting” and “exceeding” the standards looks like in different skills at each grade level
- analyzing schoolwide and grade-level student assessment data to identify students in need of support and challenge
- taking part in professional workshops on areas of schoolwide learning (such as Conscious Discipline, meeting the needs of academically advanced students) to insure consistency across the school
- conferencing with other teachers about individual students
- receiving training in critical areas of compliance (special education, allergy management, emergency protocols, mandated reporter, CPR) so that a safe and supportive environment exists for all students

What are the proposed ways to create increased time for teacher and staff collaboration?

In order to gain regular and sufficient collaboration time, on one day each week school is in session, the regular school day would end and students would be dismissed earlier—at 1:30 PM at the elementary campus and at 2:15 PM at the middle campus. This is an approach several other charter and traditional schools locally and nationally use to schedule collaboration time for their professional staffs, including our middle school campus since 2008. We propose making this structure consistent across both campuses.

On this day each week, teachers and staff would be engaged in activities such as those described above for approximately 2.5 hours. For students, regular ANCS after care would be available immediately after dismissal until **either the regular school day dismissal time (3:00 for the elementary campus and 3:45 for the middle campus) for half the regular daily rate or** until the regular after care end time at the same daily rate as all other days of the week and with scholarships available for families who need them. **Programming such as structured physical activity, music offerings, and academic support would be a part of after care on Wednesdays.**

The proposed day for this earlier student dismissal for teacher and staff collaboration time is Wednesday. Why Wednesdays? The school's leadership team—made up of the Executive Director, Principals and Assistant Principals, Director of Business & Operations, Special Education Coordinator, and Director of Collaborative Learning & Partnerships—sees Wednesdays as the best day to engage in professional learning and collaboration away from the busy-ness that comes with the start and end of each week. Wednesdays also allow teachers and staff to address and adjust to school issues that unexpectedly arise early in the week or will be coming later in the week. The leadership team realizes that, for some families, Friday might be a preferable day for a weekly earlier dismissal time. The leadership team does not see Fridays as the ideal day for several reasons. Several Fridays throughout the year would be lost due to school holidays, and scheduling the most creative, collaborative work for the final hours of the day at the end of a work week does not seem like it would be productive in any profession. As well, many student activities—in particular, nearly all athletics games—occur on Friday afternoon and evenings, which would make an earlier dismissal and extended block of collaboration time logistically challenging for many. However, knowing all of this, we are open to your feedback on this proposed day.

Although students at ANCS are already in school approximately 1-3 hours more each week than most other area schools, we heard in feedback from many last spring that it is important to maintain a high level of in-class time for students. **Based on survey feedback, the taskforce recommends to the board that no additional school days be added to the calendar for the 2015-16 school year and that the elementary campus leadership team be charged with bringing to the January board meeting a plan for recapturing 15 minutes of in-class time from the original proposal. This 15 minutes of in-class time is the equivalent of what would have been gained by adding 2 school days without additional cost.** this proposal includes potentially adding two school days to the 2015-16 calendar to compensate for the weekly early dismissal day. With a commitment to keeping the ANCS calendar as aligned as possible with the calendar for the Atlanta Public Schools, the options for where to add two days to the school calendar are:

- August 3rd and 4th (starting school two days earlier than APS calendar)
- October 8th and February 16th (fall and mid-winter breaks each one day shorter than APS calendar)
- November 23rd and 24th (Thanksgiving week break two days shorter than APS calendar)
- May 26th and 27th (ending school two days later than APS calendar)