



# MEQUON-THIENSVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

CITY OF MEQUON AND VILLAGE OF THIENSVILLE

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Demond A. Means, Ed.D., Superintendent

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July 13, 2011

Dear Mequon-Thiensville Community Members,

I would like to thank you all for your input regarding the proposed trimester schedule change at Homestead High School. We are appreciative of your interest in this issue.

As most of you know, the school district switched to a 6/7 high school teaching schedule at the start of the 2008-2009 school year for the sole purpose of saving \$1,000,000 in operational costs. This schedule requires teachers to teach six periods out of a seven-period day. Prior to 2008, teachers at Homestead taught in a 5/7 schedule, meaning that they taught five periods out of seven-period a day.

As the instructional leader of the school district, I have concerns about the 6/7 schedule. It does not allow the district to provide the highest level of service to our students, and does not allow our teachers to provide the type of instruction that our parents have come to expect from Homestead High School. Thus, an examination of an alternative high school schedule was commissioned to preserve the quality of service to our students and parents. The school district is not attempting to placate teachers with a schedule change.

We have the following concerns with the current 6/7 schedule:

- The rigor of academic assignments has and continues to decline because of the schedule, which has an adverse impact on student learning
- Teachers are hindered in creating and providing timely feedback on authentic performance-based assessments
- The ability of students to meet and conference with their teachers is limited

In addition to addressing the above-mentioned concerns, the proposed high school schedule change will allow Homestead to address academic performance issues that continue to persist in our system, even with the 5/7 high school schedule. The school district and high school staff fully understand that there is room for more interactive and engaging instructional practices, greater focus on *learning for understanding* and stronger preparation for post-secondary opportunities. I believe that a schedule change is the only way that Homestead can go from being a very good school to a truly great one.

The Homestead Schedule Study Team discussed different high school models with the constraints of developing a cost-neutral solution. There are some in the community who would suggest that the district use the full extent of Act 10 (also known as the Budget Repair Bill) to further reduce employee compensation by \$1,000,000 in order to re-implement the 5/7 schedule. The following factors are why I believe this is not a prudent policy direction for our school district:

1. Act 10 was enacted to help local governments fill the budget shortfalls created by the 2011-2013 state budget. It was not meant to create new programs, but to protect existing ones.
2. Even if Act 10 was used to restore programming, the first items to be restored would be those that are currently on the district's three-year reduction plan. We should not drift away from our budgeting process by restoring a program that is not highly prioritized by the administrative team. I have enclosed the most recent three-year plan for your review.
3. Employees are already facing significant compensation reductions. Starting next school year, all employees will face the following:
  - a. 5.8% of their salary will be contributed toward pension payments (WRS)
  - b. Salary freezes
  - c. Increases in insurance premium contributions
4. The further use of Act 10 beyond the reduction of \$1,800,000 in employee compensation would make the district's compensation package an outlier, creating a competitive disadvantage in hiring and retaining high-quality teachers. The prospect of aligning the district insurance package to one in the private sector is available through the use of Act 10, but doing this has the potential of making Mequon-Thiensville undesirable to the best teaching candidates.
5. We will need to use Act 10 to offset future budget shortfalls, and so using it for the restoration of one program is very narrow in scope.

As you can tell, the issue of the Homestead High School schedule is complex. I feel the current schedule is not sustainable from a service perspective for our students, and would recommend that we change the schedule for the 2012-2013 school year. Understanding that we are unable to ask the community for additional revenue to support a schedule change, I believe the only logical option for the district is to consider a trimester model.

There are a number of compelling reasons to consider the trimester proposal, including:

1. The academic programming will improve due to positive attributes of the trimester model, including the following: 1) Engaging and interactive class periods, 2) More opportunities to assign and provide timely feedback on student writing, 3) Increased opportunities for high-quality guided practice, 4) The inclusion of flex time for re-teaching, intervention and extension, and 5) Increased academic and professional focus from students due to fewer classes being scheduled. We believe that as a result of the improved instructional model in place at Homestead, we will be able to improve in essential areas like AP course offerings and participation rates.
2. The extended class periods will improve the current science program, as it will allow science teachers to truly explore the essence of instruction by providing meaningful lab experiences.
3. Faculty effectiveness will improve by reducing the overall student load. Teacher load examples are:
  - 4 sections of 28 = 112 (Trimester model)
  - 6 sections of 24 = 144 (6/7 model)

Currently, some Math and English teachers are assigned nearly 170 students per semester. High teacher load impacts an educator's ability to know students as individuals, differentiate instruction, assign and offer feedback on writing-based assessments and incorporate authentic assessments (which may require extensive grading time) into the classroom. It also increases the need to use multiple-choice testing on a more frequent basis.

4. The schedule change allows us to address some of our current academic challenges, including closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities. The extended class period will allow teachers to work closely with our at-risk student population.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are also some disadvantages to the proposal, which include the following:

1. The trimester proposal creates instructional gaps for students and could create space in the instructional program for certain highly sequenced subjects (e.g. world languages and math).
2. The trimester proposal will prevent some students from enrolling in some of their first-choice course selections in a given school year, as sometimes happens with the current schedule.
3. The 60-day instructional term may be difficult for some students, who may fall behind early in a course and have less time to catch up.
4. There are some families who are so opposed to the trimester model that they may elect to withdraw their student(s) from the school district. We are not in a position where we can afford to lose any students for any reason.

The conclusion that the status quo is fine and therefore we should not change is contrary to the message of continuous improvement our parents are seeking from the school district. Instead of being complacent, the administration is seeking to further enhance an already good academic product.

Despite the disadvantages outlined in this communication, I still enthusiastically endorse a trimester schedule model. I would like to reassure the community that the administrative team would never risk the success of our students, and we are confident that we will be able to improve current academic performance with this proposal.

The complexity that comes with developing public policy is that it is nearly impossible to achieve 100% acceptance for any proposal. The fact of the matter is that policy should be developed based on research, organizational objectives and what is best for the future of the organization. In using the criteria outlined for policy development, I recommend that the community of Mequon-Thiensville support the trimester proposal. I believe that it is the best instructional model to protect the Homestead brand of academic excellence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Demond A. Means".

Demond A. Means, Ed.D.  
Superintendent