

Half-day schedule at Norwood High to clear hallways for MCAS tests

By Jen Judson/Wicked Local Norwood

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Posted Feb 17, 2011 @ 04:05 PM

NORWOOD — In an effort to provide a distraction-free testing environment, the Norwood School Committee on Wednesday unanimously approved a half-day schedule for the seven days this spring MCAS tests will be administered. The high school principal also announced a pre-test exercise program intended to focus the students' minds.

The standardized Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test is given at the high school level to sophomores. The first MCAS test, the English Language Arts composition, will be held March 22 followed by ELA reading comprehension on March 23 and 24. The math test will be administered on May 17 and 18 and the science tests on June 1 and 2.

Under the new testing schedule, while sophomores will have to report at 6:50 a.m. on MCAS test days, freshman, juniors, and seniors will not be required to report to school until 10:32 a.m., Norwood High School Principal George Usevich told the school committee on Wednesday, Feb. 16.

With the other students out the first half of the day, Usevich said, sophomores in the middle of tests should experience less disruption from bells, hallway traffic, and noise between classes. Classes that have both junior and sophomore students will be disrupted less, he said.

The half days will not cause the school to fall below the state's minimum requirement that students receive 990 hours of actual learning time each year, Usevich said. The school will lose 18.9 hours of learning time by implementing the half-day schedule over the seven test days. On each test day, students will lose 2.7 hours of curriculum time, he said. Even after the modified schedule, Usevich said, the school will still hold 1,002.4 hours of learning time.

No student will miss more than two of the same class as a result, Usevich said.

The school will arrange for two separate bus pickups on test days, Usevich said. Buses will operate on a regular schedule for sophomores and with a later pickup for the rest of the students

The modified bus schedule will cost up to \$3,150, which is provided for in the budget, Usevich said, though he said he anticipates the final amount for transportation will be cheaper than that.

Any student wishing to come in before 10:32 a.m. will have the option of studying in the library or in the cafeteria, Usevich said.

On test days, sophomores will begin with breakfast in the cafeteria at 6:50 a.m. followed by "what we are calling an 'exercise burst activity,'" in the gym, Usevich said. The exercise session begin at 7:20 a.m. and last about 10 to 15 minutes.

Using research by Dr. John Ratey, the author of "Spark," the school decided to implement a pre-test fitness plan, Usevich said. Ratey's research shows the value of exercise in learning, Usevich said, and can result in "improved academic performance, alertness, attention and motivation.

"His research makes sense to us and we want to include exercise as part of our MCAS plan and send students off to their test site in the right frame of mind," he said.

By 7:35 a.m. MCAS testing will begin, Usevich said.

Another change to the school's approach to MCAS testing, said Vice Principal Sean Kane, is sophomores will not be randomly assigned testing rooms, but will be drafted ahead of time by proctors, "who know and have a supportive relationship with the students."

Each testing room will have 22 students. With an already established rapport between proctor and students, said Kane, they will be more at ease.

These new measures Usevich said, should help create "a more settled academic environment," and will bring a "heightened awareness as to the importance of this high-stakes test."

"This is a very exciting concept for us," said Usevich. "Some school systems around here have pioneered this and found it to be very advantageous and successful."

The proposal received unanimous support, from department chairs and the Parent Teachers Association, Usevich said.

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