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## Orange schedule flip: After audit, School Board looks at options

### District likely will not flip high-school, middle-school schedules, despite audit showing it saved \$5.8 million

By Erika Hobbs, Orlando Sentinel

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Could Orange's students be facing another school-schedule flip?

The word from School Board members: No.

But could the district's 172,000 pupils be facing other, new start times?

Maybe.

Board members of the nation's 10<sup>th</sup>-largest school district say they have no choice but to keep an eye on options as they await what they expect will be dire budget news from legislators next week.

"I would think everything is on the table because we're going to have budget cuts coming, and not only budget cuts coming, but the stimulus money is running out as well," said board member Nancy Robinson.

But the flip — the nickname for last year's deeply unpopular measure that reversed high-school and middle-school start times — is not among the options, she said.

Even if it does save millions of dollars.

"We don't have the votes for that," said Robinson, a flip opponent.

During the 2008-09 school year, officials started high schools later and middle schools earlier to save money on busing costs. But the old schedule was reinstated in August, after parents complained that the new one was disruptive.

But a new audit by the Missouri-based TransPar Group firm found that the flip saved the cash-strapped district \$5.8 million, in line with what Superintendent Ronald Blocker and the School Board had said it would.

Nevertheless, three School Board members, including Robinson, had campaigned on a promise to reverse it — and appear to be sticking to their guns.

"I think it's premature to go into talks about service," said board member Christine Moore, who opposed the flip.

"I didn't adapt. It was disastrous for my family for one whole year," said Moore, who had a child in high

school. She heard the complaints from constituents, she said: Families weren't eating together, and parents incurred new child-care costs.

"People did not adapt," she said.

Moore pointed out that there were plenty of other options to consider, from cutting staff within the transportation department to other operational efficiencies the board discussed last year but were spared from enacting because of the cash boost from federal stimulus dollars.

Indeed, there are other options for them to look at. But if the goal was to save money, auditors said, the flip saved a sizable amount and shouldn't necessarily be discounted.

Blocker, who pushed the original change in schedules between high schools and middle schools, said the board will now have to balance two decisions: efficiency and goodwill. And members will have to decide, he said, on "how much the board wants to pay for good will."

While he pointed out they had many options to look at, he stopped short of ruling out new scheduling options — or endorsing them.

The auditors suggested that Orange slash the number of buses from 1,000 to 825, and to do that would require a new configuration of start times.

Among their suggestions:

- High schools could start earlier, such as at 7 a.m. or 7:15 a.m.
- The 8 a.m. and 8:15 a.m start times at about 13 elementary schools could go away.
- Times could be aligned at most elementary schools and at 4 middles that start at 8:30 a.m.
- Start times for elementary and middle schools could be flipped.
- Start all schools at the same times — all high schools at 7:30 a.m., all elementaries at 8:30 a.m. and all middles at 9:30 a.m. Starting times are now staggered.

That's an option that Robinson said she — and parents — could likely stomach. How much it would save isn't yet clear.

But to do that would require adding 10 to 15 minutes to the elementary- and middle-school day, so that every student attended school for six hours and 30 minutes — and that would require new bargaining agreements with teachers.

Whatever direction the board chooses, members said, one thing was clear: No dramatic change would occur in the fall, and any change would likely be phased in.

The public, too, would participate in all discussions — a dramatic departure from last year's practices.

"They handled it incorrectly last year, and it will not be handled that way this time," Robinson said. "I think they [fellow board members] learned a valuable lesson last time."

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