



# SCHOOL ZONE FLASHING BEACONS

## City of Tacoma | Public Works | Policy

### PURPOSE

School zone flashing beacons remind people driving to slow down to 20 mph or less when the lights are activated. These flashing lights are activated and run on a set schedule as determined by the factors outlined below.

The City of Tacoma operates school zone flashing beacons approaching most of the Tacoma Public School, charter, and private schools within the city limits. These flashing beacons are installed on arterial roads only and operate during pre-determined arrival and dismissal times.

Some flashing beacon locations are associated with automated traffic enforcement cameras, sometimes referred to as school zone speed cameras. These cameras are active when the school zone flashing beacons are active.

#### Driving 20 mph or less near schools:

- Makes it easier for people driving to stop quickly when see students and families crossing the street.
- Reduces the chance that a person driving a vehicle may seriously injure or kill another person if a collision occurs.
- Contributes to a safer, more comfortable environment for students and families to walk, bike, and actively roll to and from school.

### BEACON SCHEDULES

#### FACTORS

Factors that determine school zone flashing beacon schedules for Tacoma Public Schools, charter, and private schools in the City of Tacoma are as follows.

- **School start time**
- **School end time**
- **Late start days**
- **Early dismissal days** such as conference days
- **No-school days** such as school breaks, holidays, and teacher data days

Tacoma Public Schools sets the established district-wide school start times, end times, late start times, early dismissal times, and no-school days for all public elementary, middle, and high schools. These are published on the district’s website and used to set the school zone flashing beacon schedule.

Charter and private schools must provide their respective schedules to the City of Tacoma no later than four-weeks prior to the start of the academic calendar.



Factors that do not influence the beacons as operated by the City of Tacoma include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Preschool<sup>1</sup>
- School breakfast programs<sup>2</sup>
- Before or after school programs
- Special school events
- Summer school
- Inclement weather or emergency associated closures

## SCHEDULE

The following school zone beacon schedule applies to all schools (public, private, and charter) within the City of Tacoma:

- **Morning:** The beacons will flash 30 minutes prior to school start time until 10 minutes after school start time, for a total of 40 minutes.
- **Afternoon:** The beacons will flash 10 minutes prior to school end time until 30 minutes after school end time, for a total of 40 minutes.

Additional guidelines include:

- The beacons will not flash on no-school days.
- On emergency closures, such as inclement weather days, the beacons will flash as a normally scheduled day.
- On the last day of the school year, the beacons will flash as a normally scheduled day.

The City of Tacoma developed this flashing beacon schedule based on field observations of select Tacoma Public Schools and a review of peer city policies and schedules. See the Appendix for more details.

## PROCESS

The City of Tacoma's Public Works Department programs the beacons to run at the designated times. To do so, the City of Tacoma coordinates with the Tacoma School District and local private and charter schools to confirm the following during summer break:

- District-wide school start times and end times
- District-wide school holidays, exception days, and breaks for Elementary, Middle, and High School
- Late start days and times
- Early release days and times, such as those for conference days
- Schools closed to instruction, such as those currently under construction
- Snow make up dates, if applicable

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<sup>1</sup> Preschools are not eligible for School Zone Flashing Beacons in accordance the federal Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), which defines a school as public or private educational institution recognized by the state education authority for one or more grades K-12, or as otherwise defined by the state.

<sup>2</sup> Nutrition services provides most students with breakfast in their classroom during the pandemic (PK-5) or between 1<sup>st</sup> and second period (6-12). Further observation of student travel may be needed to accommodate a return to before-school breakfast programs.

## APPENDIX

### FIELD OBSERVATIONS

Field observations of arrival and dismissal by city staff provided the following findings. Table 1 outlines the activity times before and after the school bells.

- **Arrival:** School arrival tends to occur over a longer duration, with students arriving well in advance of school start and after the school bell has already rung. Handfuls of students at schools are frequently arriving at school after school has begun. Expanding the flashing beacon schedule into the start of the school day can accommodate for more of these student's travel times. Second, expanding the time beyond the morning bell will help to cover the return trips by parents and caregivers with other young children who walk or roll to drop off their K-12 students.
- **Dismissal:** School dismissal occurs in a more concentrated time compared to arrival once the second bell rings. However, parents or caregivers may be walking with other young children to the school for dismissal, and students or families may linger at school to play on the playground. Additionally, observations showed that some schools begin dismissal at the first bell, approximately fifteen minutes prior to official release time. This staggered dismissal appeared to accommodate transportation for some students with disabilities, among other factors.

Table 1. Tacoma School Arrival & Dismissal Observations

SCHOOL	Observed (Arrival/Dismissal)	Activity – mins BEFORE bell	Activity – mins AFTER bell	Total activity time
Baker MS	Arrival	27 minutes	16 minutes	43 minutes
Blix ES	Arrival	28 minutes	16 minutes	44 minutes
Franklin ES	Arrival	30 minutes	12 minutes	42 minutes
Whitman ES	Arrival	32 minutes	12 minutes	44 minutes
Stanley ES	Dismissal	23 minutes	10 minutes	33 minutes
Boze ES	Dismissal	18 minutes	23 minutes	41 minutes
Edison ES	Dismissal	28 minutes	18 minutes	46 minutes
Whitman ES	Dismissal	29 minutes	17 minutes	46 minutes
<b>Arrival Averages</b>		<b>29.25 minutes</b>	<b>14 minutes</b>	<b>43.25 minutes</b>
<b>Dismissal Averages</b>		<b>24.5 minutes</b>	<b>17 minutes</b>	<b>41.5 minutes</b>

## REVIEW OF PEER CITIES

The team developing this policy reviewed the following cities' school flashing beacon policies and schedules for the 2020-2021 academic year, as made available online or by jurisdiction confirmation, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. School Zone Beacon Schedules (2020-2021, unless otherwise noted)

City	Arrival & Dismissal Schedule
<a href="#">Bellevue, WA</a>	<b>Morning:</b> 40 minutes total (30 mins prior, 10 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 40 minutes total (10 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
Bellingham, WA	<b>Morning:</b> 45 minutes total (45 mins prior, 0 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 45 minutes total (15 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
<a href="#">Federal Way, WA</a> <sup>3</sup>	<b>Morning:</b> 30 minutes total (25 mins prior, 5 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 30 minutes total (5 mins prior, 25 mins following school end)
<a href="#">Fife, WA</a>	<b>Morning:</b> 180 minutes total (6:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.) <b>Afternoon:</b> 130 minutes total (2:20 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.)
Hillsboro, OR	<b>Morning:</b> 45 minutes (30 mins prior, 15 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 45 minutes (15 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
Kent, WA	<b>Morning:</b> 30 minutes (25 mins prior, 5 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 30 minutes (5 mins prior, 25 mins following school end)
Kirkland, WA	<b>Morning:</b> 50 minutes total (40 mins prior, 10 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 40 minutes total (10 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
<a href="#">Lakewood, WA</a> <sup>4</sup>	<b>Morning:</b> 55-75 minutes total (25 mins prior, 30-45 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 45-60 minutes total (0 mins prior, 45-60 mins following school end)
<a href="#">Puyallup, WA</a>	<b>Morning:</b> 35 minutes (35 mins prior, 0 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 35 minutes (0 mins prior, 35 mins following school end)
<a href="#">Sammamish, WA</a>	<b>Morning:</b> 30 minutes total (25 mins prior, 5 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 30 minutes total (25 mins prior, 5 mins following school end)

<sup>3</sup> Schedule provided from 2018-2019 at schools that do not offer breakfast. For schools that offer breakfast, the beacons flash 15 minutes before breakfast, lasting through 5 minutes following the start of school.

<sup>4</sup> Select schools' beacon schedules run for longer durations. For the multi-jurisdiction averages, the lesser time was used.

<a href="#">Seattle, WA</a>	<b>Morning:</b> 50 minutes total (40 mins prior, 10 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 40 minutes total (10 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
Spokane, WA	<b>Morning:</b> 30 minutes total (30 mins prior, 0 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 35 minutes total (5 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
Unincorporated King County	<b>Morning:</b> 35 minutes (30 mins prior, 5 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 35 minutes (5 mins prior, 30 mins following school end)
<b>Multi-Jurisdictional Averages</b>	<b>Morning:</b> 39.6 minutes (31.7 mins prior, 7.9 mins following school start) <b>Afternoon:</b> 37.5 minutes (7.1 mins prior, 30.4 mins following school end)