



Health, Safety and Equity in Education

Subject: Please Support HB 1462 – Task Force for Later School Start Times

Dear Senator,

HB 1462 may include the word “school,” but it’s also about the health and safety of Maryland’s children – something we know that you and other Senators care about deeply. Just as our Delegates understood the need for this work group (it passed the House with a unanimous vote), we believe you can agree that it’s time to bring the stakeholders together to find feasible solutions.

Many Maryland high schools start shortly after 7 a.m., with bus runs as early as 5:45 a.m. These very early hours do not allow students to get the sleep they need. Many compelling studies have shown that 70% of adolescents do not get enough sleep. Early school starts have also been linked to increased sleep deprivation, which impacts:

- Health – Chronic sleep deprivation contributes to childhood obesity, car crashes, high blood pressure, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts.
- Safety – Students walk to the bus and drive to school in the dark, operate vehicles while drowsy, and many are unsupervised in the early afternoons.
- Equity – Early school hours disproportionately affect disadvantaged students. Privileged families can counter the negative effects by choosing private schools, hiring tutors, and driving their children to school.

Schools that have switched to later start times consistently see less tardiness, reduced absenteeism, improved grades, increased graduation rates, fewer visits to the school nurse, and improved behavior.. Later start times can also help close the unacceptable high achievement gap in our state.

The problem isn't the evidence, which is irrefutable. The problem is a lack of knowledge about adolescent sleep patterns and, perhaps, fear of change. A task force is the best possible way we can get all stakeholders involved in resolving this complex problem.

As your constituent, I ask you to support HB 1462 so that we can start looking seriously at ways to improve that health, safety and academic success of all of Maryland's children? Our children deserve every chance for success, and their success will be Maryland’s success!

Thank you for your consideration.

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Two more districts consider later start times for high school

By [Editorial Board](#), Published: March 8

TWO MORE area school districts have decided to study later start times for their high school students. That's evidence of the growing demand that school schedules be shaped not by mindless adherence to tradition but by what is best for student learning. Let's hope that school officials who have undertaken examinations of this issue are not just going through the motions.

Anne Arundel and Howard are the [latest districts](#) to undertake studies of later bell times for older students. This comes in response to complaints from parents, who point to evidence showing the benefits of start times that are more in sync with teenagers' natural sleep patterns. The decision, as The Post's Donna St. George reported, comes after officials in [Montgomery](#) and Fairfax decided to pursue the issue. Fairfax seems especially serious, establishing a goal of start times after 8 a.m. and enlisting a consultant to help implement a plan. Montgomery has formed a work group, which has met several times and is expected to make recommendations by June.

The four school systems start high school classes between 7:17 a.m. and 7:25 a.m., which requires many students to be up and headed to school by 6 a.m. or soon after. In pushing for start times after 8 a.m., parents point to the persuasive body of [research](#) establishing that adolescent sleep patterns make it hard for them to go to sleep or wake up early. **Biology — not a parent's nagging or a teen's self-discipline — is the determining factor. Schools with later start times have demonstrated the benefits to students, schools and communities in the way of better academic performance, less tardiness and absenteeism and lowered risks for depression and car crashes.**

Both Montgomery and [Fairfax](#) have studied later start times in the past, but the efforts were scuttled by opposition and the complexity of rearranging bus schedules and after-school activities. Fundamental change to community routines isn't easy. But other districts around the country — including Loudoun and Arlington counties — have shown that later start times are beneficial and feasible.

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COMMENTARY

Push Back High School Start Times

By Terra Ziporyn Snider

Since the late 1990s, school boards across the United States have been asked repeatedly to delay predawn school start times and bus schedules, and some—including schools in Decatur, Ga., and Amherst, Mass.—appear poised to move in that direction. Just last month, the Fairfax County, Va., school board set a goal of starting its high schools no earlier than 8 a.m. to promote student sleep and health.

These recent developments, while encouraging, are baby steps on a road marked by considerable idling and even reversals. They join a plethora of both new and decades-old campaigns, including ones championed by a Florida pediatrician; a Wisconsin research librarian; district superintendents in Louisiana and Massachusetts; students in California, New Hampshire, and Missouri; and parents in Washington state and my own state of Maryland.

Most of these efforts fail, primarily for systemic reasons. The science is there; the will to change is not. Today you'd be hard-pressed to find a health professional, sleep scientist, or educator who would defend starting high schools in the 7 a.m. hour, now the norm for many U.S. high schools, as good for physical or mental health, safety, or learning. But politics and human nature typically keep schools from prioritizing student health and well-being when they draw up the academic schedule.

Given the science, the idea of starting high schools later is a no-brainer. Waking before sunrise means **teens must be asleep by about 8:30 p.m. to get the approximately nine hours of sleep per night their growing brains and bodies require. Even disregarding homework, extracurriculars, and electronics, physiologic changes mean most adolescents can't fall asleep before 11 p.m. Shifted circadian rhythms make 7 a.m. in teens (and younger teachers) equivalent to 4 a.m. in their parents.**

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's, or CDC's, 2011 **Youth Risk Behavior Survey** estimated that 70 percent of U.S. teens are sleep-deprived, with nearly 40 percent getting six or fewer hours of sleep per night—setting them up for a sobering litany of health and learning problems.

Safety is an issue, too. With bus runs starting in the 5 a.m. hour, students wait in the pitch black, often with no sidewalks or even shoulders of the road, or they drive themselves drowsily to school. Because these early-start school days end around 2 p.m., teenagers come home to hours of unsupervised time, which, together with sleep deprivation, predisposes them to risk-taking and delinquent behavior.

Many state and local medical societies have advocated later start times in the past two decades. CDC researchers have confirmed that delaying school start times is a demonstrated strategy to promote sufficient sleep among adolescents. A Harvard School of Public Health forum on **America's sleep deficit**, held in March, emphasized the need to start schools later, and the American Academy of Pediatrics is developing a **policy statement** about safe and healthy start times for middle and high schools.

Aligning start times with student body clocks decreases dropout rates, truancy, moodiness, car crashes, depression, and related medication needs, and it improves school performance and increases the amount of sleep students get per night. Brookings Institution economists **recently showed** that early school start times reduce performance among disadvantaged students by an amount equivalent to having a highly ineffective teacher. They estimated that delaying middle and high school start times from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. would increase academic achievement by 0.175 standard deviations, with a corresponding increase in student lifetime earnings of approximately \$17,500—a benefit-to-cost ratio of at least 9-to-1.

Ironically, the widespread push several decades ago toward what sleep scientists have called deleterious, cruel, and even abusive start times coincided with growing understanding of adolescent sleep requirements, circadian rhythms, and the critical function of sleep itself. Data about school start times (and bus runs) are poor, but in many communities the change was implemented gradually and without public input, primarily to save money by reusing buses to ferry students to schools with different opening times. The change may also, in part, be related to an expansion of business hours. Today we have a much more 24/7 view of life than we used to have, and the concept of 9 to 5 as "normal" work hours seems to be going the way of family dinners and nonworking vacations.

Whatever the explanation, returning to more traditional 9 a.m. school bells is now virtually impossible in many districts. Even the best-organized reform efforts fall to entrenched interests that have adapted to early hours, as well as the human tendency to make a virtue of (perceived) necessity. Because communities revolve around school schedules, too, there is inevitably outcry that later start times will wreak havoc on life as we know it. This outcry typically includes kneejerk and misinformed reactions, some

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"We must start regarding 7 a.m. start times as just as unacceptable as refusing to heat schools when the temperature drops."

reflecting our society's disregard for sleep itself.

Tellingly, identical objections arise no matter what the existing or proposed school hours, and recur even when superintendents propose making changes to save money on transportation. It's not so much the new start time that people fear, but change itself.

Communities with the will to change have found ways to do so as shown in the rare, but revealing, success stories in districts including Wilton, Conn.; Edina, Minn., and Minneapolis; and Palo Alto, Calif. Concerns about the impact on sports, jobs, day care, and so forth turn out to be groundless; everything in the community adjusts to the new school times, just as when schools or families change start times for other reasons.

Red herrings or not, community concerns remain a powerful force. A superintendent or school board member who suggests, or even supports, later start times has to be almost suicidal because merely raising the issue mobilizes opposition. By the time communities have been familiarized with the ever-growing literature on the topic, the cohort of kids in question has graduated.

If we genuinely believe the research about the impact of our extremely early school hours and associated sleep deprivation, continuing to throw this issue back to lay school boards and administrators is nothing short of negligent. Tolerating baby steps is equally negligent, given that we're dealing with human lives. We need a sea change in our approach, and, as several leading public-health experts have noted, **this will require collective action on a scale much larger than the local school system.**

We must start regarding 7 a.m. start times as just as unacceptable as refusing to heat schools when the temperature drops or as exposing children to secondhand smoke. This may take federal, state, and/or local laws or regulations to ensure safe, healthy school hours for all students, in much the same way that federal regulations already restrict times school lunch can be served.

Specific school hours must be determined at the community level. But setting reasonable parameters is a matter of public health and safety and will make it easier for local districts to prioritize the health and well-being of students and communities alike when they set their particular schedules.

Terra Ziporyn Snider is a medical writer and historian and a former associate editor of JAMA, The Journal of the American Medical Association, and the author of numerous popular health and medical publications, including The New Harvard Guide to Women's Health. She is the co-founder and co-director of Start School Later (startschoollater.net), a coalition dedicated to increasing public awareness about the relationship between sleep and school hours.

Bill for school start times study moves forward

By TIM PRATT Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, March 24, 2013 12:00 am

The House Ways and Means Committee has advanced a bill that would set up a task force to study later school start times.

The House Ways and Means Committee's Education Subcommittee moved House Bill 1462 forward last week, said Del. Aruna Miller, D-Montgomery, its sponsor. As of Saturday, the General Assembly website showed that the measure had gotten a favorable report from the full committee.

The bill would establish a task force including politicians, education leaders, and health and sleep experts to look at the ramifications of starting school later in the morning.

The Ways and Means Committee heard more than a dozen people testify in favor of the bill during a hearing on March 15. Nobody spoke in opposition.

The hearing featured students, parents, health experts and sleep specialists.

"While we're talking about school start times, what we're really talking about is the health and safety of our children," said Merry Eisner, policy chairwoman of the Montgomery County chapter of the grass-roots organization Start School Later.

Sleep loss causes problems with complex thought, motor responses, memory and attention, control of emotions, and performance in school or on the job, according to the National Institutes of Health.

The NIH also reports the amount of sleep that an individual will need each day changes considerably over the course of a lifetime, with school-aged children needing at least 10 hours a day and teenagers needing at least nine hours a day.

Anne Arundel County high schools start at 7:17 a.m., the earliest in the state. As many students need to wake up at 6 a.m. or earlier, they would need to fall asleep at 9 p.m. or earlier to get the recommended amount of rest.

That is difficult with teens' circadian rhythms, which naturally keep them awake later in the night, said Richard Gelula, former chief executive officer of the National Sleep Foundation.

"We have a critical misalignment of school schedules, which have been artificially imposed on children," Gelula said.

Annapolis High School seniors Ebony Acton and Isabelle Locke have experienced the difficulties of sleep deprivation firsthand.

After completing school, extracurricular activities and homework, students have difficulty making it to bed early enough to get the recommended amount of sleep, Acton said. As a cheerleader, she won't get home from basketball games this winter until 9 or 10 p.m.

"Starting school at 7:17 (a.m.) is ridiculous," she said.

Locke, who did an essay on the issue, agreed. She too finds extracurricular activities and homework make it difficult to get the recommended amount of sleep.

"Teens are strongly affected by sleep deprivation and carry the consequences into the future," she said.

The Anne Arundel County Public School system recently completed a study on the issue, which identified start time options and the potential transportation and logistical issues that would arise from them.

The study said that potential costs ranged from minimal to more than \$6 million, depending on the student transportation arrangements.

Some members of the legislative subcommittee worried last week that pushing start times back would lead to students getting home later in the day, impacting jobs, child care and after-school activities. Others worried about transportation costs.

But Miller, the bill's sponsor, said school schedules could be staggered so the impact on transportation is minimal. She wants no classes to start before 8 a.m.

"Twenty-five states have school districts that have implemented starting schools later," she said. "We can look at those states as examples."

Committee member Del. Kathy Afzali, R-Frederick, said she had concerns about the logistics of starting school later, but likes the intent of the bill.

"I'm the poster child for having children that are sleep-deprived," she said. "On the weekday, I cannot get my kids to bed before midnight and they have to get up at 5:30 or 6 for school."

That's what the Start School Later group is trying to change.

"The students and parents need your help," said Mandi Mader, founder of Montgomery County's Start School Later chapter. "The superintendents and school boards need your help."

Annapolis High School teacher Lisa Brannigan sees the impact of sleep deprivation every morning. The Monday after daylight saving time started, only 10 of the 22 students in her first-period class actually got there, she said.

"It's a struggle to keep the students' heads off their desks," she said.