



Howard County | Maryland

health, safety and equity in education

BOE Election Candidate School Hours Questionnaire

Please return to: sslhoco@gmail.com

Candidate Name: Kirsten Coombs **District:** 4

Will you sign Start School Later's 2013 petition at

<https://sign.moveon.org/petitions/changing-howard-county>? 1. If you won't sign it, please explain why.

I fully recognize the overwhelming body of research on the benefits of healthy start times for our students. I agree with the points made in this petition, which reads, "We respectfully request our school board to officially recognize the large and compelling body of research regarding teen sleep and academic achievement, and, with a resolution, to set a goal to start all schools in Howard County, MD, after 8:00 AM." This is a laudable goal for our school system and an issue that we should continue to discuss and identify ways to address. As an experienced board member and accountant, I also want to be fully transparent and refrain from making promises that I know will be difficult to keep in the coming year ahead. At this moment, I do not see a way for us to delay start times for every school level past 8:00am over the coming school year due to our significant budgetary limitations, particularly in the time of COVID-19. We are facing many difficult decisions ahead with a need to cut \$30 million from our operating budget in FY21. However, in the event that some form of distance learning continues into SY20-21, I would fully support models that allowed check-ins for students at every level to be delayed until after 8-9am. Without the barrier of transportation costs, there should be no reason why we cannot make this happen for our students and align our instruction with the science on youth sleep.

2. Based on the research that later middle and high school start times increase graduation rates and decrease absenteeism, with disadvantaged students benefiting the most from age-appropriate school hours, do you feel the current school hours affects the County's ability to be a leader in K-12 education for all students?

Yes, as with many areas in our education system, the detriments of unhealthy start times impact our vulnerable students the most, particularly our middle and high school students. Howard County prides itself on its high quality, inclusive education system, and our inability to address healthy school start times does present a threat to our leadership position in K-12 education.

3. What hours would you define as healthy, safe, and age appropriate? The current school hours are: Elementary 8:15-9:25 a.m. start times, Middle School 7:40-8:25 a.m. start times, and High School 7:25 a.m. start time.

Elementary School: 8:00-9

Middle School: 8:00-8:30 (considering balance with dismissal time, extra-curriculars, child care, and homework needing to be completed in the evening)

High School: 8:00-8:30 (considering balance with dismissal time, extra-curriculars, child care, and homework needing to be completed in the evening)

4. On December 19, 2017, Staff proposed four models for bell times that could be implemented. All four models had Elementary starting between at 8:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. and Middle between 8:00 a.m. and 8:45 a.m. Model 1: High school at 8 a.m. Model 2: High School at 8:15 a.m. Model 3: High School at 8:30 a.m. Model 4: High School at 8:45 a.m. What do you think about these four proposed models?

I believe that Models 1 & 2 provide the best balance for our high school students, considering the following factors:

- Delaying start times to increase needed sleep time in line with scientific evidence
- Reasonable dismissal times for extra-curriculars, after school activities, and evening homework
- Reasonable dismissal times for necessary child care assistance for younger siblings

Logistically, Models 3 & 4 present more challenges to address the needs of all of our community according to the factors outlined above.

5. With the Board of Education purchasing a new bus routing system for the Department of Transportation, what would be your timeline of implementation healthy school hours?

To effectively design, pilot, and implement healthy school hours, the timeline would likely take two to three years to complete. The routing system allows for route optimization and associated decreases in transportation costs, even when healthy school hours have not been implemented yet. Specific factors that need to be considered regarding implementation include a transition plan, determination of bus driver need and availability, and changes in number of routes per driver (and therefore, number of required buses and associated costs). The school system will need to work closely with the many transportation contractors who manage their own drivers and buses.

6. Currently, HCPSS services 5 parochial schools with 21 bus routes dedicated to those schools at a price tag of \$800,000 annually to HCPSS. The HCPSS Transportation department uses their manpower to design and maintain those routes. The BOE's Legal Counsel stated that the school system is not legally required to supply bus service if a student does not reside on a public school bus route. What are your thoughts about HCPSS providing this extra service to these parochial schools?

We should eliminate the parochial school transportation, as we don't receive any additional funds for the administration of these routes.

7. In your prior experience and positions, what have you done to ensure all Howard County Public School students (K-12) have healthy, safe, and age appropriate school hours?

While on the Board, I advocated for the analysis of bus routes for healthy school hours. Ultimately, I was unable to identify the necessary additional operating funds to support implementation during my first term. As an alternative, I considered swapping elementary and high school start times to better align with sleep science; however, this posed additional concerns for families regarding child care for younger siblings, as well as poor alignment with neighboring counties' extra-curricular activity schedules. I would like to see broader support by our state Department of Education on this issue so that we can ensure that counties are generally aligned with each other on activity schedules, particularly for sports and arts programming.

8. In your elected position, what will you do to ensure healthy and safe school hours for all of Howard County Public School Students? Please be specific: Resolutions, recommendations, funding requests, educational outreach, implementation efforts, etc.

I would support the following activities:

- Collaborating with the County Council to draft a resolution regarding healthy and safe school hours for our students. Legislative resolutions are typically drafted at the Council, not the BOE, level.
- Continuing to advocate and relaying the importance of a fully funded school system budget with the County Executive, to include increases in transportation funding required for healthy and safe school times
- Outreach to state delegation and education agencies on potential sources of state funding and supporting legislation, as well as bringing forth any relevant legislation to the Board for review
- Discussing the possibility of a “flex” zero period for students, particularly at the high school level
- During periods of distance learning, delaying mandatory school activities to occur after 8am
- Outreach to athletics and arts departments to assess current practices, compare with neighboring counties, and explore possibilities for amended extra-curricular schedules

9. Is there anything else you would like your constituents and future voters to know about your position on safe, healthy, and age-appropriate school hours?

HCPSS is a large system, and we do not own our buses which constrains our efforts to determine schedules. I am a parent of a high-schooler, so I know firsthand how difficult the schedule is on her. We have to develop a process that is equitable for all families and students and continue to have these important discussions. In addition to delaying start times for our older children, I would like the elementary schools with start times after 9:00am to be shifted earlier. Elementary openings at 9:25 are problematic, as younger children are often more focused during morning hours.

Sleep is highly related to the mental health and behavior of our children. I have strongly supported expanded school mental health services, including on-site counseling and related supports. In my visits to school buildings, I have observed how effective social-emotional supports and instruction can be for our students. Partnerships with the Horizon Foundation and community providers are crucial to maintaining these programs. A social emotional health curriculum has also been added to our schools. I hope that focusing on social-emotional wellness, particularly in the early elementary years, will result in benefits for youth mental health as they continue in their academic careers.