



Anne Arundel County Chapter | Maryland health, safety and equity in education

Election Candidate School Hours Questionnaire

Please return to: sslaaco@gmail.com

Candidate Name: India Ochs

The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Academy of Sleep Medicine, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and many other public health groups recommend that middle and high school start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. In 2014, a joint report from the Maryland State Department of Education and Maryland Department of Health recommended that school systems conduct feasibility studies to determine the possibility of starting schools after 8 a.m. These experts base their recommendation on numerous studies that connect changing adolescent sleep patterns and early middle and high school start times to lower academic achievement, negative physical and mental health conditions, and risky behaviors among teens.

A 2014 Start Time Task Force by Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) recommended several potential options to improve school hours. In February 2015, the County Council unanimously passed Resolution 6-15 urging AACPS to follow the recommendations of its 2014 Task Force and “expeditiously take measures to establish safe and healthy high school hours for all students.” In January 2020, AACPS released a [report](#) by Prismatic Services, Inc regarding school transportation, bus routing, software use, facilities, logistics, and potential bell times. In Recommendations #27, Prismatic proposed two options for bell times that could be implemented at *no additional cost*, with fewer routes and fewer miles driven. Option 1: Elementary at 8 a.m., Middle and High schools at 9 a.m. Option 2: Elementary at 7:30 a.m., High School at 8:15 a.m., and Middle School at 9:00 a.m. At its January 22nd meeting, the Board of Education agreed to a late February/early March in-depth discussion of start times.

1. Will you sign Start School Later’s 2017 petition at <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/establish-safe-and-healthy-school-hours-in-anne-arundel-county> ? If you won’t sign it, please explain why.

Of course! I have been in support of everything the petition states since I first learned of the push for later school start times in 2016. I will never waver from the fight to establish safe and healthy school start/dismissal times until it is fully implemented throughout all AACPS schools.

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, the current school start times has had a significant negative impact on the high quality education AACPS strives to provide to all our students. As I and others have repeatedly stated, science doesn’t lie. Study after study show loss of sleep in students leads to problems in retention & cognition, behavior, tardiness & absenteeism, and depression. Given that teenagers are biologically geared to fall asleep much later than the rest of us, thousands of sleep deprived teens struggle as they arrive to schools with

early start times each day. Furthermore, statistics show lower academic performance in first period classes – which is especially troubling if first period is a core subject like math or English. Studies have also shown less sleep for lower-income students results in more diminished cognitive outcomes. For AACPS in particular, chronic absenteeism has increased in all schools each year since 2016¹ (13.9% in 2016 to 16.3% in 2019). AACPS high school students have the highest rates of absenteeism: 2019 saw 26.3% of students chronically absent and 20.8% of students absent more than 20 days.² At the same time, statistics show drops in proficiency in 10th grade English (down to 47.8% in 2019) and in Algebra I (down to 35% in 2019). While the lack of sleep is not the only factor for lower grades & test scores and increases in absenteeism, ensuring our students have the sleep they need would strengthen AACPS’s ability to better educate our kids. After all, science also shows sleep leads to increases in memory & learning, attention span, and mental health, with low-income high school students benefiting twice as much from later start times.

3. What hours would you define as healthy, safe, and age appropriate? The current school hours are: Elementary 8:10-9:45 a.m. start times, Middle School 8:10-9:25 a.m. start times, and High School 7:30 a.m. start time.

Elementary School: Factoring in both health/safety and academic readiness, 8:00am is the ideal start time. Our youngest students wake up the earliest and would be the most attentive during the morning hours, but we also do not want them waiting/walking in the dark prior to arrival at school.

Middle School: Per medical/science based recommendations, no earlier than 8:30am.

High School: Per medical/science based recommendations, no earlier than 8:30am.

Additionally, dismissal times for PreK-12 should be between 2:30 – 3:30pm.

4. In Recommendations #27 of its report, Prismatic Services, Inc. proposed two options for bell times that could be implemented at *no additional cost*, with fewer routes and fewer miles driven. Option 1: Elementary at 8 a.m., Middle and High schools at 9 a.m. Option 2: Elementary at 7:30 a.m., High School at 8:15 a.m., and Middle School at 9:00 a.m. What do you think about these two proposed options? What would be your timeline of implementation, now that altering school hours could be done without needing to include a funding request in the budget proposal?

As inferred above, I am in favor of Option 1 or something similar to having Elementary schools start at 8:00am and Middle & High schools start at 9:00am. Option 2 not only places our elementary school students in danger by being in the dark in the morning (depending on the bus route), but potentially takes away 30 minutes of extra sleep from our youngest kids who should get 10 hours of sleep. The 8:15 high school start time also goes against all the expert recommendations, and while 15 minutes may seem minimal to adults in the context of a normal day, it does make a difference for students and schools.

I would hope the shift in school start hours was implemented for the 2020-2021 school year, but if not, I would work with my fellow Board members to ensure AACPS’s administration and Transportation department develops a new transportation system/routes to get the change in school start times in place by 2021-2022.

¹ The current Maryland Report Card statistics on absenteeism only date back to 2016.

² Of note, 35.6% of high school students on a free and reduced meal plan were absent over 20 days in 2019.

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

I have advocated for healthy, safe, and age appropriate school hours for all AACPS students since I was first made aware of the situation during my first term as President of the Hillsmere Elementary PTA for the 2016-2017 school year. During that first year, I invited Lisa VanBuskirk from Start Schools Later's Anne Arundel County chapter to be a guest speaker at a PTA meeting, which subsequently led to a formal vote authorizing me to advocate for later high school start times/earlier elementary school start times on behalf of the Hillsmere PTA. I submitted oral and [written testimony](#) at the December 7, 2016, Board of Education meeting (which was subsequently shared with other PTAs through the County Executive's education officer), and circulated information sheets and draft templates for fellow parents and community members to submit similar testimony. Additionally, my [Letter to the Editor](#) was published five days later on December 12, 2016. When the Board of Education eventually voted to shift school start times 13 minutes later for high schools and 15 minutes later for elementary schools, with the one exception of shifting Hillsmere Elementary School only 10 minutes later,³ I knew it was not enough. I also knew it was not enough when some of my fellow parents and PTA Board members would say "it's a done deal. The Board voted, no need to keep fighting for it, lets move on". And so in my second year as PTA President – and all the years since then – I have kept the issue as one of my priorities – including tracking how transportation would fit into bringing such change – and provided public comment at Board of Education meetings when school start times and changes to the transportation system would come up in discussion. With the shift in Board of Education members after the 2018 election, these issues once again became more public, and once again, I advocated for the need for changes to the transportation system/supported hiring a transportation consultant. Once the transportation consultant report was released, I submitted additional [oral](#) and [written](#) testimony related to school start times at the January 22, 2020, Board of Education meeting. Additionally, I joined with two of my fellow Board of Education candidates to write a [Letter to the Editor](#) (published on January 27, 2020) in response to misinformation on school start times that *the Capital Gazette* staff had circulated in an editorial.

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

If the shift in school start times has not been implemented by the time I took office in December 2020, I would take the following steps:

- (If not already in place) Request a working group to specifically examine and recommend the best school start times for AACPS based on analyzing all factors in developing a new bus route system that supports new school start times (e.g., appropriate rider capacity per bus to ensure equity in school activities, number of buses available for new elementary, middle, and high school start times, timing of routes).
 - Request outreach to the agencies providing before/aftercare services to coordinate any recommended shifts in before/aftercare times and potential increases in staffing.

³ I can only speculate that the 10 minute shift in time was meant as a small token for being the most vocal elementary school to advocate on the topic.

- Conduct community forums in each school cluster to raise awareness on the shift in school start times and its benefits, address any questions from the public, and debunk any common myths on the topic. Recommend that Board members (including the Board member representing the cluster) actively participate in the forums along with the appropriate AACPS staff and County Department of Health personnel.
 - Request that AACPS develop informational materials in English and Spanish to distribute to all AACPS families prior to the start of the school year (ideally prior to each forum).

6. What is your timeframe for your actions in Question 5? Please be specific, Fiscal Year, School Year, etc.

Immediately and on-going until it gets done. I would ensure the final recommendations from the working group were released with enough time to 1) work with the bus companies, before/aftercare agencies and other stakeholders to get it in place by the start of 2021-2022 school year, and 2) conduct all community forums prior to the 2021-2022 school year. If for some reason additional funding was required (e.g., more buses), I would move to include it in the 2021-2022 budget.

7. 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?

There is a lot of literature on why teenagers benefit health-wise from later school start times, but I would like to share a few more mitigating factors that further support their safety and academics. Specifically, studies from other jurisdictions who shifted to later high school start time found increases in GPAs and college admissions test scores, decreases in disciplinary action, and decreases in student's risky behavior including student-involved car accidents. Of note, one study showed the number of car crashes for drivers 16 to 18 years of age was reduced by 70% when a school shifted start times from 7:35 AM to 8:55 AM. Students who slept at least 8 hours have increased athletic performance and are also 68% less likely to suffer a sports-related injury than their peers who sleep less. And it's not just students that benefit: a 2017 study by the RAND corporation projected moving to a 8:30am start time would result in an gain of \$8.6 billion to the U.S. economy, a \$83 billion gain over a decade, and \$140 billion after 15 years – and those were conservative numbers.

Additionally, a shift to earlier elementary school start times would have a significant impact on our youngest students' health and safety. As I have stated in the past, pushing elementary school times 15 minutes later went against the original AACPS statement that no elementary school student would be walking to/from their school/bus stop in the dark. As of the 2019-2020 school year, 18 elementary schools dismiss at 3:50pm or later, with three dismissing after 4:00pm.⁴ According to weather data, the sun set between 4:45- 5:00pm from November 6, 2019 – January 8, 2020. If you factor in some buses that routinely don't depart the school until 15-20 minutes after dismissal, that is 36 actual school days that elementary age kids with late bus drop offs were walking in dusk or dark as winter season set in.

⁴ Two speciality schools also dismiss late with students under age 12: Marley Glen School (4:05) and Ruth Parker Eason School (3:55).

Factor in rain, no headlights, and other elements that further limit vision of both drivers and students, and we can not have our youngest kids arriving at home during dusk or in the dark.

Of equal significance is the impact of breakfast times, a factor that is rarely addressed in discussion on school start times. Specifically, elementary school students enrolled in the free breakfast program face serious challenges with late start times. Numerous studies show eating breakfast improves children's mental and physical productivity throughout the day, while skipping breakfast can have the negative effect. What is not always discussed is the timing of breakfast: studies also have shown that if people do not eat breakfast 30-60 minutes after waking up, their metabolism that was at a lower level when sleeping never kicks in, resulting in lower attention/cognition skills and constant feelings of hunger (even if they do eventually eat breakfast). We also know that the younger the child is, the more prone he/she is to wake up earlier in the morning, and so, with the current school start times, many elementary school students who rely on the free breakfast will not be getting that essential nutritional intake until after 9:00am, which easily could be 2-3 hours after they wake up. Such circumstances result in poorer classroom behavior and learning capabilities.

For those reading this, I appreciate you taking the time to review all of the information within these five pages. To put this all in perspective, I would like to close with a quote from a **1913 study** that I cited in my January 22, 2020 oral testimony: "The European custom of beginning school at 7 to 8 o'clock in the morning works great hardship, often causing the pupil to rush away to school in nervous haste and without breakfast. The American practice of beginning at 9 o'clock is far wiser and should never be changed unless for very special reasons."