



Health, Safety and Equity in Education

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Petition for Starting High School Later Finds Support Throughout Montgomery County

New report on petition sheds light on who supported it and why

Silver Spring--There is strong support for later high school start times from all parts of Montgomery County and from a wide variety of stakeholders, according to a [report](#) released today by the [Lloyd Society](#), an independent, non-profit, research center. The report analyzes the responses to an [online petition](#) requesting that high school start times be delayed by one hour in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). The petition was circulated by the Montgomery County Chapter of [Start School Later](#), a national advocacy organization.

As a result of the petition, which was presented to the MCPS Board of Education on December 11, Superintendent Joshua Starr established a working group on school start times, which meets for the first time today.

"This report provides a number of insights that can be useful to the working group," said Ann Gallagher, board chair of the Lloyd Society and author of the report. "Our analysis found that signers came from every area in the county and represent a cross section of all groups involved with teenagers and the school system. I was also impressed by how much petition supporters were familiar with the research documenting the negative impact of sleep deprivation on teenagers." In addition to her role at the Lloyd Society, Gallagher is an adjunct professor of science at the Catholic University of America and the outreach chair of the Montgomery County Chapter of Start School Later.

The petition garnered 10,223 signatures in 12 weeks. Signers included school faculty and staff, students, parents of students, sleep experts, doctors, and mental health professionals. About a quarter of responders left comments explaining the reasons for their support for later start times.

"We still have some years until our kids are in high school, but as a coach at a Montgomery County high school I see on a first hand basis how exhausted these high school kids are each day," noted one petition signer.

Overwhelmingly, signatures come from Montgomery County residents, 98.4% of the total. Support for the petition came from every part of the county, corresponding to distribution of the overall population. But even for those who live outside the county, most have local ties, including former MCPS students and parents, as well as health practitioners that treat county residents.

Petition signers expressed concern over the physical and mental health effects of sleep deprivation and its impact on academic performance.

"I could not focus on or learn the material that was being taught to me in school. I truly believe I would have picked a different major in college if I had been awake enough in high school to realize how much I loved science," wrote one signer.

A few commented about safety issues, expressing concerns about teens traveling to and from school in the dark, cars hitting students, girls waiting at bus stops in the dark, and the general practice of students driving while sleepy.

One student reported that "as a student in the Blair magnet program, I had to drive or be driven three miles to my bus stop every morning at 6:30 am, which at one point resulted in me hitting a tree. Though I was not seriously injured, this sort of ridiculous morning could easily be prevented with a little less sleep deprivation and a little more time to actually wake up in the morning."

A number of comments came from health professionals and therapists expressing support for the petition, based both on experience with patients and their own children.

"Many of my patients who have eating disorders report using food to wake themselves up during school because they are so tired," said a therapist in Kensington.

Students, parents and teachers indicated that first period was especially problematic. Many students are chronically late. Others are not awake or are unable to absorb the lessons.

"My son has Spanish first period," a parent from Takoma Park reported. "At back to school night, the teacher told us that she could not teach our kids. The kids are asleep!"

The establishment of the working group has given hope to supporters of later start times that their concerns have been heard and that the county will look for ways to address them.

"It's about time to do something," commented a Bethesda resident. "Our children are getting sick from not sleeping enough. They can't concentrate on their homework in the afternoon because they are tired, thus needing more and more time to finish it. They sit for hours on their homework. This leads to even later bed time. Our children have rarely more than 6 or seven hours of sleep per night, which is absolutely not enough. We need to do something about it and find a workable solution."

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Start School Later is a coalition of health professionals, sleep scientists, educators, parents, students, and other concerned citizens dedicated to increasing public awareness about the relationship between sleep and school hours and to ensuring school start times compatible with health, safety, education, and equity. Please visit our website at: <http://www.startschoollater.net>.