



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

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A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP BY THE ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

For more than two decades, high school students in Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) have been required to be in their seats at 7:17 a.m., which has them traveling to school or school buses in the 6 a.m. hour, sometimes even earlier. Health and education experts have long argued and proven that such early school hours undermine adolescent health and the ability of teens to learn and achieve academic success.

At its February 15 budget meeting for 2018-2019 school year, the Anne Arundel County Board of Education and Schools Superintendent George Arlotto again chose to ignore the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that no middle or high school begin before 8:30 a.m.

"Dr. Arlotto failed to include any funding for establishing safe, healthy and developmentally-appropriate school hours for all K through 12 students," says Lisa VanBuskirk, chapter leader of the nonprofit advocacy organization Start School Later about AACPS's \$1.1 billion budget. "The board failed to advocate for our county's students by not using its authority to add funding for appropriate school start times. The board also continued to fail in its oversight duties by allowing Dr. Arlotto to either disregard or slow walk a needed, effective change to school start times."

Maria Sasso was the sole board member to advocate for student health during the meeting. Ms Sasso introduced an amendment to increase the district's transportation budget by what amounts to less than \$100 per pupil per year. Because Ms. Sasso's board colleagues declined to second her motion, the amendment failed without any discussion. As a result, testimony about start times by eight members of the public (including a high school student who had to skip classes to be at the 10 a.m. meeting) was not allowed.

"A sad irony of the Board of Education's inability to lead is that earlier this month, yet another report was published showing that later school start times result in less absenteeism and higher student achievement," says VanBuskirk, citing an article in the academic journal *Sleep Health*. "A promise to start school a mere 13 minutes later, beginning with the 2017 school year, is the only relief Dr. Arlotto has provided to more than 30,000 sleep-deprived high school students and their similarly tired parents."

The continued inaction on this issue by Anne Arundel County Public Schools is contrary to the national recommendations, as well as to a 2014 report by the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and Maryland State Department of Education. The departments jointly recommended that Maryland's school districts pursue implementing change so no school begins before 8 a.m. As a show of support for appropriate school hours, the Anne Arundel County Council has issued Resolution 6-15 calling for healthy school hours and twice provided funding toward the effort, including to purchase and use GPS-assisted bus routing rather than sticking with bus routes that are based solely on past practice and institutional knowledge.

"Does the board refute the mountains of scientific evidence that's telling them to establish healthy school hours for all students?" asked Melissa Ellis, a Crownsville mother of four. "Or are they choosing to ignore the need?"

During the meeting, several board members lectured one another and the audience about the board's duty to advocate for the school system by asking the County Executive, County Council and taxpayers to provide the funding a quality school system needs.

"Hearing those speeches was highly ironic and exceedingly disappointing since Start School Later has encouraged the board to do just that," notes VanBuskirk. "Instead, our governor-appointed Board of Education blocked the ability of our community's elected officials to consider funding and supporting this needed school change."

Ms. VanBuskirk says the local chapter of Start School Later will continue to educate the public and, if Anne Arundel County moves to an elected school board, engage with board candidates about the importance of safe and healthy school hours.

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Start School Later Anne Arundel County, MD is a chapter of Start School Later, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works at local, state, and national levels to raise awareness about and advocate for safe and healthy school start times.

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