



health, safety and equity in education

The Honorable Vanessa E. Atterbeary
House Ways & Means Committee
Room 131
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support for House Bill 1418 (Public Middle and High Schools—Start Time for Instruction—Requirement)

Madam Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify **in support of House Bill 1418**, an essential and groundbreaking piece of public health and child-protection legislation that will help local communities ensure school hours consistent with children’s health, safety, school performance, and well-being.

I am the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Start School Later, a Maryland-based, non-profit coalition dedicated to safe, healthy, and equitable school hours. I have a doctorate in the history of science and medicine, and my work as a science and medical writer has included co-authoring of *The Harvard Guide to Women’s Health* and serving as an associate editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. I’m a Severna Park resident and Maryland voter as well, and have experienced firsthand what it meant for my three children, all graduates of Severna Park High School, to attend a school that began each day at 7:17 a.m.

What I experienced with my now grown children led me to form a national non-profit to address a critical matter of child health and safety that local districts had trouble addressing—even when school leaders were trying to do so. I’ve seen the same story play out all over the country: schools try to change bell times, but they almost always face pushback from communities who fear change and don’t understand why they are being asked to do it. I’ve also seen many districts around the country make this change and discover these fears are unfounded and that safe, healthy hours are feasible and affordable. In most cases, however, **fear and speculation still stop change, and kids get caught up in the gears. This has been true in many Maryland counties since the 1990s.**

The result is significant, unnecessary harm to student health, safety, and school performance, as recognized by both the medical and education communities, including the American Medical Association (AMA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National PTA, National Education Association (NEA), and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)—which, in 2014, first recommended that secondary schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Recognizing calls from these organizations for safe, healthy school start times—and the extensive research supporting them—the Maryland General Assembly unanimously passed landmark legislation in 2014, prompting the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) to issue a [Report on Safe and Healthy School Hours](#) (Dec. 2014) recommending that MSDE advise all Maryland districts to follow AAP

policy. This report also noted that despite two decades of trying, **local districts may need support overcoming political obstacles to change.**

HB 1418 provides exactly this support by setting guardrails on how early districts can require attendance, following precedents recently established in both California and Florida. This legislation will give school districts the necessary impetus to treat safe, healthy, equitable school hours as a **non-negotiable public health right** rather than a negotiable school budget item. **It will empower local school leaders to prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of students,** as well as compelling research about both the benefits and feasibility of this change, over adult vested interests and unfounded fears. Not insignificantly—and **contrary to the summary of the bill's fiscal analysis** (which overlooks the many creative transportation solutions that districts making this change have employed)—it will also benefit Maryland's economy: the **RAND Corporation** projects that **starting middle and high school classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m. would boost the national economy by \$83 billion within a decade, with benefits far outweighing any immediate costs of change.**

The public health community is telling us that sleep and school hours are a public health and equity issue right up there with child labor, smoking, and seatbelts. In many districts today, students and their parents must choose between compliance with school hours and adequate sleep. **Setting parameters for safe, healthy hours is just as appropriate for the state of Maryland as establishing standards for the number of days or hours children should be in class, or any of the state's many school health laws.** This is a case where, as Dr. Judith Owens of Harvard Medical School has observed, **"to do nothing is to do harm."**

Of course, local schools should and even must set their own hours, based on their specific community needs. This legislation will not change their ability to do so. By establishing an earliest acceptable opening hour for required classes, however, this legislation will ensure that adolescents have a chance to get a healthy night's sleep and help local communities overcome the myths and fear that have blocked change for decades. Following the example of many other districts around the state and the nation that have made these changes, **local school districts will then be positioned to implement change in a way that works for their individual communities.**

Maryland's schools need help if they're going to do the right thing and avoid subjecting another generation to what we now know are counterproductive and dangerous conditions. A decade ago our state led the nation by passing [HB883/SB14](#) in 2014 and [HB39](#) in 2016. But over a decade has passed, and thousands of students continue to suffer. It has become clear that **most districts cannot take action to protect student health and well-being without state guardrails that enable local districts to ensure healthy, safe, and equitable school hours.** I urge you to make this a reality by supporting this bill.

Sincerely,

Terra Ziporyn Snider, Ph.D.
Executive Director and Co-Founder
Start School Later, Inc.