



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 1015 (Public Middle and High Schools—Start Time for Instruction)

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

Thank you for this opportunity to testify **in support of House Bill 1015**, an essential and groundbreaking piece of public health and child-protection legislation that will help local communities ensure school hours that promote 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 has kept me working for decades to address this 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. **Still, fear and speculation often 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 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)—which, in 2014, first recommended that secondary schools start no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Recognizing these calls—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, **districts may need support overcoming political obstacles to change.**

Following precedents recently established in both California and Florida, **HB 1015 provides this support, empowering districts to keep student well-being off the chopping block with every budget crisis.** Importantly, and contrary to common misperceptions:

1. **HB 1015 is NOT a mandate. It is merely a guardrail** setting a reasonable and medically recommended limit on how early schools can require attendance. (We all already live by similar mental guardrails—e.g., no one would consider starting class at 3 a.m.) Districts can still set any schedules that works for their communities so long as those schedules are safe and healthy.
2. **Many districts (including Maryland districts) have found feasible and affordable ways to follow these guardrails and run schools at safe, healthy hours.**

Not insignificantly, 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. Furthermore, **extravagant cost claims by some districts in the bill's fiscal analysis overlook the many creative and low-, no-cost, and even cost-saving transportation solutions** many districts have employed to make similar changes.

The public health community is telling us that sleep and school hours are a public health and equity issue like 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.**"

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 harmful 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 real live children continue to suffer unnecessarily day after day and year after year. Please help our school leaders do what is right for children and communities by supporting this bill.

Sincerely,

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