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Testimony in Support of HB 189: Public Middle, High, and Charter Schools – Start Time for Instruction

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Submitted by: Dr. Lauren B. Covington, PhD, RN Assistant Professor, University of Delaware School of Nursing Sleep Researcher, PICU Nurse & Mother of Baltimore City Pre-K Student

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Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Lauren Covington. I am a nurse scientist specializing in pediatric sleep health disparities, a Pediatric ICU nurse since 2012, and the mother of a pre-kindergarten student in Baltimore City Public Schools. I urge your support for HB 189.

Why I'm Qualified to Speak on This Issue

As a sleep researcher, I've published over 20 peer-reviewed articles on pediatric sleep health in top-tier journals including *Sleep Health* and *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*. I serve as the sole nurse scientist on Safe Kids Worldwide's Safe Sleep Work Group developing a National Safe Sleep Roadmap. Through my Betty Irene Moore Fellowship (\$500,000), I lead community-based research with Black mothers and community organizations examining how systemic barriers, including policies like early school start times, harm children's health.

The Science is Unequivocal: Early Start Times Harm Adolescents

During adolescence, biological changes cause teenagers to naturally fall asleep and wake 2-3 hours later than children or adults. This is not laziness, it's biology, observed across mammals at puberty. When we force adolescents to attend school before 8:30 a.m., we're requiring them to wake when their brains are biologically programmed to be asleep.

The consequences are severe:

- **Sleep deprivation crisis:** 81% of Baltimore City high school students and 62% of middle school students get fewer than 8 hours of sleep, below the recommended 8-10 hours.
- **Mental health:** Insufficient sleep significantly increases risk for depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. In Baltimore, 17% of middle school students reported ever attempting suicide, nearly twice the national average. Maryland students reporting suicide attempts are significantly more likely to report insufficient sleep.
- **Academic performance:** Sleep-deprived students struggle with attention, memory, and learning. Later start times improve grades, attendance, and graduation rates, with greatest benefits for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

- **Safety:** Drowsy teenagers have impaired judgment and slower reaction times. One Kentucky district saw a 16.5% drop in teen car crashes after delaying start times by one hour.

Baltimore Students Face Compounded Harm

The September 2024 Abell Foundation report documents how early start times disproportionately harm Baltimore students:

- **73% rely on public transit** with an average 45-minute commute requiring 1-3 bus transfers.
- **A student with a 7:30 a.m. start time must wake by 5:30 a.m.**, when their adolescent brain is still in deep sleep.
- **71% Black, 19% Hispanic/Latino, 72% low-income** populations already experience sleep disparities due to housing instability, neighborhood noise, food insecurity, and chronic stress.

When City Schools pushed start times earlier in 2022 to address bus driver shortages, they prioritized logistics over student health. Currently, 81% of City Schools high schools start before 8:30 a.m., ignoring recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, and CDC.

Later Start Times Work

Districts nationwide demonstrate success:

- **Seattle:** Shifting high school start from 7:50 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. resulted in 45 minutes more sleep, better grades, fewer absences, with the greatest improvements in schools serving disadvantaged students.
- **Minneapolis:** Moving from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m. resulted in more sleep, better attendance, less falling asleep in class, fewer depressive symptoms.
- **Jackson Hole, Wyoming:** Teen crash rates dropped 70% after shifting start from 7:35 a.m. to 8:55 a.m.

A 2017 RAND Corporation analysis estimated that shifting to 8:30 a.m. start times would result in \$8.6 billion gain to the U.S. economy within two years, from improved graduation rates and reduced crashes alone.

My Perspective as a Pediatric ICU Nurse and Mother

As a Pediatric ICU nurse at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore, I've witnessed the devastating consequences when systems fail children. I've cared for teenagers hospitalized after suicide attempts and car crashes. I've consoled parents who blame themselves for outcomes they could not control.

As a mother of a Baltimore City pre-k student, I know that my professional flexibility, financial resources, and car will buffer some harm of early start times if they persist. I can drive my child if they miss the bus. I can afford tutoring if sleep deprivation impacts her grades. I can access mental health services if needed.

Most Baltimore City families cannot. Many parents work multiple jobs, rely on public transportation, and lack resources to compensate for policy failures. Early school start times are a structural barrier that disproportionately harms our most vulnerable students.

I refuse to accept policies that harm children simply because changing them is inconvenient.

Why HB 189 is Right

This legislation is thoughtfully designed:

- **Three-year implementation timeline** gives districts sufficient time to plan. It's the same timeline California and Florida provided.
- **Evidence-based standards** (8 a.m. middle school, 8:30 a.m. high school) align with American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations.
- **Waiver provision prohibits lack of funding as justification.** Student health cannot be negotiable based on budget.
- **Public education requirement** ensures community understanding and feedback.
- **Statewide equity:** A student's opportunity for healthy sleep should not depend on their ZIP code!

This is Health Equity and Social Justice

Early school start times are a modifiable social determinant of health. Unlike poverty or housing instability, which require complex interventions, school start times can be changed through policy. We have the power to eliminate one barrier to health equity for Maryland's children.

Thirty years of research from sleep scientists, pediatricians, psychologists, and education researchers point to the same conclusion: *requiring adolescents in class before 8:30 a.m. jeopardizes their health, safety, and academic success.*

We know the problem. We know the solution. The only question is whether we have the political will.

As a sleep scientist, I tell you the evidence is unequivocal. As a Pediatric ICU nurse, I tell you the consequences of inaction are devastating. As a mother, I tell you every Maryland child deserves the opportunity to attend school at times allowing them to be healthy, safe, and ready to learn.

I urge you to pass HB 189. Our children's health cannot wait.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer questions.

Sincerely,



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