

Testimony of Sandra S. Landis
Montgomery County Chapter Leader, Start School Later
Montgomery County 2025 Operating Budget Hearing
April 8, 2024

Good Afternoon, Members of the County Council and Attendees,

Thank you so much for the privilege of appearing before you today for the third consecutive year to speak about the County's 2025 Operating Budget. My name is Sandra Landis, and I am the Leader of the [Montgomery County Chapter of Start School Later](#), a national organization dedicated to ensuring school start times compatible with health, safety, education and equity. In the interest of full disclosure, I want to share that I have also assumed the role of Bell Time Subcommittee Chair of the MCCPTA Health and Wellness Committee. Today I am officially speaking for Start School Later, but both roles work synergistically to underscore the single mission focus of safe and healthy bell times for secondary school students.

I am hoping that the adage "the third time's the charm" works and (pardon the pun) that my request today won't be eclipsed by the other issues on your plates – especially since much of what I'm here requesting at this critical moment involves swift action and leadership, without additional funds.

Our entire community is reeling from the reports of improprieties within MCPS that led to our then relatively-new superintendent stepping down and the current search for a new one. We all reacted in horror as evidence of a hostile work environment confronting our teachers was exposed, and published comments attributed to many of you referred to

“systemic” problems in MCPS that need to be addressed, and the need for MCPS to implement evidenced based programming with associated metrics so we can see returns on investment. I am here to speak to you about one such initiative that has been shown Nationwide to yield improvements in secondary school outcomes. That is beginning secondary schools at 8:30 a.m. or later, consistent with recommendation of nearly every medical group in the country including [U.S. Surgeon General](#), [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), and [Centers for Disease Control](#) and the [National PTA](#). Our own MCCPTA has included this in its advocacy priorities for the last 3 years, and our newly formed Free State PTA at the State level has included it as well.

While we were operating during COVID, the science was breaking and we were scrambling to implement solutions. We now have the legacy of 3 decades of research on this with quantitative, measurable results to point to, of what has been achieved in districts that have done this. Nearly every problem area confronting public schools improved when bell times were delayed in this way including violent crime, substance abuse, aggression and mental health. We have thrown huge sums of money at these problems, but we will never buy our way out of a problem that we ourselves are creating by systematically implementing bell times known to cause these problems in teenagers, whose basic biology is incompatible with these early start times. We’ve heard the former Superintendent say that problems in the community find their way into the schools. But today, we’re finding that the student absenteeism, and other problems associated with insufficient sleep caused by school start times that are too early are spilling over into the community, with juvenile crime in Montgomery County having increased by 95% since 2019!

isHere are some specific metrics associated with delaying bell times:

- An NIH study released several years ago showed that every one hour of increased sleep among teens led to a [decreased risk of suicide by 11%](#)
- A population study released last year showed that teens who obtained less than 7 hours of sleep during adolescence [developed multiple sclerosis at higher rates](#) than their peers who slept more.
- A study of high schools with varying start times showed that [every ten minutes made a difference in obesity rates](#).
- [Graduation rates increased 9%](#) in schools that implemented later bell times.
- A study of a New York high school that moved 45 minutes later found [significant changes in student discipline](#).

In the interest of time, I've attached a fact sheet that lists many more studies.

Perhaps most chillingly, Dr. Judith Owens, Director of the Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Boston children's Hospital; Faculty in Neurology, Harvard Medical School, has stated that "To do nothing, is to do harm". So to stop the cycle in Montgomery County of both elected and appointed officials actually harming our public school teens through collective inaction, I respectfully request the following actions:

1. Use this initiative of safe and healthy bell times, with zero dollar investment right now, to serve as a litmus test for effectively implementing this evidence-based, common-sense initiative jointly by the Board of Education and the County government in the spirit of a renewed partnership that affect everyone. Report out regularly on its progress.

2. Sign our [updated petition](#) – either individually or collectively. This petition replaces the [legacy petition](#) transmitted to MCPS in 2012 with 10,000 signatures at the time. It has grown to 14,000 signatures, because parents want this. Ironically, it is addressed to the one Superintendent who actually delayed school times back in 2015, so it needed to be updated.
 - a. If we can't collectively encourage our current Board to do this, 9 of the candidates running for the board responded to a questionnaire about his and 7 signed the updated petition our [election website](#) .
3. Leverage your various media opportunities to let the community know your stance on this.
4. Encourage the Board of Education to pass a formal resolution to set a goal of establishing later secondary school hours. In addition to allowing the community to be aware that change is coming, and providing reassurance to the 82,000+ secondary school students in MCPS that you are addressing that which is harming them. **More importantly, this will serve as a roadmap for the new Superintendent to follow.** Enacting the resolution is an imperative, zero-cost action that can be completed in no time and that can put us on the right path to improving the health and welfare of our teenagers and our community.
5. See where funding opportunities exist to support a comprehensive transportation assessment that looks not only at MCPS resources for yellow school bus transportation but that also leverages our existing investment in

Ride-On buses to get our students to and from school. This was requested by
sent a [letter to the Board of Education and County Council](#) back in 2022.

10 Ways Later MIDDLE and HIGH SCHOOL Start Times Benefit Teens and the Community

1. Healthy School Hours Reduce the Achievement Gap "[D]elaying school start times by one hour, from roughly 7:30 to 8:30, increases standardized test scores by at least 2 percentile points in math and 1 percentile point in reading. The effect is largest for students with below-average test scores, suggesting that later start times would narrow gaps in student achievement."

2. Healthy School Hours Lower Juvenile Crime Rates Juvenile Crime peaks nationwide at 3 p.m., a time that's between the end of school and when parents get home. Police support limiting unsupervised situations at this crucial time. Also, sleep deprived teens are more likely to commit crime due to low self-control. The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services supports later start and release times.

3. Healthy School Hours Help Prevent Car Crashes Drowsy driving is responsible for a significant number of fatal teen crashes. School districts with later morning start times see the teen crash rates decline.

4. Healthy School Hours Reduce Drop-Out Rates School attendance improves, tardiness decreases and graduation rates increase, which helps raise tax revenues and reduce crime and gang activity. When comparing attendance and graduation rates before and after the schools implemented a delayed starting time, the average graduation rate jumped from 79% to 88%, and the average attendance rate went from 90% to 94%.

5. Healthy School Hours Improve Health

Sleep loss has wide-ranging consequences, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension. Sleep deprivation reduces the immune system. With later, healthier school start times, teens experience fewer sports injuries and miss fewer days of school due to illness.

6. Healthy School Hours Are Better for Mental Health Inadequate sleep is linked to depressed mood, anxiety, behavioral problems, alcohol and drug use, risky behaviors and suicidal thoughts.

The Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2016 (YRBS) shows that 19.5% of Anne Arundel County high school students seriously considered suicide and

16.5% made a plan to do so. The county's numbers are higher than the Maryland average. When able to sleep more:

- Teen attitudes and behavior improve
- Teens report less depression
- Teenage needs for medication decreases

(A cost-benefit analysis prepared for Fairfax County, Virginia, estimates that later start times could save the community \$1.7 million a year in mental health treatment costs.)

7. Healthy School Hours Help Prevent Substance Abuse Increased and adequate sleep decreases risk taking behaviors such alcohol and drug use. The Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2013 shows that Anne Arundel County high school students have higher rates of substance abuse than the Maryland average across nearly all categories queried.

8. Healthy School Hours Make Streets Safer

With early school start times, many students who are eligible for school bus service opt out and instead drive to school (or are driven by family members), which leads to more cars on the road during morning rush hours. In addition, children walking to schools and bus stops in the predawn darkness are a serious safety risk for both pedestrians and drivers.

9. Healthy School Hours Are Family-Friendly

A year after the city of Minneapolis implemented later start times, students were getting an hour more of sleep per school night, 92 percent of parents were happy with the change, and parents reported improved relationships with their children.

10. Healthy School Hours Benefit the Economy

The potential costs of schools starting after 8:30 a.m. can be recouped in as little as 2-3 years, based on improved academic outcomes (thus increased lifetime earnings) and a reduction in teen drowsy driving accidents.

SOURCES: (1) <http://educationnext.org/do-schools-begin-too-early/> and http://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/legacy/files/downloads_and_links/092011_organize_jacob_rockoff_brief.pdf
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(3) www.geico.com/information/autosafety/safety---library/ and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2603528/pdf/jcsm.4.6.533.pdf>
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