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## Calvert schools can start later with community support

LETTER TO THE EDITOR Lisa VanBuskirk, Edgewater The writer is a chapter leader for Start School Later Maryland.

May 25, 2016

Thank you to The Calvert Recorder for your article about the Orange Ribbon Bill for Healthy School Hours ["New law encourages 'healthy' school start times," May 6]. In my review of start times across the state, Calvert County Middle School is tied for earliest middle school start time in Maryland. Calvert County high schools are second earliest in the state. If an Anne Arundel County plan to delay high schools is implemented, Calvert County would move to first place (which is not something of which to be proud). There are also Maryland counties where middle school starts as late as 9:15 a.m. and high school starts as late as 9 a.m.

Late-starting middle and high schools are possible, with students who still have jobs, extracurricular activities, sports, homework and family time. Those students likely fall asleep at the same time as Calvert students (due to a well-documented two-hour-plus delay in the teen sleep cycle), but with their later start times, they are able to benefit from the extra hours of sleep in the morning when they need it the most. For adolescents, a 6 a.m. (or earlier) wake-up is akin to an adult's 4 a.m. wake-up. It's doable, as many Calvert commuters to Washington, D.C., know all too well, but it's neither enjoyable nor healthy in the long term.

It is unfortunate that Superintendent Daniel Curry chose to focus on the myths and excuses of why not to change to healthier and safer school hours, rather than focusing on the benefits of such a change.

An extensive body of research shows later school start times for adolescents:

- 1) Reduces the achievement gap: Disadvantaged students benefit twice as much as their peers, showing measurable improvements in test scores;

- 2) Reduces dropout rates: Attendance improves, tardiness decreases and graduation rates increase;
- 3) Improves physical health: Insufficient sleep is linked to greater risks of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and immune system suppression. Teens experience fewer sports injuries and miss fewer days of school due to illness with healthier school hours;
- 4) Improves mental health: Proper sleep improves the ability of teens to deal with stress and control reckless impulses. The rates of adolescent drug use, risky behaviors and suicidal thoughts are slightly higher in Calvert County than the Maryland average, according to the 2014 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
- 5) Lowers juvenile crime rates: Juvenile crime peaks between the end of the school day and when parents return from work. Delaying teen dismissal times limits the amount of unsupervised time and potential for getting into trouble.
- 6) Benefits the economy: Economists estimate a 9:1 benefit-to-cost ratio for later school times, noting that adjusting school start times is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve school systems.
- 7) Reduces drowsy driving: School districts that have later morning start times have seen teen car crash rates decline. Drowsy driving is the equivalent to drunk driving.
- 8) Encourages happier families: A year after Minneapolis implemented healthier hours, students were sleeping an hour more per night and 92 percent of parents reported they were happy with the change.

Changing school hours will necessitate adjustments to after-school activities, child care arrangements, transportation logistics and more. These are not trivial adjustments, but ones the community must undertake together.

When three tiers of busing were created, the sleep science was neither well known, nor appreciated. Today it is undeniable. We must use sleep science to justify a redesign of our bus schedules. Parents and adolescents are responsible for healthy bedtimes (such as

limiting electronics), but Calvert County Public Schools needs to be responsible for healthy wake times.

I encourage Calvert County residents to continue to email, call and testify before the superintendent and board of education, demanding healthier and safer school hours, until they are achieved. Perhaps the Orange Ribbon Bill recognition and the lessons learned that will be shared through this legislature can further encourage change. Start School Later, a national nonprofit based in Maryland, is able to assist, but only you can demand safe and healthy school hours for your children.