

Home / The Calvert Recorder / News / Local

http://www.somdnews.com/recorder/news/local/new-law-recognizes-school-systems-for-healthy-and-safe-start/article_c5161087-e24c-5236-86ed-25ed804c1397.html

New law recognizes school systems for 'healthy and safe' start times

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The Orange Ribbon Bill for Healthy School Hours, the first legislation in the nation to recognize school systems for healthy and safe school hours, was signed into law last month in Maryland — although Calvert County Public Schools is currently ineligible for this recognition.

Only school systems that do not have an elementary school starting class before 8 a.m. or boarding a school bus before 7 a.m., and that do not have a high school or middle school system that requires a student to be in class before 8:30 a.m. or board a school bus before 7:30 a.m., can be recognized as Orange Ribbon Schools, the law specifies.

According to the bill, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends middle school and high school students start the school day no earlier than 8:30 a.m. “for the sake of the students’ health, safety, and academic success.”

The legislation, sponsored as HB39 by Del. Aruna Miller (D-Montgomery), with a companion bill cross-filed by Sen. Bryan Simonaire (R-Anne Arundel), becomes effective July 1 of this year.

“The bill incentivizes districts to use best change-management practices as they work to find feasible, affordable, and community-specific ways to ensure safe, healthy school hours ,” Terra Ziporyn Snider, executive director and co-founder of Start School Later, an Annapolis-based nonprofit, said in a press release. “These practices include working with local stakeholders, educating the community, and addressing individual concerns.”

With three levels of recognition, depending on the school system's progress in achieving healthy and safe school hours, at least four school systems in Maryland are tentatively eligible for recognition under the Orange Ribbon Bill, should they choose to seek it: Anne Arundel, Garrett, Howard and Montgomery counties, according to a release from Star School Later.

"It's one of those ideas that sounds really good and, in a way, makes a lot of sense, but is not easily implemented. It calls for some major financial investments as well as a big investment in the community and selling them on the idea," said Daniel Curry, Calvert County superintendent of schools.

The earliest school start time in Calvert County is at Calvert Middle School, which has a start time of 7:22 a.m. Most of the high schools start school at 7:25 a.m., while most elementary schools start at about 9:05 a.m., Curry said. Another tier of mostly middle schools starts around 8:15 a.m.

Curry said the issue of school start times has come up before in phone calls and emails and that the administration is "well aware" of the ideas behind a later start.

"The challenge is how do you make it happen?" Curry said.

Calvert County has a three-layered bus system, with three major groupings of school start times. In order to maintain the same number of buses and drivers, the high school and elementary school start times could be switched, but if high schools start later, after-school activities would also start later and some sports games are played on unlit fields; athletes might have to miss more classes to travel to away games; and parents could run into child care issues if their older children are not at home for the younger ones while the parents are still at work, Curry explained.

To have schools start later, the school system must make several financial commitments: have more buses and drivers, which is a recurring annual expense, and light more athletic fields, Curry said.

Deb Jung, a chapter leader in Howard County, praised the efforts of the Howard County school district but expressed frustration that the issue has been “studied” for so long, in the release from Start School Later: “Parents want this change. Almost 80 percent of the parents surveyed last year stated they wanted to see school start times for high school students begin after 8 a.m. It is time for the school district to take action. I hope the Orange Ribbon Bill will encourage this change.”

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