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Resources are available to help St. Mary's start classes later

LETTER TO THE EDITOR by Lisa VanBuskirk, Edgewater The writer is the leader of Start School Later Maryland. Nov 29, 2017

It is with resigned familiarity that I read the Nov. 10 article "Can older students catch some more Zs before classes?" Every obstacle suggested by school leaders are the same ones each community that chooses to re-examine their school hours for the benefit of students must address and solve: school bus logistics, after school activities, child care for younger students and more.

It is especially disappointing, given that the superintendent and board of education were twice invited but declined to attend, a national conference in Washington, D.C., last April to discuss the benefits of later start times and learn from school systems that have successfully improved school hours.

The lessons learned included those from small, rural areas whose leaders are enthusiastic about the immediate, positive impact healthy and safe school hours have had on their middle and high school students. All addressed community concerns, from which St. Mary's public schools could learn and apply.

School transportation is 7.3 percent of the system's operating budget. When leaders mention that school transportation costs would increase, have they seen the actual numbers for a variety of school hour scenarios? Have they asked for the assistance from a University of Maryland professor, who a year ago offered to do a free limited evaluation of bus schedules for every Maryland school system using his mathematical model developed for Howard County? That county paid an additional amount for bell-time scenarios, saving 5 to 10 percent using the UMd.-recommended routing over their bus software, more than recouping the consulting fee. Also, there is a Maryland-based school transportation consulting firm that has helped school systems across the nation evaluate potential bell scenarios. Some school systems have found no-cost ways of running school buses at healthy and safe hours, or even saved money. Could the same happen in St. Mary's?

It is ironic that another article in The Enterprise would be a discussion of a pilot program for evening high school, because some students cannot be successful with the existing schedule. The Rand Corp. recently released a report that calculated communities could recoup their investment in later middle and high school hours in as few as two years, largely from increased graduation rates.

The article is right about the role of parents in ensuring consistent bedtime routines, including limiting use of electronic devices. When middle school students have to be at their schools as early as 7:05 a.m. for homeroom/advisory periods, the school system must take an active role in ensuring healthy wake times. Dropping elementary students off in approaching evening winter hours is a potential safety concern, but middle school students are already being picked up for buses in pre-dawn darkness. During some months, sunrise is well after homeroom starts. Where is the concern for their safety?

This summer, the National Parent Teachers Association passed a resolution urging its members to work to "support the efforts of school districts to optimize sleep for students and encourage high schools and middle schools to aim for start times that allow students the opportunity to achieve optimal levels of sleep and to improve their physical and mental health, safety, academic performance, and quality of life."

I urge the St. Mary's community to join the PTA, as well as a number of health organizations, in advocating for healthy and safe school hours for all K-12 students.

We wouldn't accept a student saying a homework assignment is too hard, when resources and help are available. We shouldn't accept anything less from St. Mary's public schools.