



health, safety and equity in education

February 21, 2020

The Honorable Philip Baruth
Chair, Senate Committee on Education
Vermont State Capitol
115 State Street #1
Montpelier, VT 05633

Re: S.274 (Hardy) – School Start Time – SUPPORT

Mr. Chair, Vice Chair Ingram, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify **in support of Senate Bill 274**. I am the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Start School Later, a national grassroots non-profit coalition dedicated to safe, healthy, and equitable school hours with 135 volunteer-led chapters, including a Vermont statewide chapter, in 3 countries, 31 US states, and Washington DC. I have a doctorate in the history of science and medicine, and my career as a science communicator has included co-authoring of *The Harvard Guide to Women's Health* and serving as an associate editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. In the 1990s my husband served two terms on the Burlington board of education, and both of my daughters, one now a South Burlington resident, served on our county school board in Maryland as well.

In my professional as well as my personal experience in school board politics and in raising three teenagers who began the school day at 7:17 a.m., I came to understand not only the toll too-early bell times take on the next generation but also the difficulty most local districts have ensuring safe, healthy hours. That is why I believe S.274 is an essential and groundbreaking piece of public health and child protection legislation that will help local communities ensure school hours consistent with children's health and well-being.

What I saw with my own children and their classmates is consistent with the large, broad, and consistent body of research confirming that starting high schools too early in the morning is unhealthy, unsafe, and counterproductive. Since the mid-1990s, sleep researchers and health professionals have been telling us that:

- **Most adolescents required to get to class before 8:30 a.m. cannot get enough sleep** at the times their growing brains and bodies most need it, endangering growth, development, health, and safety and setting them up for serious and lifelong physical and mental health problems.

Start School Later® is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working to ensure school hours compatible with health, safety, and equity.

Healthy Hours is the research and education arm of Start School Later, Inc.

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- Requiring teenagers to be in class before 8:30 a.m. interferes with **school performance**, impairing **memory**, **attention**, and **judgment**, and increasing **truancy**, absenteeism, tardiness, and **drop-out rates**.
- Sending children to bus stops at 5 or 6 a.m. or putting young drivers on the roads when they are sleep-deprived is **dangerous** not just to them, but to the **whole community**.
- Dismissing teenagers—especially sleep-deprived teenagers—from school in the early afternoon and leaving them unsupervised for 3 or 4 hours predisposes them to health-risk behaviors such as use of **cigarettes**, **marijuana**, **alcohol**, and **stimulants**; early **sexual activity**; **depression** and suicidal thoughts; and physical **fight**s. Law enforcement data show that juvenile crime peaks in the unsupervised after-school hours.
- **Children of lower socioeconomic status benefit disproportionately in terms of test scores, attendance, and graduation rates** when schools start later.

We now have abundant evidence that **when schools move bell times later, more students get more sleep and healthier sleep**. They also have **fewer signs of depression, less stimulant and illegal substance use, lower rates of truancy and tardiness, higher graduation rates, better grades and test scores, and lower car crash rates**. These outcomes benefit the entire community. The **RAND Corporation** projects that **starting middle and high school classes no earlier than 8:30 a.m. could boost Vermont's economy by at least \$17 million (0.06% of state GDP) after 2 years, \$70 million (0.23% of GDP) after 5 years, \$159 million (0.53% of GDP) after 10 years, and \$385 million after 20 years**. Remarkably, the report projects that **within just two years these benefits would outweigh any costs that districts might incur** in changing bell times.

We didn't know all this back in the 1970s and 1980s when school systems moved up traditional school start times, usually 8:30 or 9 a.m.—an idea that arose primarily to make bus runs more efficient. Back then we didn't fully understand the role sleep played in learning or in health. Back then we didn't understand how much sleep adolescents needed or that they needed it at different times than younger and older people. We didn't know any of this then, but we know it now, and we've known it since at least the mid-1990s. At that point many local school systems tried returning to more traditional bell times. County boards of health supported them, as did state health associations. Grassroots groups of parents arose, trying again and again to delay start times, and they failed, again and again.

That's why S.274 is critical to protecting the health and well-being of Vermont's youth.

The problem school systems are having isn't the science. Compelling evidence shows **the harm we're doing to our children's health and well-being** by requiring them to be in school too early in the morning. The problem is that **local school systems have not been able to go back to later, healthier, evidence-based school hours**. Most will not be able to do so long as they continue to treat school hours like any other negotiable school budget item. **Over 75% of middle, high, and combined schools in Vermont still require students to be in class before 8:30 a.m., the time that the American Medical Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Pediatrics, Society for Behavioral Medicine, and American Academy of Sleep Medicine, among other major health organizations, have all recommended as the earliest bell time consistent with sleep health and learning in adolescents**. The evidence underlying these recommendations is so strong that over 120 experts in medicine, sleep research, and public health recently signed a consensus letter stating that “[t]he volume, breadth, consistency, and strength of the peer-reviewed scientific

research” supporting legislation in California similar to S.274 “are unequivocal, and they exceed the high standards for public health and public education policy.” The groundbreaking California legislation they referenced, was signed into law last October and has since received national and even international recognition.

Statewide legislation to ensure healthy school start times is as critical in Vermont as in California. This is because statewide parameters give school districts the necessary impetus to treat safe, healthy, equitable school hours as a **non-negotiable public health right** rather than a negotiable school budget item. The problem with the latter approach is that **community life revolves around public school hours**. As a result, proposals to change school schedules almost inevitably evoke outcry from a variety of stakeholders. This outcry typically includes kneejerk and misinformed reactions and speculations, some reflecting our society's disregard for sleep itself. Tellingly, identical objections arise no matter what the existing or proposed school hours, and recur even when superintendents propose making changes to save money on transportation. **It's not so much the new start time that people fear, but change itself**. People who are already struggling to make current schedules work understandably worry how a schedule change will affect their personal schedules. The good news is that **we now have evidence from hundreds of districts that have delayed middle and high school bell times (or never moved them so early) that these fears are groundless, temporary, and/or resolvable**. Communities that change schedules inevitably discover that community life—including daycare hours, sports schedules, traffic patterns, and afterschool programs—adapt to school hours, not vice versa.

Working families also find that later start times are no more challenging than earlier school hours. It's important to remember that both family configurations and work hours vary enormously, and for every family concerned that a later start time will hurt their commute or childcare is one who is hurt right now by early start times. Until school and work schedules are perfectly aligned, some families are going to find school schedules, whatever they are, problematic. Communities can and often do find solutions to these problems, usually through some combination of public and private childcare, before- and after-school programs, or flexible work hours. Regardless, moving a middle or high school time to 8:30 a.m. or later is not the cause of these challenges, and, in fact, resolves as many problems as it may seem to cause. In addition, it's important to remember that **S.274 concerns high school students, generally ages 14-18, who usually do not need the same kind of parental supervision that younger children need**. The fact that parents concerned about lack of supervision defend 7 a.m. start times, which go hand-in-hand with 2 p.m. dismissal times, or that they defend 7 a.m. start times for teenagers but accept 9:15 a.m. start times for first graders, suggests that **the real concern isn't childcare or work but change itself**.

Unfortunately, these groundless fears have allowed entrenched interests to keep most Vermont communities from returning to more reasonable, healthier hours. Educating the community to allay these fears is an answer, but unfortunately by the time communities have been familiarized with the ever-growing literature on the topic, the cohort of children in question has graduated.

For all these reasons, **Vermont's schools need help if they're going to do the right thing and avoid subjecting another generation to what we now know are counterproductive and dangerous conditions**. The public health community is telling us that sleep and school hours are a public health and equity issue right up there with child labor, smoking, and seatbelts. In many districts today, students and their parents must choose between compliance with school hours and adequate sleep.

Setting parameters for safe, healthy hours is just as appropriate for the state of Vermont as establishing standards for the number of days or hours children should be in class, or any of the state's other school health laws. This is a case where, as Dr. Judith Owens of Harvard Medical School has observed, **"to do nothing is to do harm."**

Of course, local schools should and even must set their own hours, based on their specific community needs. This legislation will not change their ability to do so. By establishing an earliest acceptable opening hour, however, this legislation would ensure that adolescents have a chance to get a healthy night's sleep and help local communities overcome the myths and fear that have blocked change for decades. Following the example of districts around the state and the nation that have made these changes, **local school districts will then be positioned to implement change in a way that works for their individual communities.**

In the wake of California's landmark school start time law, the eyes of the nation are turning to Vermont as a leader in positive social change. I don't think it's too grandiose to say that Vermont has a chance to make history by **ensuring healthy, safe, and equitable school hours** by passing this important piece of child protection and public health legislation.

Sincerely,



Terra Ziporyn Snider, Ph.D.
Executive Director and Co-Founder
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