

BILL: Senate Bill 224
TITLE: Education - Orange Ribbon for Healthy School Hours - Establishment
DATE: February 3, 2016
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the state's local boards of education, opposes Senate Bill 224.

MABE recognizes the recent attention to the issue of establishing standards for start-times for the school day to ensure that the school day, especially for adolescents, not commence before 8:00 to 8:30 a.m. in the interest of allowing students ample time for sleep. MABE participated in the work of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) to conduct its 2014 Study of Safe and Healthy School Hours for Maryland Public Schools. This study was completed in 2014 following passage of House Bill 883. The report addresses the science on the sleep needs of children and adolescents and makes recommendations regarding whether public schools should implement a starting time of no earlier than 8:00 a.m.

MABE believes the DHMH study strikes an appropriate balance in its recommendation, which states that DHMH "recognizes the connection between sufficient sleep and student health and wellness. To that end, the Department encourages the Maryland State Board of Education to use its authority (specified in Md. Code Ann., Ed. § 2-205) to advise local school systems of the benefits of later school start time policies, and to encourage them to conduct feasibility studies regarding the implementation of school starting times of 8 a.m. or later." This approach reflects the DHMH findings regarding health benefits of later start times, while also acknowledging the very significant costs arising from local decisions to shift to later start times.

The policy and budget issues surrounding any proposal to shift high school start-times later in the morning involve local board, superintendent and staff work informed by parent and community input. Feasibility studies have been conducted, and community engagement processes are ongoing in several school systems. MABE believes this work reflects the serious attention and investment of staff and resources local boards may agree to devote to a priority issue as they consider how to allocate limited resources in the years ahead.

On behalf of all local boards of education, MABE supports local discretion to determine school and school system start-times, without the imposition of a state standard or certification program. House Bill 39, while not mandating new parameters or changes to elementary and secondary school start times, would mandate the adoption of state criteria and a new state certification program for school systems meeting those criteria. In this way, the bill would establish a state program for the purpose of promoting a major shift in a policy area appropriately in the purview of each local board of education.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 224.