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American Academy of Pediatrics

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30 Association Drive, Box 190  
Manchester, ME 04351  
office: 207-622-3374

[www.maineaap.org](http://www.maineaap.org)

## Testimony by Melissa Burch MD, FAAP

### On behalf of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, supporting LD 396: An Act To Provide for a Later Starting Time for High Schools

#### Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

February 27, 2025

Good Morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 396: An Act To Provide for a Later Starting Time for High Schools.

My name is Dr. Melissa Burch. I have been practicing pediatrics in Maine since 1999. I graduated from the University Of North Carolina School Of Medicine in 1987. I am Board Certified in Pediatrics. I would like to add my support and that of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to this needed bill.

The national AAP, the largest membership organization for pediatricians in the world, recommends that the start time for middle and high school be 8:30 a.m. or later, in order to combat sleep deprivation in adolescents. This well-established policy was outlined in a policy statement, School Start Times for Adolescents in 2014 in the journal Pediatrics, the most referenced journal for pediatric providers in the world.

I addressed the Committee on Education and Cultural affairs in 2015, sharing the science behind recommendations for later school start times for high school students. That effort was unsuccessful, but I hope that the intervening ten years have led more school districts and more legislators to see the wisdom of later start times for teens.

I will also add that I am married to a high school teacher, who prompts me every legislative season, "when are you going back to Augusta to do something about school start times?" Every day he sees first period students too sleepy to learn.

Let me review the science behind later start times for high schools:

(1) The natural sleep cycle shifts up to 2 hours later at the onset of puberty. Compared to younger kids or adults, adolescents have brains designed to start functioning later in the morning and to get sleepy later at night. They naturally have difficulty falling asleep before 11-11:30 p.m. They need, on average, about 9 hours of sleep. Doing the math, it becomes clear that if school starts at 7:30, it means that those kids, on average, are short 2 hours of sleep per night. Many of you will have had the experience of having to function in a new time zone after a long flight; your difficulty in focus would be comparable to teens.

(2) What happens when this circadian rhythm is disrupted? This leads to sleep deprivation and chronic sleep loss. Teenagers can seem tired all the time, for good reason. About 40% of American adolescents are chronically sleep deprived. Every day in the office I see kids who need 9 hours of sleep and get an average of 7 hours per night.

And the sleep deprivation accumulates. This chronic sleep deprivation over time puts teens at risk for multiple health problems. Rates of obesity and depression are higher in sleep-deprived teens. Sleep deprived youth are at increased risk of motor vehicle crashes. Inadequate sleep is also correlated with poor academic performance and decreased scores on standardized tests.

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(3) Why is it important to change school start times for teens? It would align the school day with the period when the adolescent can function best. It can be done. Some of the best studies of the benefits of later school start times come from Minnesota, another state with dark northern winters like ours. This is a free and data-driven change that can reap benefits for Maine youth, in health and safety as well as academic performance.

To conclude, and as said by the lead author of the AAP policy paper on School Start Time for Adolescents, Dr. Owens states, “By advocating for later school start times for middle and high school students, the AAP is both promoting the compelling scientific evidence that supports school start time delay as an important public health measure, and providing support and encouragement to those school districts around the country contemplating that change.”

Please support LD 396: An Act To Provide for a Later Starting Time for High Schools. It is what is good for adolescents, good for you, for me, and for Maine.

Respectfully submitted,

Melissa Burch, MD, FAAP

On Behalf of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics