

Anne Arundel school board votes down controversial flag ban proposal



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The Anne Arundel County school board voted down a controversial proposal to ban flags that don't "promote national, state, and local government pride" Wednesday afternoon after extensive discussion.

The proposal was [introduced in mid-May](#) by District 3 representative Corine Frank. It sought to limit flags on school grounds to those "with a bona fide educational purpose" such as the Maryland state, Anne Arundel County and city of Annapolis flags, in addition to the American flag. The plan would have effectively banned the LGBTQ Pride flag from being displayed.

The final vote was four against, three in favor with one abstention. Voting against the ban were District 5 representative Dana Schallheim, board president and District 6 representative Joanna Bache Tobin, vice president and District 2 representative Robert Silkworth, and student board member Eric Lin.

All [made statements last month opposing the policy](#). District 1 representative Gloria Dent abstained from voting.

Frank said community concerns about which flags are flown in schools arose before she entered office in 2020 and have [persisted into this school year](#). She was joined in voting for the measure by District 7 representative Michelle Corkadel and District 4 representative Melissa Ellis.

"I have been listening to my community members for years on these issues. No one to this day has taken any action to resolve any of the issues," Frank said before the proposal failed.

In the last two months, the policy has received extensive public attention; more than 1,800 comments have been submitted. Several meetings drew crowds of individuals and organizations who either supported or opposed the policy's adoption.

Community organizations such as Moms for Liberty, the Teachers Association of Anne Arundel County, the Association for Educational Leaders, and Annapolis Pride have all weighed in — in addition to a plethora of parents and students who have testified..

Superintendent Mark Bedell, who had not previously commented on the proposal, recommended Wednesday that the board not approve it. Bedell said he does not feel the policy would make students feel a sense of belonging or that they are supported, nor is it clear how it would be enforced.

"The spaces inside of our schools matter," he said. "From my perspective of being in education for 24 years, our classrooms, as a former teacher, are places where relationships that cultivate a sense of belonging for students are created. That belonging leads to growth, which leads to success in those spaces."



Ruth Roberson, Severna Park, and Peggy Williams, Severna Park, support the "Display of Flags" policy. Ahead of the vote at the AACPS Board of Education on the "Display of Flags" policy, supporters of the Flag Policy, and those against the policy, members of TAAAC, PASS, and GLSEN Maryland, rallied along Riva Road outside the AACPS Board of Education.

Just like at June's meeting, dozens of community members — many of whom wore shirts that represented the Teachers Association of Anne Arundel County — and parents lined up at 10 a.m. across the sidewalk that leads to the Parham Building on Riva Road to rally with their rainbow LGBTQ flags, banners and signs.

Nicole-Disney Bates, president of the teachers association, stood outside with the teachers she represents.

"Anne Arundel County has never told teachers how to decorate or what to put in their classrooms except for the American flag, so this is a change from the norm," she said. "The concern is that they're going to start allowing certain flags, but not other flags and the pressure will be on the administration to decide, which is relatively unfair to them."

In the same fashion, protesters carrying American flags lined up along Riva Road in support of the flag proposal.

Edgewater resident Carol Moyer said that individuals who oppose the policy can "play with whatever [flags] anytime they want," but school is "supposed to represent the country, our nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

During debate, Corkadel moved to add a "sunset clause" and amend the policy so that enforcement would end in May 2024. This would allow the school system to "take a hard pause" and engage with community stakeholders before making a final decision, she said. The motion failed.

"We cannot say that one protected class has more rights than another," she said.

Ellis, who voted in favor of the policy, said: "If nothing else, [the draft policy] was finally the catalyst that empowers some to speak out who have been afraid for years."

"I do not make statement votes, I vote for what is likely to deliver the best outcome for our students," Ellis said. "It is so discouraging to hear good people who really at the heart of the matter, want the same things, speak so badly of those who view or experience the world differently than they do."

She also questioned the lack of civility in the debate around the policy.

"Bullying in the name of kindness is still bullying," she added.

Silkworth said the proposal "does not address concerns we face today, and we have heard in this room today," referring to inclusivity and patriotism.

"What we need is a renewed dedication and devotion to the ideals of our forefathers who built a nation composed of immigrants, arguably the greatest nation in the world, on the premise that people of all colors and creeds could come together as one united family," he said.