

Anne Arundel Board of Education considers policy prohibiting display of LGBTQ pride and other flags in schools



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The Anne Arundel County Board of Education heard extensive community testimony Wednesday night on a policy proposal that would prohibit the display of flags on school property such as those associated with the LGBTQ+ community and Black Lives Matter.

The policy states that “[e]xcept for flags that promote national, state, and local government pride, the display of flags on Board property and in [Anne Arundel County Public schools] shall be limited to those with a bona fide educational purpose.”

Board representative Corine Frank, of District 3, proposed the policy “not for any reason other than constituents coming to [her] with concerns,” she said Wednesday. Frank did not go into detail about the what concerns and did not return a request for comment Thursday.

As drafted, Frank’s proposal designates the school principals or “the principal’s designee” as the main party who will determine what constitutes a bona fide— or genuine — education purpose for the display of a flag. The policy does not list any specific flags that would be subjected to this new evaluation standard, rather it bars the American, Maryland, Anne Arundel County and Annapolis city flags from being subjected to the policy.

“This policy stems from a board member request, not from one of the offices or departments I supervise,” Superintendent Mark Bedell said during Wednesday’s meeting. “As such, it is inappropriate for me to offer an opinion at this time.”

Advocacy groups, such as those representing Annapolis Pride, the Anne Arundel County NAACP, as well as parents and educators across the county, attended the meeting at Board of Education headquarters to call into question the policy’s intent.

Many attendees showed their support for the LGBTQ community and Black Lives Matter by waving miniature flags and donning shirts with slogans like “Protect Trans Kids.” Among them was Anne Arundel County Council member Lisa Rodvien, an Annapolis Democrat. The group was told by Board President Joanna Tobin they couldn’t wave the flags because there is a rule against doing so during meetings.



Jaden Farris collects flags from other members of the public after being told they could not have them in the board room. The Anne Arundel County Board of Education heard public testimony on a proposed flag policy Wednesday, May 24, 2023, during their board meeting in Annapolis.

Joe Toolan, Annapolis Pride's board chair, said he considers the policy proposal another attempt to ban the display of the rainbow LGBTQ+ Pride flag similar to a bill the Anne Arundel County Council considered last year.

In July, Pasadena Republican Council member Nathan Volke introduced legislation that would have [banned all flags from county flagpoles other than the U.S., state and county standards](#). After community pushback, Volke [revised the bill](#) but still failed to get the necessary votes. After overwhelming opposition from community members at the bill's final attempt at passage, [the Democratic majority voted down](#) the measure.

Similar policy proposals have cropped up in other Maryland counties. Last year, the Carroll County Board of Education [banned the display of rainbow LGBTQ+ Pride flags on school properties](#). Pride flag advocates protested before a Carroll school board meeting in April 2022, when some school board members [decided certain flags go against the board's revised political neutrality policy](#).

The Anne Arundel proposal presents the potential for inconsistent enforcement across all county schools since the policy will be enforced at the discretion of individual school principals or the individual who is chosen as the school principal's designee, according to Grace Wilson, the legislative and policy specialist for the school system.

"[This policy] is bigger than just our community," Toolan said. "It's going to affect any activity that could have a flag that is not those very specific ones [listed in the policy]."

Anne Arundel County NAACP representative Mary Dadone testified that symbols on flags also show up on items such as stickers on water bottles and computers, posters, as well as clothing. She said the proposed policy "leaves too many questions unanswered and too many dangerous loopholes."

Kerry Gillespie, a mother of an Anne Arundel County student from Arnold, also during the meeting. She didn't explicitly state her position on the flag proposal but instead spoke about the symbolism of the United States flag and its invocation in the larger discourse of First Amendment rights. She ended by reciting the chorus of a Billy Ray Cyrus song "Some Gave All."

"That flag is the one and only symbol that unites us all and the freedoms it encompasses us as Americans," said Gillespie, who ran unsuccessfully for an Anne Arundel House of Delegates seat as a Republican last year.



Kerry Gillespie speaks in favor of the policy. The Anne Arundel County Board of Education heard public testimony on a proposed flag policy Wednesday, May 24, 2023, during their board meeting in Annapolis.

Board member Dana Schallheim, who represents District 5, was one of two members aside from Frank who spoke on the policy itself. The proposal "disturbs [her] on many levels" as it "appears to be a terrible solution in search of a problem that doesn't exist," Schallheim said.

Schallheim mentioned several instances in which the board has passed resolutions and policies that aimed to protect LGBTQ students including a resolution passed in 2020 that stated "Black Lives Matter."

In the past two years, the Anne Arundel Board of Education has considered and passed several policies aimed at creating a safe school environment for LGBTQ+ students.

In 2021, the board approved a policy that states that students have a right to be addressed by a name and pronoun that matches their gender identity. This policy also [allows students the right to use bathrooms and locker rooms that match the gender identity](#) the student consistently demonstrates and identifies with.

At the beginning of 2022, the board also voted to give students the option of taking a course on American LGBTQ+ history and the county's African-American history [for the first time in the 2023-24 school year](#).

"Our constitutionally protected rights are always a bone fide educational purpose and should be illustrated in a variety of ways in life, including this instance," Schallheim said.

Zach McGrath, the student member of the board, was the second board member to speak directly on the proposed policy.

"We need to support every student, and I think we really need to think about the unintended consequences this policy could have if we rush through it," he said.

McGrath will leave his role before the board votes on the proposed policy in July. Eric Lin, [the newly elected student member of the board](#) from Severna Park High School, will be sworn in June 29.

The next reading of the policy proposal is scheduled for late June. Until then, the policy is now open to receive public comment for 30 days. To submit a public comment email policycomments@aacps.org. The board is scheduled to vote on the policy in July.