

Anne Arundel County school board narrowly rejects proposal to limit flags



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Cadence Quaranta, John-John Williams IV

July 12, 2023

[Cadence Quaranta](#) and [John-John Williams IV](#)



File photo of the rainbow pride flag. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

A divided Anne Arundel County school board on Wednesday rejected a controversial proposal to restrict flags that could be displayed on school property — a measure that critics claimed was written to ban symbols such as the rainbow pride flag.

The board voted 4 to 3 against adoption of the proposed policy, with one board member abstaining.

The proposed flag policy has been a point of contention since it was introduced by board member Corine Frank, a Republican Party official who worked with the board's legislative and policy office to draft the measure. It then went to the board's policy committee, which vetted it and advanced it to the full board, said Bob Mosier, a spokesman for the county schools. He added that the policy committee in Anne Arundel does not approve policies.

Frank was joined by board members Michelle Corkadel and Melissa Ellis in voting for the proposed policy. Voting against it were board president Joanna Bache Tobin, board members Dana Schallheim and Robert Silkworth, and student representative Eric Lin. Board member Gloria Dent abstained.

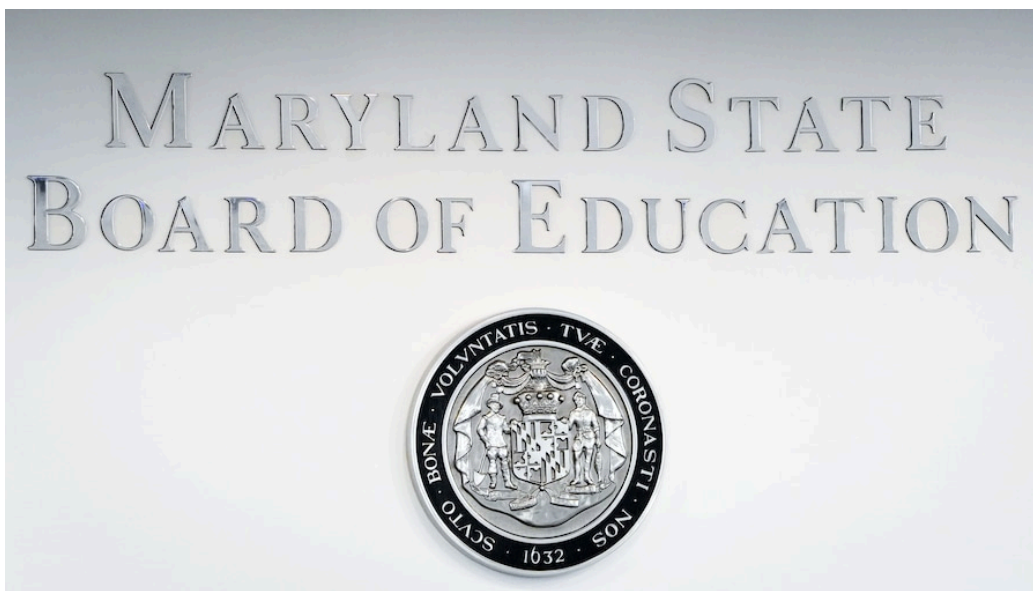
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Members of the Anne Arundel County Board of Education debate a policy limiting flags on school property on July 12, 2023.
(Cadence Quaranta)

Tobin said she was concerned the measure would “strip teachers universally of the autonomy necessary to make decisions about how to communicate to their students that they belong and that their classroom is safe.” She said the board should trust its teachers to determine what is best for their students, and if issues come up, there are processes in place to address them.

She also worried that the proposed policy would require schools to take down anything that could be “perceived as a potential source of disagreement,” which would steal from students an essential part of their education and the tools they need to live in a diverse society.



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Lin also opposed the policy, arguing that pride flags are not political. He said the majority of flags displayed in classrooms are for colleges, sports teams and the military, as well as cultural or country flags. These help foster meaningful relationships between teachers and students — and without them, “discussions that were inspired by these flags would cease to exist,” Lin said.

But Frank argued that the proposed policy would allow all students to feel welcome in the classroom, and “not just the ones who see their flags on a wall.”

Frank has previously said she pursued the new policy after being approached by a number of constituents with “concerns” about flags in schools. She reiterated that view before the vote Wednesday, emphasizing that the board has the responsibility to provide governance on the issue.

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“If we don’t have a policy that outlines guidance, we are allowing some causes to be advocated, and some not, some students to celebrate their cause, and some not,” she said. “This policy manages a critical issue and provides a process for the system to manage it.”

Ellis also emphasized that the policy is intended to create a “safe and neutral” environment for students. She said her concern with flags was that “no matter how well-intentioned, when a teacher imparts their opinions and values on students, that shuts down the freedom of expression for many students, given hierarchy in the classroom environment, and the fact that the teacher is assumed to be teaching. So for students their expressions carry the weight of fact rather than the expression of ideas.”

Corkadel voted for the proposed policy in part because she said certain flags may make some students with certain religious beliefs feel like they don’t belong, and emphasized several times that “no student should feel that they have to choose between religion and education.”

Dent chose to abstain, she said, because she wanted to remain neutral on the issue.



Anne Arundel County school board member Corine Frank (Anne Arundel County Public Schools)

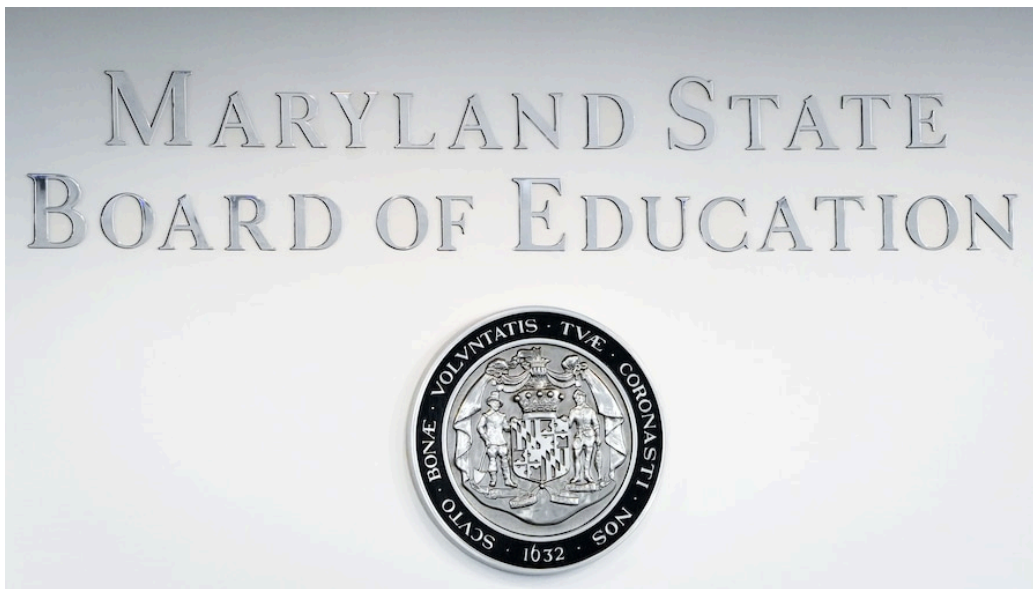
The debate reflects the divided politics in Anne Arundel County, a purple county where the top offices are now held by Democrats.

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Frank, a Pasadena resident, was appointed executive director of the Maryland Republican Party in 2019 and elected to the school board the following year.

The draft policy would have encouraged the display of the Maryland state, Anne Arundel County and city of Annapolis flags, in addition to the American flag that is flown, but limited the showing of other flags to occasions with a bona fide educational purpose. The proposed policy would have left it to a school principal or the principal's designee to determine what constitutes a bona fide educational purpose.

The board received more than 1,300 comments during the 30-day public response period, according to officials. One critic said the policy was drafted to target flags denoting LGBTQ pride or the Black Lives Matter movement. The proposed policy was amended to allow the personal display of buttons, pins and patches featuring flag designs.



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During a meeting in May, Frank said that she was the board member who “wanted to see this policy created” and that she was “very proud of that.”

She noted that some students in the beginning of the school year wanted to have a “red, white, and blue day” and were told they couldn’t have one. She said that the approach to flags has been “inconsistent.”

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Supporters of rainbow pride flags say the symbol helps LGBTQ youth who at times struggle with acceptance in school.

Debates such as the one in Anne Arundel come amid a push by conservatives nationally to get school districts to remove books about sexual orientation and gender from school curriculums, to limit discussion of such topics in the classroom, and to bar trans kids from playing on sports teams that align with their gender.

Last summer, the Carroll County school board voted 4-1 to effectively prohibit the display of the rainbow pride flag. The decision came during Pride Month, a nationally recognized celebration of the LGBTQ community.

The Anne Arundel school board room was nearly full on Wednesday afternoon, as many people — including teachers, students and parents — showed up to watch board members vote on the issue. Some wore Pride flags on T-shirts, hats and bracelets.

Lisa Taylor-Soriero, who teaches art at Monarch Academy in Annapolis and opposed the policy, said she felt better following the vote, but was still disappointed that it was drafted in the first place.

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“It was really based in bigotry,” she said, “and it didn’t support our students.”

A lot of students may feel different, she said, and flags “are one of the ways that we can show them that they’re in a safe place.”

"It can make a big difference," she added.



AJ Wrotny, a rising junior at Crofton High School, opposed the proposed policy limiting flag displays. She drew a sketch of the board members as they debated the measure. (Cadence Quaranta)

A.J. Wrotny, a rising junior at Crofton High School, said flags, or even the "safe space" stickers that some teachers put on their doors, can help students feel more comfortable when entering certain classes.

When Wrotny was in middle school, they transitioned to they/them pronouns and a new name, and didn't often know how people would react. Seeing that one teacher had a lot of LGBTQ+ books made Wrotny feel comfortable talking to talk the teacher, Wrotny said.

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"Because when I'd go into other classes, you would never really know if they were going to be accepting of you," they said. Flags and stickers, they added, "kind of helps people understand where they can be more of themselves or not."

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