

Display of pride flags could be limited in Anne Arundel County schools under proposed policy



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John-John Williams IV

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

The Anne Arundel County Board of Education is weighing a proposal that would limit the number of flags that could be displayed on school property, a move that would effectively ban the LGBTQ pride flag from being displayed on campuses.

The [proposed flag policy](#) is scheduled to be discussed during the board's Monday meeting. It comes up for a third reading on July 12.

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

The measure was first proposed by board member Corine Frank, 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.

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- [People of Pride: A look at Maryland's LGBTQ community](#)
- [‘This is a really big step’: Howard County schools hold a first-ever ‘Pride Prom’](#)

- [Carroll County school board limits display of pride flags as nation marks Pride Month](#)

The board received more than 700 comments during the 30-day public response period, according to Mosier.

"They are not universally one side or another. I don't know if 50-50 is the proper characterization. But it's not 70-30, 80-20 or 90-10," Mosier said.



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During a meeting last month, Frank said that she was the board member who "wanted to see this policy created" and that she was "very proud of that."



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

Frank said she sought out a new policy after being approached by a number of constituents with “concerns” about flags in schools.

“And my job as a board member is to take concerns that are inherent in our schools and adjudicate cases, pass budgets, and pass policy that addresses what our students need,” she said. “There were a lot of complaints about this issue. ... The genesis of this policy is because of concerns that were brought to me.”

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Frank 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.”

“As a result of these inconsistencies and concerns, I asked the policy committee to create a policy. And I think that this was very well done, and I thank the policy committee,” she said.

Frank, a Pasadena resident and member of the board’s budget committee, is a former dental assistant and licensed radiographer. She was appointed executive director of the Maryland Republican Party in 2019 and is now a full-time working mom, according to her school board bio.

Frank, who began a four-year term on the board in late 2020, did not respond to requests for comment.

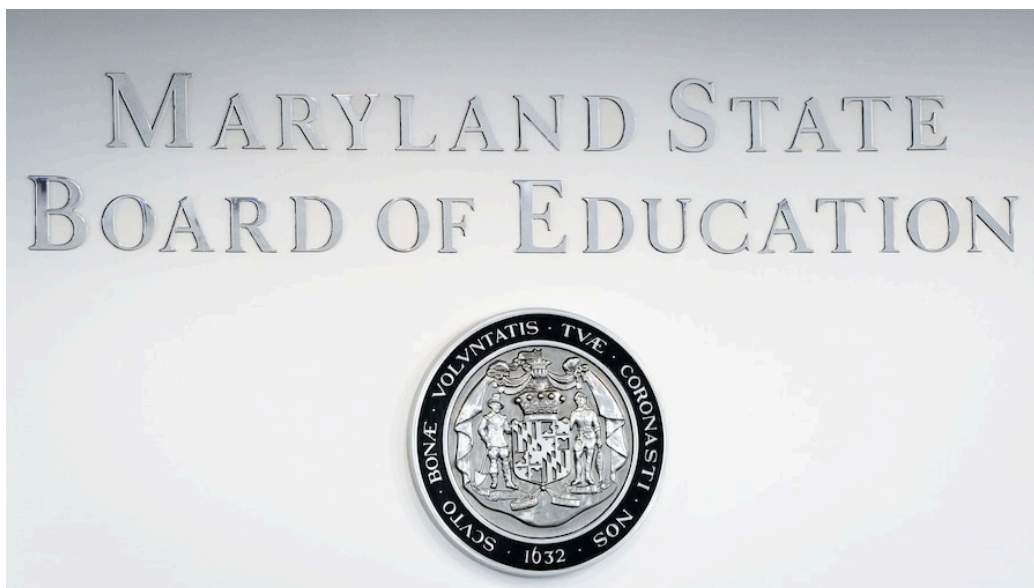
Anne Arundel County school board member [Dana Schallheim](#) vehemently opposes the proposed policy.

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"I was very, very surprised when I saw this policy was coming forward," she said. "My phone started blowing up. I subsequently spent the weekend speaking with constituents about the policy. Some were very upset. I am absolutely 100 percent opposed to the policy as written. Unless heavily amended, this policy is a non-starter for me on every level."

Schallheim, who was elected to the board in 2018, said she respects all of her colleagues but acknowledged their differences.

"It don't think it is a surprise or secret that we come from polar opposite political viewpoints," Schallheim said of Frank. "Ms. Frank was the executive director of the GOP. Now she works for the RNC. I don't support the views of that party as it stands today, in any measure. But we have found some common ground. And when we do, we get on like a house fire. That includes the interviewing and hiring of our brand new superintendent."



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Schallheim said one of the most troubling aspects of the proposed policy is the ambiguity it creates by giving principals the discretion to determine if a flag has a "bona fide education purpose."

"We have 127 school buildings in Anne Arundel County," she said. "We would have 127 definitions of what is considered. It is highly problematic. What if one principal is accepting and tolerant of all of his or her students and another is not? I can't have our students and our employees at one school be subjected to a policy that is so inconsistently implemented. We're going to have inequity and inconsistency within the same ZIP code."

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Asked if she expected the proposed policy to pass, Schallheim responded: "Not on my watch. I hope not."

Molly Estabrook, a board member with the [Annapolis/Anne Arundel County Chapter of PFLAG](#), attended the school board meeting in May when the issue came up.

"It's just another way that people are trying to snuff out an entire population of our community," Estabrook said. "It's targeting the queer community and hiding behind 'all flags.' If this ends up passing, it will cut off your nose despite your face."

Under the policy, international flags representing various cultures represented in the school system would also be in jeopardy, Estabrook said.

"It is a more widely spread tragedy than telling every homosexual or trans person they are not welcome in the school system," said the Annapolis resident, who has two LGBTQ children.

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Estabrook said Pride flags help LGBTQ youth who at times struggle with acceptance in school.

"When you take away tiny signs that it is a safe space, you are furthering the harm," Estabrook said.

The debate comes 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.

Local school districts have also grappled with free expression questions. While Carroll County limited the pride flag's display, the Howard County public schools last month hosted its first Pride Prom, to create a more accepting experience for LGBTQ students.



Two students hold hands while dancing during the Pride Prom at the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center in Columbia on June 10, 2023. (Heather Diehl/The Baltimore Banner)

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.

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Carroll County's policy states that "the only other flags or banners that may be flown, posted, or affixed to the grounds, stadiums, fencing, walls, doors, ceilings, or any other appurtenances of any public school system building or facility owned or operated by the Board of Education of Carroll County" are those of the United States, the state of Maryland,

Carroll County and those related to student achievement. Sports banners are also permitted, as are the flags of other nations as part of a multinational display. The policy does not prohibit students or faculty from wearing Pride flags on clothing, according to the school system.”

The proposed Anne Arundel policy doesn’t address whether students would be able to display, say, a pride flag pin on their clothing or a bumper stick on their book bag.

A year after the Carroll County policy went into effect, the school board’s general counsel, Edmund J. O’Meally, said, “There have been no changes to the policy, and things have been very quiet.”

In fact, most school systems in the Baltimore region — Baltimore County, Howard — report no changes to their policies.

Estabrook, who has had two pride flags ripped from her home this past year, is doubtful that there hasn’t been a fallout as a result of Carroll’s policy.

“So many things don’t get reported. Some of that is not accurate,” Estabrook said.

Estabrook added that she is disappointed with the direction Maryland appears to be headed.

She said, “West Virginia is a safe sanctuary state for trans youth and adults, and we’re making moves in Maryland to become more conservative than West Virginia? Gross.”

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