

## Four on Anne Arundel school board have said they oppose flag ban; if they vote no on Wednesday, the plan will fail



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As a vote on a proposed Anne Arundel County schools ban on flags that don't "promote national, state, and local government pride" approaches, at least four school board members have expressed opposition to the measure, meaning it's likely to fail.

At least five of eight members must vote yes for a proposal to be approved.

The board is scheduled to take a final vote Wednesday afternoon on the measure that would prohibit the display of flags on school property, such as those associated with the LGBTQ+ community and Black Lives Matter, unless they have an educational purpose.

Four of the eight board members have made statements opposing the policy. Should these members vote that way, it will not be adopted.

District 5 representative Dana Schallheim, board president and District 6 representative Joanna Bache Tobin and vice president and District 2 representative Robert Silkworth, stated their opposition after almost three hours of debate over amendments to the policy at June's meeting.

Eric Lin, who was [sworn in as the student member](#) at the end of June, said he is ready to vote against the policy after reading almost all the submitted public comments and attending meetings.

"I think that we don't need this policy," he said. "If there is a concern with a flag in a teacher's classroom, that can be addressed on a case-by-case basis, but banning all flags altogether creates more harm than help."

Wednesday will be Lin's first meeting as the student member, filling Zach McGrath's seat.

District 3 representative Corine Frank, the sponsor of the proposal, has shown unwavering support for it.

Three members' positions are not clear, based on their public statements: District 7 representative Michelle Corkadel, District 1 representative Gloria Dent and District 4 representative Melissa Ellis.

Ellis has not explicitly stated her support for or opposition to the policy and did not return a request for comment Thursday. However, she has made statements regarding her interpretation of the policy's intention.

"What [this] policy does not do is exclude anyone, for any reason, or make anyone feel like they do not belong. [This policy] appears to focus on student's commonalities and creating a learning environment for all," Ellis said at the June meeting. "This policy is not a denial of any student's rights or personhood including the right to feel safe in the classroom."



Up to 100 supporters of 6.08 Policy Revision, Opening and Patriotic Exercises – Code IKA, who support the pledge and American flags in every classroom, rallied outside the Board of Education building waving the American flag prior to The Anne Arundel County Board of Education meeting Monday, Monday June 26, 2023.

"To disagree with the LGBTQ messaging in schools, or school walls, is not a rejection of LGBTQ students," Ellis said. "As much as we all want to protect our most vulnerable students, it is not in our purview as a state agency to raise them. We need to be partners with our parents, all of them, [and] not some self-imposed moral authority."

Corkadel and Dent also have not taken an explicit stance on the policy.

Corkadel's statements have been limited to her feeling that that the outcome of the vote should "best address the whole needs of each and every student."

Dent told the public on June 26 that she wants the policy to be inclusive for all student interests and ["doesn't know if there is a way"](#) to make that happen.



Flag concerns date to before Frank entered office in 2020 as the District 3 representative and have [persisted into the school year just ended](#), she said.

Since its [introduction to the board](#) on May 24, the policy has garnered community attention from groups on both sides of the issue, such as Moms for Liberty, Annapolis Pride, the Teachers Association for Anne Arundel County and the Association for Educational Leaders — the bargaining unit representing administrators in the county.

Both unions oppose the proposal and have said they want to protect the interests of those they represent. AEL President Tracy Ahern released a statement before the June 26 meeting opposing the policy and calling it “the first step in validating racial and homophobic behavior and excluding minority populations and the LGBTQ+ community.”

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

Ahern said that designating individuals who determine which flags can be displayed would create myriad problems.

“The idea that individual principals or their designees are to decide whether or not displaying a flag serves a ‘bona fide educational purpose’ allows the Board of Education to abdicate its responsibility (avoiding potential public criticism), creating instead a no-win situation for school administrators and effectively putting a target on their backs,” she said in her statement. “This policy will no doubt have inconsistent results if implemented in this manner and AEL and the Board will spend their time and resources defending the decision of each and every administrator, who no doubt, will be challenged regardless of the decision that is made.”

In response to the concerns raised by the school leadership and teachers’ unions, Frank proposed an amendment in June that would have given the superintendent “maximum flexibility” in developing regulations. The amendment failed at the June 26 meeting on a 4-4 vote.

Anne Arundel County Superintendent Mark Bedell will give remarks regarding the proposal at Wednesday’s meeting. However, he declined to comment on it when asked Thursday.

At the beginning of May, Bedell told the public that he thought it would be “inappropriate” to offer his opinion on the policy while it is being discussed since it was introduced at the request of a board member.

“My comments that I made on the first read of [the policy] is what my position still is. I made it very clear about my position on this policy, and the board will have to vote and make their decisions,” Bedell said on Thursday.

What Bedell did say is that he doesn’t want any family or student to feel discriminated against in county schools for any belief or group they might identify with.

“I don’t want my conservative families and kids being discriminated against just as much as I don’t want families that show up marginalized, or families showing up with disabilities or LGBTQ families being discriminated against. I don’t want [any] of it,” he said.

The meeting will begin at noon Wednesday in the Parham Building on Riva Road and will be available for livestreaming on the school system’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@annearundelcountypublicsch2292>