

I am writing on behalf of Together We Will, a social justice advocacy non-profit based in Bel Air, MD. My husband and I are the co-chairs of the Education Committee.

Our group supports HB 1288, which would prohibit appointed Board of Education (BOE) members from holding leadership positions on the BOE.

Under the current arrangement, our 9-member board includes three members appointed by the conservative Republican county executive. Currently, our board president is an appointed board member. In the past, we have had appointed board members as president and vice president.

Nowhere has this arrangement caused more toxic partisan influence than when the board voted to ban the book *Flamer* from school district libraries. Had the decision been left to the elected members, the book ban would never have happened. The majority of elected members opposed the book ban, which reflected community values. Out of 55 public comment speakers at a board meeting, 52 opposed the ban.

We filed an appeal with the Maryland State Board of Education opposing the ban, and the state board reversed the ban. In the next step, the board sought - and ignored - public input on whether the state ruling should be accepted. A total of 177 community members wrote in favor of accepting the state decision, while only 17 sent in written comment that favored opposing the state ruling. Against community input and the majority of elected members, the State decision is now under judicial review in circuit court. Again, a majority of the elected members agreed with accepting the State decision.

The appointed members of the Harford County BOE do not reflect community values, which has been apparent with the book banning and their opposition to a number of curriculum issues. Allowing them to hold positions of leadership gives them an out-sized role, since leadership sets the agenda for BOE meetings, which influences the direction of priorities. Having leadership automatically gives them a title of respect and allows them to set the tone by being the voice of the BOE in the media. They do not answer to the community and do not depend on public support for reelection. Instead, they reflect the extreme positions of the county executive who appointed them.

HB 1288 is a sensible step to protect our community from over-influence of appointed BOE members. I respectfully request that you support this important legislation and help gain its passage.

Sincerely,
Tarsilla Thompson
Co-Chair Education Committee
Together We Will
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