



October 16, 2025

Members of the Somerset County Board of Education
7982A Tawes Campus Drive
Westover, MD 21871

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dear Members of the Somerset County Board of Education:

On behalf of Somerset County parents, teachers, community members, and local organizations, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland urges the Board to reverse its recent decision to move from in-person meetings with a public comment period to a virtual format that prohibits public comment. This decision violates the Board's own policies and the school system's longstanding commitment to transparency and community involvement.

Your own policies are clear. Board Policy 100-2 (Involvement of School Community) states that Somerset County schools *"belong in every sense to the people"* and are only as strong as the participation of the community. Policy 100-12 (Public Participation) affirms the Board's commitment to public input, expressly requiring that each monthly meeting include time for oral public comment. Specifically, Policy 100-12 provides: *"At each of the Board's monthly meetings time will be set aside for Public Comment and the first ten (10) individuals who have signed up and are present will be allowed to speak."*

Your own members have reinforced these principles. At a board meeting earlier this year, Board Vice Chair Andrew Gleason stated: *"The school system does not belong to the board members, the board, or the Superintendent, but to the people of Somerset County. The board is required to keep the citizens well informed."* He also reminded the Board: *"It's policy and I think the board should follow the policy."* Chair Matthew Lankford added: *"We can't expect everyone else to follow policy if we don't follow policy,"* and has emphasized that transparency is a top priority.

Ending in-person meetings and eliminating public comment contradicts these policies and principles. The Somerset County families are deeply committed to their children's education, and meaningful collaboration with the Board is essential. This move hinders the vital connection and dialogue that take place in person, preventing the community not only from addressing the Board directly, but also from hearing each other's questions, ideas, experiences, and perspectives as parents, teachers, and neighbors. Online submission of written testimony is a completely inadequate replacement for the opportunity to speak in front of the Board and the public. And, even if the Board had legitimate security concerns, there are readily available tools (such as Zoom webinars) that still allow for live public comment.

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We appreciate the recent remarks by Board Members John Robertson and William McInturff about the importance of in-person public meetings, and raising concern about the shift to virtual meetings closed to public comment. They emphasized the necessity of accessible, open board meetings for everyone in Somerset County.

The Maryland State Board of Education expressed the same sentiment, warning that it is “deeply concerned by the Somerset County Board of Education’s abrupt move to hold open meetings online” and urged you to “return to in-person meetings, in alignment with every other local board of education across Maryland.”

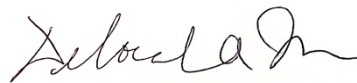
On behalf of the Somerset community that this Board claims to represent and “belong to”, we are calling on the Board to restore public comment immediately, honor its policies, and recommit to working with the community as true partners in education.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read 'Amy Cruice', with a stylized, flowing script.

Amy Cruice
Legal Program Manager

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Deborah Jeon', with a stylized, flowing script.

Deborah Jeon
Legal Director

CC: Gordana Schifanelli, Esq.
Marc Schifanelli, Esq.
Dr. Ava Tasker-Mitchell