



PRESS RELEASE

Coalition Appeals to State Board of Education to Strike Down Somerset County's Unconstitutional Book Ban

<https://www.aclu-md.org/press-releases/coalition-appeals-to-state-board-of-education-to-strike-down-somerset-countys-unconstitutional-book-ban/>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 2, 2026

Contact: Danielle Tyler, media@aclu-md.org

Baltimore, MD — Today, the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA), Maryland Association of School Librarians (MASL), and the ACLU of Maryland filed a formal joint appeal to the Maryland State Board of Education requesting that the board overturn as illegal and unconstitutional the Somerset County Board of Education's newly enacted media selection policy, Policy 500-19. Parties represented in the groups' appeal include the Somerset Education Association, MASL, and parent Joseph Hylton, whose three children attend Somerset County Public Schools.

The new book policy was enacted by the Somerset Board on August 18, but at the request of MSEA was immediately paused by Maryland State School Superintendent Wright to give the State Board time to review the policy's legality.

"This extremist policy attempts to bar student access to age-appropriate books, silence educators from sharing legally protected concerns, and shamelessly violates Maryland's Freedom to Read Act," said **MSEA Executive Director Sean Johnson**. "We appreciate Superintendent Wright's 60-day stay of the policy and are proud to stand with SEA, ACLU, and MASL to defend the rights of students and educators."

"Somerset County's policy is a textbook case of government overreach into what young people are allowed to read and think," said **Deborah Jeon, ACLU of Maryland Legal Director**. "The First Amendment doesn't stop at the schoolhouse door, and neither does the Freedom to Read Act. Banning books because of the ideas they contain,

and punishing educators who speak up about it, is not just bad policy — it's illegal. We're asking the State Board of Education to make that clear."

"The Maryland Association of School Librarians is pleased to stand in solidarity with MSEA, SEA, and the ACLU in defending the practice of constitutional librarianship, as well as the rights of Somerset County students and their families to make decisions that reflect their values about what they choose to read without interference from the local school board," said **Maryland Association of School Librarians President Jacob Gerding**. "The Freedom to Read Act, along with decades of jurisprudence, places students and their families at the heart of these decisions, and the fact that the Somerset County Board of Education will not honor that right is very disappointing. We are honored to support school librarians, not only in Somerset County, but across Maryland, as they seek to curate developmentally appropriate collections that are responsive to the needs and interests of the students and communities that they serve."

Policy 500-19 Targets Books Based on Viewpoint

The appeal argues that Policy 500-19 directs the selection and removal of library materials based on whether a book's political or ideological viewpoint is deemed acceptable by the board, not on its educational or literary merit. This viewpoint-based screening is a direct violation of the Freedom to Read Act, which prohibits removing or restricting materials because of the ideas they contain or the political, religious, or social perspectives they represent.

Policy Strips Teens of Age-Appropriate Books

Under the policy, young adult titles (books written and vetted specifically for readers ages 12 to 18) would be reclassified as "adult" material. Middle and high school students would lose access to an entire category of literature intended for their age group, cutting them off from books that address the real experiences of adolescence.

Educators Threatened with Discipline for Doing Their Jobs

The policy also unlawfully directs immediate disciplinary action against any educator who does not comply. The appeal notes that the Freedom to Read Act explicitly bars this kind of retaliation, and that threatening teachers and librarians with discipline for raising concerns has a chilling effect that goes beyond the classroom.

The appellants are asking the State Board of Education to reject Policy 500-19 in full.

###