

FEATURED

## School board seeks to enhance code of conduct, solicits input on allowing weapons on clothing

By ANDREW CEPHAS [acephas@somdnews.com](mailto:acephas@somdnews.com) Apr 30, 2018

As inappropriate student behavior has been a topic of many public comments at recent board meetings, the school board revisited the students' rights, responsibilities and code of conduct Thursday to discuss staff's recommended changes. The board also seeks the public's input on whether clothing depicting weapons should be permitted in schools.

Over the past several months, educators, parents and members of the community have come before the Calvert County Board of Education during public comment to discuss the disobedient and sometimes disrespectful behavior they or their child has observed from students in the school system.

At the school board's April 26 meeting, president of Calvert Education Association — the union representing the county's public school educators — Dona Ostenso said "our members do not feel that the code of conduct is being followed because the level of response to student behavior is not consistently followed in all schools."

Ostenso said behaviors like hitting, punching and using profanity are starting to become the norm and subsequently asked the school board if it can implore administrators to consistently enforce the leveled consequences to these actions.

Explaining that she felt compelled to speak to the board on behalf of her fellow educators and students, Chris Curl, kindergarten teacher at Windy Hill Elementary and 30-year CCPS teacher, said she has never seen behavioral issues of this magnitude. She said she has seen students get assaulted, spit on and have their work torn from the wall in her classroom.

"I've personally been spit on, scratched and hit. Calvert County [Public] Schools' code of conduct states that all students are entitled to a safe and orderly environment. This is not happening in our classrooms. There are inadequate programs in Calvert County to ensure the mission statement of the school system is met," Curl told the board.

Director of Student Services Kim Roof discussed the minor changes recommended to the code of conduct. She said a committee of stakeholders came together to discuss modifications.

Regarding consequences, the code of conduct details six levels of responses to inappropriate student actions. While level 1 results in appropriate behavior being taught through a variety of classroom management strategies, level 6 responses can result in a one-year suspension or a referral to law enforcement.

A clarification added in the code of conduct indicates that administrators can place students in in-school suspension for level 2 responses. A recommended change allows for students to receive up to level 3 or 4 responses for the inappropriate use of electronic and communication devices. Level 3 and 4 responses allow for short-term or long-term removal of a student from the school environment.

“We felt that what we have come up against in the last year was students were using their devices to create other issues that were happening and when those things were occurring, the only option a school had at that point — especially if it was a severe issue ... the worst they could do was an in-school suspension,” Roof said.

President of the board Tracy McGuire asked how administrators are trained to respond to incidents, to which Roof said the student services department is in constant contact with administrators to determine if there are any issues in the code that prohibit them from keeping the school in order. Roof said the department also looks at data to assess if there are any practices or procedures that need to be addressed.

“I think when you give a range of consequences that can happen, as each one of these levels do, there’s going to be inconsistencies just by virtue the number of things you can pick,” Roof said, adding that this is the direction that the Maryland State Department of Education is moving in.

Roof said zero-tolerance policies lead to more minority students being punished.

Board member Pamela Cousins questioned what’s going on that’s causing systemic bad behavior among students.

“That is the big question and I think the answer is there’s no one pathway that leads to more-than-ever-seen inappropriate behavior among [students],” Superintendent Dan Curry replied, indicating the code of conduct calls for programs and opportunities to be put in place to give educators a better chance at changing some behavior.

Board member Kelly McConkey said disruptive kids need to be identified and relocated because it’s not fair to teachers. Curry responded that these students have been identified, but moving them would just make them another teacher and group of children’s problem.

“Maybe we should have a problem classroom in each school with just problem kids,” McConkey said.

“What’s our program if we did have such a classroom, or would it just be a holding cell?” Curry responded, insisting that programs and interventions must be put in place before it gets to that point.

Curry said classrooms, guidance and school administrators are currently working together to try to change behaviors.

One topic that the code of conduct committee couldn’t come to a conclusion on was whether clothing depicting weapons should be allowed in schools. Currently, the policy restricts students from wearing garments that depict violence, sex, vulgarity or other inappropriate scenes or wording that advertise tobacco, alcohol or drug-related products.



“It has been a longstanding practice in Calvert County Public Schools not to allow students to wear any kind of garments that depict any kind of weaponry. That exceeds what is worn by our ROTC folks and in some cases I think there might even have been a mascot at some point [that depicted weaponry],” Roof told the board members before asking what they prefer.

Student member of the board Thomas Ridenour, who was part of the committee, said he talked to students, parents and teachers about the policy, but received three different answers.

“It seems like students don’t care, parents want uniforms — at least the ones I talked to — and teachers, they don’t want guns depicted,” Ridenour reported, indicating he will try to conduct a survey among the student population to get the majority’s opinion.

McGuire and vice president of the board Dawn Balinski said students are exercising their freedom of speech with the clothes they wear, but Roof chimed in that school systems have the ability to set parameters around free speech. Cousins said malicious intent should be taken into consideration when making judgments on students’ garments.

Roof said student services has heard concerns from parents on both sides of the issue and referred to it as a very divisive topic.

McGuire questioned how this policy could be consistently implemented across the school system when somebody’s shirt depicting guns may look more threatening than another shirt that may have a depiction of the cartoon character Elmer Fudd hunting rabbits.

“The general standard, my understanding is, is not whether anybody’s uncomfortable. Free speech makes people uncomfortable. Still, you’re entitled to your free speech. The standard schools are permitted to use is does it cause a disruption,” Curry said, referring to Supreme Court precedents like students wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War.

The code of conduct was placed on the school system’s website for a 30-day review and public comment period. Comments may be emailed to school board assistant Karen Maxey at [maxeyk@calvertcounty.education](mailto:maxeyk@calvertcounty.education).

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