



PRESS RELEASE

ACLU Maryland Sues Somerset County School Board for Blocking Access to Public Information

Lawsuit alleges school board is illegally hiding information about book censorship, superintendent's firing, and taxpayer-funded expenditures

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND — The American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland filed suit today in Baltimore City Circuit Court against the Somerset County Board of Education, seeking to compel release of public records Board officials refuse to disclose. The lawsuit, filed under the Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA), challenges the Board's systematic efforts to hide its controversial new practices and decisions governing book removals, school curriculum, the firing and resignation of its Black superintendent, and the secretive retention of new, ideologically-aligned legal counsel.

At its core, this case is about the community's right to understand how decisions are made about their public schools. That is especially important here, where — after a newly constituted board took office — community members, advocates, and state officials have repeatedly identified Board violations of state and local law. Board members advancing an anti-equity agenda have been reprimanded by the State Board for failing to adhere to Maryland law on at least six occasions since 2025. Families, educators, and community members have consistently called for basic transparency about new policies that impact students' access to books, learning opportunities, and school leadership.

"When a school board operates in the shadows, our children's education suffers and our democracy dies," **said Deborah Jeon, Legal Director for the ACLU of Maryland.** "Somerset's Board has chosen secrecy at every turn — maneuvering to ban books behind closed doors, rejecting expert-preferred curriculum without explanation, and hiding how much taxpayer money is being paid out to bankroll this censorship campaign. If they're making decisions in the best interests of students, why won't they let the public see the receipts?"

The lawsuit describes a pattern of erratic decision making that has limited or outright denied access to public information and made it harder for families to stay informed and engaged.

“As a father, I shouldn't have to fight this hard for basic information about my children's education,” **said Joe Hylton, a Somerset County parent and advocate for transparency and equity.** “My public records requests have been denied — and I'm not alone. The school board is withholding information about finances and decision-making from parents and community members who are deeply invested in Somerset County schools.”

Among the issues highlighted in the complaint:

- The Board enacted a policy stripping professional librarians of their authority over book selection and giving itself final say over which books are available to students.
- The Board secretly terminated its experienced legal counsel and installed an ideologically-aligned firm without competitive bidding, public notice, or compliance with its own procurement policy—conduct that the Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education found violated state law.
- The Board repeatedly ordered the removal of parents, and even the superintendent, from meetings, then evaded accountability by shifting to virtual sessions without public comment.

These developments have prompted enormous public outcry: Residents have filed numerous formal complaints with the State, organized petitions for Board member removal, and spoken out at meetings demanding greater accountability and openness.

“Access to information empowers families and communities,” **said Rev. James Jones, co-convenor of the Caucus of African American Leaders Eastern Shore.** “Somerset County residents are deeply invested in their schools, and they deserve a clear view into how decisions are being made for their children.”

Maryland law emphasizes that government transparency plays a vital role in helping residents understand decisions that affect their daily lives. This is especially important in public education, where choices about curriculum, books, and leadership shape students' futures. Families and community members rely on access to information to advocate for educational opportunities that reflect their needs and values.

The ACLU of Maryland first requested records from the Board in August 2025 and followed up with additional requests in February 2026. To date, the Board has failed to produce many of the requested records, keeping them off limits to the public.

The lawsuit seeks a court order compelling the Board to produce all withheld public records, along with a declaration that the Board has violated the MPIA, an award of damages, and attorneys' fees.

The ACLU of Maryland is represented by attorneys Deborah A. Jeon and Sonia Kumar, as well as paralegal Amy Cruice of the ACLU Foundation of Maryland, and Tyler O'Connor, Carina Federico, Rachael Padgett, and Kathy Lowrey of Crowell & Moring LLP.

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