

# Asheville school board delays vote on Parents' Bill of Rights policies



**NOT TODAY:** The Asheville City Board of Education delayed a vote on policies written to comply with Senate Bill 49 because board members want to consider adding "supportive" language to the seven policies. Photo by Greg Parlier

Four days after Buncombe County Schools passed controversial new policies to comply with the state's new Parents' Bill of Rights, the Asheville City Board of Education postponed action at its meeting Dec. 11.

Board Chair **George Sieburg** said board members wanted to explore how to show support to teachers and students in the policies beyond what has been provided by the N.C. School Boards Association. Opponents of Senate Bill 49 have said it will create an unsafe atmosphere for LGBTQ+ students, while supporters argue it will safeguard parents' role in their children's education.

Unlike the two hours of public comment heard at the BCS meeting last week, just two commenters spoke in front of the Asheville board, both asking the board to delay its vote.

"I know you have heard from many community members, students and families and staff and faculty about the damage that this law will do, particularly to LGBTQ students," said **Craig White**, supportive schools director for the Asheville-based Campaign for Southern Equality. "And I know that you've been working very hard on finding a way to thread the needle to comply with SB 49 without violating federal nondiscrimination laws, such as Title IX. What I would like to say to you tonight is that is not your ... problem to solve. It is not your homework to complete."

White asked the board to wait until the N.C. Department of Public Instruction issues guidance on how school boards can legally comply with both SB 49 and federal civil rights law, adding that NCDPI will soon face

a federal civil rights complaint of its own on the topic.

School board attorney **Chris Campbell** told the board that nothing prevents its members from adding "supportive" language to the policies beyond what is recommended by the school boards association, but they need to have that discussion in an open session, which has not happened yet.

Campbell did ask the board to adopt two procedural elements of the parental involvement policy regarding student health and parental requests for information. The new procedures require parental appeals of an information denial to come before the local school board before going to the state school board.

"It doesn't prevent a parent from going further but gives you a chance to resolve it first," Campbell said.

The procedures also set timelines for staff — first the principal, and then the superintendent — to respond to parental appeals.

"I want to recognize that there are now more hoops that our staff have to jump through to comply with these procedures," he said.

Board members approved the updated procedures 6-0. Board member **James Carter** was not present. The board will discuss the rest of SB 49-related policies at the January board retreat, open to the public and scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 18.

Those policies are parental inspection of and objection to instructional materials, comprehensive health education program, criminal behavior, surveys of students, student health services and staff responsibilities.

## Board approves academic calendar

Students in ACS will get to recover from their Halloween hangover at home next year after the board passed academic calendars for the next two school years Dec. 11.

Board members asked staff to draw up two extra calendar proposals — one with Nov. 1 as an optional workday for teachers and one with Oct. 28 as an optional workday. Two-thirds of the calendar committee preferred the day-after-Halloween option, citing a lack of student focus on that day, historically.

Superintendent **Maggie Fehrman** recommended the board pass the calendar with the Oct. 28 workday to avoid an awkward sequence where students would have days off on Friday, the following Tuesday for Election Day and the following Monday for Veterans Day.

"It seems to me that the teachers on the committee have overwhelmingly asked us to have the day off after Halloween, so we should be listening to that. I just think that the teachers are the ones who are in the classroom," said Vice Chair **Amy Ray** before the board voted 6-0 to approve the Nov. 1 day off.

The board approved the 2024-25 calendar despite complaints that the Aug. 26 start date would require the first semester to extend into January, meaning end-of-semester exams for high schoolers come in mid-January instead of before the winter break, making preparations difficult.

The board's hands were tied because state law requires districts to start school on the Monday closest to Aug.

26, despite that creating an imbalance on each side of the winter holidays.

An earlier draft calendar for ACS had a start date of Aug. 14, which 70% of the 95 teachers surveyed by the calendar committee preferred.

"This is a state law, and we have, as an elected body, sworn to uphold the laws of this state, which puts us in a really tough position, because we know ... this isn't what's best for students or staff," Sieburg said.

The board also passed a 2025-26 calendar, which is similar except the day after Halloween lands on a Saturday, meaning an optional workday will land on Monday, Oct. 27, 2025.

## Central office reorganization

In an update to the board at the end of the Dec. 11 meeting, Fehrman announced a reorganization of the district's central offices.

Fehrman created two new departments — Equity, Policies and Public Relations, and Community Partnerships.

Fehrman said she hasn't been able to spend as much time working specifically on equity in the schools as she would like, and having a dedicated manager to lead that position is essential. Other tasks had been shifted over the years to various departments where they don't necessarily fit, so this reorganization is necessary, Fehrman said.

"What's happened over time is we've centralized a lot of work that needs to go back to our schools. So [we're] taking a really close look at what's happening in each department," Fehrman said.

"We have so many community partners, we have lots of organizations that we work with, and we haven't been able to create a cohesive way to look at what those departments [are doing]. What are we asking of our community partners? How are we tracking the effectiveness of those partnerships?" Fehrman asked rhetorically.

In other news, Fehrman said she is continuing to study the possibility of moving Montford North Star Academy to Asheville Middle School because of low enrollment at both middle schools. The principals of both schools have collected data on how rooms at each school are being used. Preliminarily, Fehrman said there are at least three rooms at Asheville Middle used as offices that could be converted to classrooms.

She said she would have a more thorough analysis of the possible merger at the January board retreat.

— Greg Parlier X