

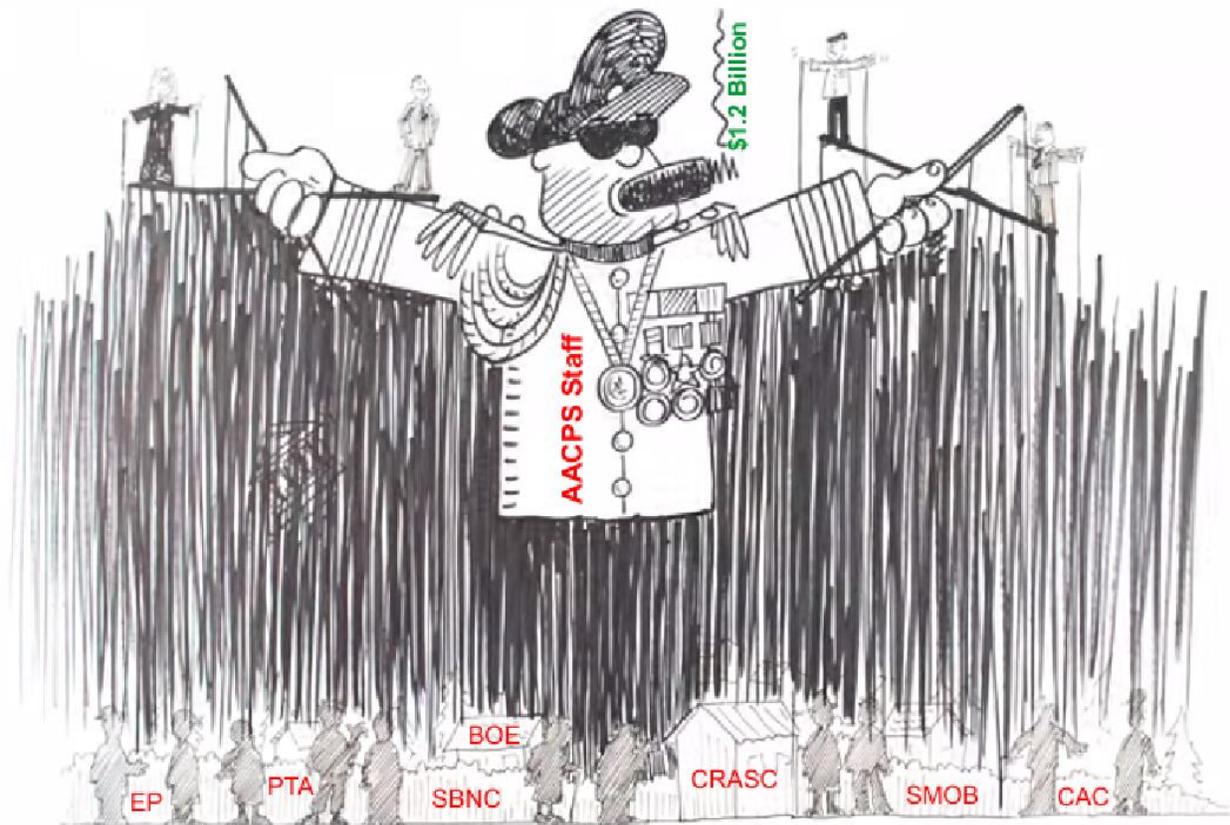
*eLighthouse Report*

*AACPS Thumbs Its Nose on Maryland's Vague and Meaningless  
Ban on Using Government Resources for Political Activity*

by

J.H. Snider, Editor  
eLighthouse.info

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## Introduction

Maryland's General Assembly bans the use of government resources for "political activity." But what exactly does "political activity" mean? Maryland State statutory and regulatory law doesn't define it. The Federal Government's Hatch Act bans state and local partisan political activity and defines such activity in some detail. But AACPS and many other local school systems are non-partisan and so are exempt from that law.

Remember how Anne Arundel County Executive John Leopold, who was expected to run for governor against the sitting governor's protege, had to leave office, pay a fine, and even serve jail time for using government resources for political as well as personal activity. (Notably, he used his personal secretary to change his catheter and his security detail to help manage his campaign signs while driving him around the county.) The verdict was not based on any legislatively created law. It was based on the common law of the courts, arguably the judge's moral intuition of what was appropriate conduct for a Maryland county executive.

AACPS staff also use government resources to pursue electoral and lobbying activities. However, unlike Leopold's activities, they are perfectly legal under any form of Maryland law--and that's probably for the good.

Nevertheless, there is great pressure on AACPS staff to ensure that these activities are not publicly disclosed. That's because they are the type of uses of government resources that would be embarrassing if publicly known. They are the type of critical resource allocations that AACPS doesn't issue press releases about (and so are not covered in the local press).

This is where Maryland's right-to-know laws come in. They are the primary mechanism through which such activity can be exposed. If that mechanism fails to work, then political insiders can tip the scales in their own favor in unfair ways. That, for example, was the key common law principle the judge used to justify convicting County Executive Leopold for using government resources for political purposes.

Since 2007, I have published hundreds of pages of articles (see the eLighthouse menu item on [K12 Elections](#)) on the way AACPS staff have undue influence on elections for the adult members of the Board of Education (let me repeat: all perfectly legal under Maryland law). I have also written extensively about how they have used the Countywide Citizen Advisory Committee for political purposes. Less extensively, I have written about how AACPS staff have effectively developed veto control over the nomination of the student member of the AACPS Board of Education, who is known as the "SMOB" for Student-Member-Of-The-Board. These writings are all summarized in the cartoon that accompanies this report.

What follows is a case study of AACPS administrators using AACPS resources to mobilize students and adults to lobby the Maryland General Assembly to oppose a bill, SB194, which would have reduced the SMOB's powers.

Although I am primarily interested in the procedural issue concerning the propriety of using government resources for political purposes, readers may be interested in my substantive view on the legislation that AACPS lobbied. I oppose reducing the SMOB's powers and thus agree with the AACPS administrators' lobbying position regarding those powers. However, I do support the democratic principle that where there is delegated power there should also be responsibility, a position AACPS administrators have not meaningfully supported and actively worked to undercut in many subtle ways. My view is that if students are given adultlike powers they should also have adultlike responsibility, including checks & balances to prevent the types of abuses that are now rife within the SMOB electoral system.

Given the extent to which AACPS insiders control both the election of adult members to the Board of Education and parental grassroots public participation, I believe it is unfair to hold students to a higher standard than adults. On the other hand, two wrongs do not make a right. The fact that corruption may be rife does not in itself justify any single instance of corruption. Yes, it was unfair to single out County Executive John Leopold when the types of activities that brought him down were hardly uncommon and were arguably of negligible political significance compared to other similar types of abuses using government resources. But that still doesn't justify his behavior. Ditto for perfectly legal violations of public norms.

I believe the following email correspondence regarding AACPS administrators' mobilization and control of students for grassroots legislative lobbying should be interesting for several reasons: First, it illustrates how AACPS staff can use government resources for political purposes in a way that is perfectly legal but potentially embarrassing if exposed publicly. Perhaps because of the Leopold scandal there is a common misconception in Anne Arundel County that it is illegal for public school officials to use government resources for electoral or grassroots lobbying purposes.

Second, in demonstrating the importance of public opinion as the only possible check on such behavior, it illustrates why Maryland's right-to-know laws are important. If government employees can use government resources for political purposes without the public knowing how those resources are being used, then they can corrupt the democratic process in the same way that corporations can if they can contribute unlimited amounts of anonymous money to election campaigns and legislative lobbying.

The emails below provide a documented account of AACPS administrator grassroots lobbying with taxpayer resources between January 13, 2014 and January 30, 2014 on SB194, a bill to reduce the SMOB's power. The collection of emails cost me \$339.98, excluding the cost of my time. After many months of seeking these emails and receiving only a subset of what I had sought, I wrote a [detailed email](#) to the AACPS Public Information Office concerning significant omissions in the responsive documents I received.

Despite those omissions, the response I received on this particular Public Information Act request concerning the emails of a low level AACPS administrator was far better than the ones I have received regarding the emails of two higher level administrators: Assistant Superintendent Sarah Pelham and Superintendent George Arlotto. For an explanation of how AACPS can pull this off, see my satire, [AACPS Superintendent Arlotto's Speech to the PR Association of America](#). I was especially interested in Sarah Pelham's emails and calendar. She supervises staff responsible for both parent and student public participation in policymaking.

Although this email correspondence primarily illustrates AACPS grassroots lobbying behavior, it also provides a vivid glimpse of how AACPS administrators can control the SMOB. This control includes both which student is elected SMOB and how the SMOB can be kept in line after being elected. Should anyone care?

The AACPS Board of Education controls a \$1.2 billion dollar budget (much more if pension and retirement healthcare obligations are accounted for) covering more than 10,000 employees and 75,000 students. Normally, the SMOB needs only four votes to pass or veto any legislation. But since November 19, 2014 to the time of this writing, April 22, 2014, the SMOB has only needed two adult members to veto any legislation, thus providing perhaps the most vivid illustration of the incentive an AACPS superintendent has to try to control who is nominated as SMOB. The two-vote veto power resulted because regardless of how many adults are actually sitting on the board, five votes are needed to pass any legislation. By November 19, 2014, two adult board members had resigned (one was elected county councilor; the other appointed to work for the county executive),

To the extent that the superintendent can control the SMOB vote more than he can control an adult vote, he also has an incentive to champion the status quo electoral system for SMOB.

The account provided below may appear long, but it is actually a brief summary of a 282-page set of emails in response to my Public Information Act request for the emails of the CRASC advisor between January 13, 2014 and January 30, 2014. CRASC is the student organization that elects the SMOB. In a red, clearly marked comment section after many of the emails, I've highlighted what I consider most interesting in the preceding email passage. In doing so, I've highlighted anything I consider potentially interesting about AACPS administrator control of student political activity regardless of its direct connection to SB194. You may want to read the original 282-page document, my highlights from those emails, my commentary on those highlights, or some combination of the above.

Although Aimee Poisson, the CRASC Advisor, is the central figure in these emails, readers should not infer anything negative about her from her efforts to control the students. I believe she was simply doing the job she was hired to do. She should also be praised rather than punished for not deleting the emails that were the subject of my Public Information Act request. Poisson is merely one cog in a much larger system increasingly designed for insiders to exert

political control of AACPS. In the cartoon accompanying this report, which depicts a master puppeteer with adjunct puppeteers manipulating the democratic institutions that the public is allowed to see at ground/eye level, she is merely a bit player.

Sincerely,

J.H. Snider, Editor  
eLighthouse.info  
April 23, 2015

## Case Study: AACPS Grassroots Lobbying With Government Resources

### ***Notable Cast***

#### **AACPS Central Office Administrators**

Aimee Poisson, Administrator for Student Leadership Development

Sarah S Pelham, Assistant Superintendent (with responsibility for coordinating adult and student grassroots lobbying) and Aimee Poisson's supervisor

Mamie Perkins, Superintendent and Sarah S. Pelham's supervisor

Jessica S. Cuches, Legislative and Policy Counsel

#### **AACPS Student Government Association (SGA) Advisors**

12 from high schools

19 from middle schools

2 from technical schools

#### **AACPS Student Officials**

Else Drooff, student member of the board (SMOB) and one of three public officials in charge of nominating three student candidates for next SMOB.

Kara Ritterpusch, CRASC president and one of three public officials in charge of nominating three student candidates for next SMOB.

### ***SMOB Nomination System***

Here is the key [rule](#) in force for nominating a SMOB during FY2014:

In the event that there are five or more nominees... there will be an interview process by an interview panel to narrow the selection to three candidates. This interview panel will consist of the current CRASC President, current Student Member on the Board of Education, and CRASC Advisor.

It is a trivial matter for the CRASC advisor to ensure that at least five students apply for SMOB, thus triggering this AACPS administrator dominated nominating process. Unlike the SBNC, which nominates adults to the Board of Education, this nominating committee meets and votes in secret. Although the rules only mention three members of that committee, the CRASC advisor's supervisor, who reports directly to the superintendent, may also attend.

The rules were changed in FY2015 and effective for the 2015 SMOB election. The revised rule had not been posted on the CRASC website as of April 21, 2015, so I scanned it and copied it below.

In the event that there are four or more nominees after the nomination period closes, there will be an interview process by an interview panel to narrow the selection to three candidates.

For the SMOB elections, this interview panel will consist of the following positions with the final approval of the executive staff by a 2/3 vote.

- A. The highest ranking member of the CRASC executive who can participate without a conflict of interest.
- B. A member of the current Board of Education, preferably the current Student Member, unless this presents a conflict of interest.
- C. A representative of the superintendent, such as the CRASC Advisor.
- D. A non-voting representative from an employee bargaining unit such as TAAAC or SAAAC
- E. A student at large to be selected by the CRASC Advisor and approved by the CRASC President. (said student must be a member of a student organization, other than CRASC)

Note the new and vague conflict-of-interest rule for student representatives on the nominating committee. In the past, AACPS implementation of vague conflict-of-interest rules has been so arbitrary and capricious that when I see a stipulation such as this I interpret it as yet another tool by which administrators can intimidate and thus control the students.

Interestingly, the conflict-of-interest standards for students on this nominating committee are arguably higher than for the adults on the Anne Arundel School Board Nominating Commission, which nominates the adult members for the AACPS Board of Education. Four of the eleven current members of the Nominating Commission are representatives of unions that negotiate on behalf of AACPS employees and collectively have veto power on any applicant seeking nomination to the Board of Education (eight affirmative votes are needed to nominate an

applicant). On January 28, 2015, when the Nominating Commission nominated applicants for two adult seats on the AACPS Board of Education, only two votes were necessary to veto any candidate because two of the Commission members were absent and the requirement for eight affirmative votes remained. The result was that the Executive Director and Vice President of TAAAC, the Anne Arundel County teachers' union, were jointly able to veto any candidate. Similarly, during most of the last decade, approximately half of adult AACPS Board of Education members had immediate family members who worked for AACPS. (It is illegal for Board of Education members to work for AACPS, but there is no restriction for immediate family members.)

Should these examples concerning adults be viewed as appropriate stakeholder representation or a conflict of interest? Obviously, laws with vague references to terms such as “conflict of interest” and “political activity” are subject to significant differences of opinion, which invites abuse by those who get to decide how to define them in particular circumstances.

### ***E-Mail Correspondence During January 2014***

I use [sic] to mark a violation of a grammatical rule in the original so as not to suggest a typing error in my copying. Certain types of mistakes, such as missing spaces between letters or paragraphs, were not marked. Problems that were self-evident because part of the overall style were also not marked. Readers should remember that emails should not be held to the same high grammatical standards as other types of published documents.

The original 282-page document provided to me by the AACPS Public Information Office is divided into two parts: [Part 1: Pages 1-150](#), and [Part 2: Pages 151-182](#). Note that the documents are generally but not all in chronological order.

**January 6, 2014.** A CRASC advisor complains to Aimee Poisson that “The CRASC website hasn’t been updated in a few years.”

**Comment:** Poisson costs AACPS taxpayers more than \$100,000/year, including benefits, but the CRASC website still hasn’t been updated as of April 9, 2015. For example, the most recent (and controversial) rules regarding the election of the SMOB still haven’t been posted under CRASC’s Constitution, and the link to the CRASC website—as it has perpetually done for many years—generates an error message. On the other hand, the Anne Arundel School Board Nominating Commission (SBNC), which provides the same function for nominating adults as CRASC does for nominating students, does no better when it comes to posting politically sensitive information online.

**January 13, 2014:** Aimee Poisson to Sarah Pelham and others [explaining her delay in getting information to them]: “I’ve been trying to work from 2 different computers, an ipad, and an android. Things are not always synched.” She then explains why she won’t provide student

transportation to the Maryland Association of Student Councils (MASC): “Student wander unsupervised....”

**Comment:** Unlike the email scandal involving presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who claimed to have trouble handling more than one email device when U.S. Secretary of State, Poisson knows how to handle four email devices. This may have come in handy when she couldn’t find any in response to a Public Information Act seeking emails during February 2012 concerning her correspondence with Sarah Pelham. As we will see, AACPS administrators believe students cannot be allowed to engage in political activities unsupervised, but students can nevertheless be allowed to assume adult-like political responsibilities in electing a student to the Board of Education with the same powers as adult board members.

**January 13, 2014:** Aimee Poisson emails the lucky members of the CRASC executive staff who she has selected to attend the Martin Luther King breakfast—and for free. Her salutation? “Good Morning Minions!” Were the students invited because they are her minions rather than because of objective public service? It’s not clear from the message that follows the salutation:

The system has asked that I invite a select group of student leaders to attend this event. If you are receiving this email, you are invited.... The MLK Breakfast is an important event in our community. AACPS student leaders will be recognized. It will be cool. There will be speakers, local politicians, community activists, and educators. This is a pretty high profile opportunity.... This event is by invitation only.

**Comment:** Dictionary definitions of “minion” include “a servile dependent, follower, or underling” (Merriam-Webster), “an obsequious follower or dependent; a sycophant” (Free Dictionary), and “a follower or underling of a powerful person, especially a servile or unimportant one” (Oxford).

There is great irony in the use of this salutation because she is using it one day before Maryland Senator Ed Reilly will introduce SB194 questioning students’ qualifications for having the same voting powers as adults on the AACPS Board of Education. Her lobbying campaign over the next month will focus on proving that the students are not, in fact, her minions.

**January 13, 2014:** Students with blanked out names quickly write back to Aimee Poisson: “Thank you for the opportunity!” “I’d love to,” and “I’m interested in doing this!!!”

**January 14, 2014:** Aimee Poisson emails Sarah Pelham and several other administrators. In her opening paragraph, she tells them that “our kids are my babies” and then follows with:

I am not sure if we will be able to send kids without a school based chaperone. I know that this has been the practice in the past but it is a direct violation of our policies. MASC is not my organization and I have run in to many issues in regards to their paperwork, chaperone requirements, and stuff but I’m speaking to Sally [Pelham] about

it. Right now, the plan is that if I can keep our total number of students attending from aacps at a manageable number, I will just be the chaperone for everyone.”

**Comment:** This is a classic if very minor case of AACPS administrators ignoring the rules, with no accountability, when they are not in their self-interest.

**January 14, 2014:** Aimee Poisson emails the entire CRASC executive staff. Her salutation: “Hello Bambinos!!!” She then reminds them about their next meeting: “Just a friendly reminder, I will see you all on Wednesday.”

**Comment:** A dictionary definition of bambino is “a child; a baby” (Merriam-Webster). So now the privileged subset of the CRASC executive staff are her “minions” and the CRASC executive staff as a whole are her “bambinos.” Poisson will abandon both terms during her fight against SB194, which will begin the following day and center on the independence and adult-like professionalism of student leaders.

**January 15, 2014:** Aimee Poisson to a blanked out member of the CRASC executive staff, possibly the CRASC president: “I am going to write some things up to help you plan for lobbying day. I am starting to get antsy about it so I'm just going to go into Huber plan mode and hand you the script to deliver. I hope that's cool. I don't want to get bit in the end because we have not planned.”

**Comment:** This type of control by AACPS staff undercuts the message that they will promote beginning later the same day after SB194 is introduced in the Maryland General Assembly.

**January 15, 2014:** At 4:28 pm Aimee Poisson writes to a blacked out individual (Senator O’Reilly?) with the subject line “sb 194” (that stands for “Senate Bill 194” and only the words “Dude, really?” in the message box. This is Poisson’s first of countless emails during the next two weeks concerning SB194.

**Comment:** This is a very odd email. One would think it would be part of a conversation. But it stands alone. Its existence doesn’t necessarily imply that there weren’t other emails in this conversation; only that at the time the AACPS staff member asked for access to Poisson’s emails this is what remained on her work computer.

**January 15, 2014:** At 4:54 pm, Aimee Poisson emails to what appears to be hundreds of individuals, mostly blacked out, a message with importance marked “high” and the subject line: “A Major Issue; Please Assist.” Among the recipients are presumably nonprofits and government entities throughout Maryland, including her counterparts as student advisor in other Maryland counties.

Friends,

Today Senator Ed Reilly introduced SB 194, a bill to revoke the full voting rights for the AACPS Student Member of the Board.

I am sure I don't need to explain to everyone the ramifications of this damaging piece of legislation. Anne Arundel County's inclusion of a SMOB with full voting rights is cited as the precedent for other efforts to attain voting rights and representation. Loss of this right in our county would diminish the likelihood of [Sic] Needless to say, this bill must be publicly and adamantly opposed.

I am speaking with my students this evening and will be meeting with our systems legal counsel tomorrow to determine how we will proceed. I am requesting your support in this. It goes to committee on January 29th at 1 pm.

I'll be in touch to discuss our next step. Thank you.

Aimee Poisson  
Administrator for Student Leadership Development  
CRASC Advisor  
Anne Arundel County Public Schools  
410-222-5405

**January 15, 2014.** At 5:05 pm, Aimee Poisson emails to an SGA Advisor with a copy of the email she sent at 4:54 pm: "Can you believe this BS?"

**January 15, 2014.** At 6:05 pm, Aimee Poisson emails to Ray Leone, president of the Anne Arundel Parent Teacher Association, a copy of the email she sent at 4:54 pm along with the message: "Can you please read this and get back to me!!!!"

**January 15, 2014.** At 7:23 pm, AACPS legal counsel Jessica S. Cuches emails Aimee Poisson. There is no recorded email to Cuches, so presumably she was one of the blacked out email addresses in the 4:54 pm email sent by Poisson. If not, then the earlier email to her was deleted.

Aimee,

Sorry I could not offer you more time or a more thorough response when you emailed me earlier today. I was busy with several other things and I had not seen SB 194 yet. Do you have any idea where this is coming from? Why Senator Reilly filed it? The next BOE meeting's agenda is already set and George [presumably George Margolies] and I did not plan on bringing Legislative items to this meeting (it will be on the agenda for the 1st meeting in Feb). However, since the hearing for this Bill is prior to the Feb BOE meeting I will talk to him about submitting testimony anyway with Ms. Perkins & the BOE's support. Are you thinking [BLACKED OUT NAME] or someone else will want to provide live testimony? We can definitely coordinate efforts once I get official word that the BOE is in support of opposition.

I have a legislative breakfast tomorrow morning, George will be there too so I intend on talking to him about this at that time. When I get back I have a meeting and documents due to the BOE but maybe we can chat in the late afternoon. If not then sometime on Friday? Have you talked to [BLACKED OUT NAME] or any of your other student reps about this yet?

Thanks,  
Jessica

**Comment:** Future legal advice from legal counsel Cuches will apparently be done face-to-face, avoiding a paper trail. From the standpoint of the private sector, it is unusual not to get legal advice in writing. Note that from the time of Poisson’s email campaign beginning on July 15 until the public hearing on January 29, there is no record in the email correspondence of the Board of Education’s officially approving the administrators’ legislative lobbying effort. To the extent there was no formal approval, it would technically be a violation of AACPS lobbying rules. However, there were arguably extenuating circumstances given the short notice. The Board of Education president also personally spoke out against SB194 at the public hearing on January 29.

**January 15, 2014.** At 9:21 pm, Aimee Poisson responds to a later Jessica Cuches email with “Absolutely.” The email to which she responds, part of the thread that started at 7:23 pm, includes no time but appears to be otherwise complete. It says:

Aimee - I talked to George over email and he is outraged & said we will definitely bring testimony. Let's talk tomorrow afternoon or Friday afternoon. Does that work for you? We can coordinate efforts, testimony etc.

Thanks,  
Jessica

**Comment:** The original emails from Cuches are missing: they only show up as replies from Poisson. Note how both Poisson and Cuches frame the issue: students are assumed to be agents of AACPS staff. Later there will be more sensitivity about this framing. What happened to that promised coordination regarding student testimony, etc.? The paper trail on that coordination soon begins to disappear and AACPS failed to include responsive attachments with edited testimony and talking points in response to my Public Information Act request--with no acknowledgment of the omission and only later claiming that it omitted them because it would need to charge an estimated \$1,471.80 to make it possible for the public to track AACPS staff involvement in shaping the students’ legislative testimony.

**January 16, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails to at least several blacked out individuals, who are presumably student leaders, the following message with the subject line: “disregard my ramblings.”

I am confused and have not slept in a bit ... please disregard my previous email.  
[BLACKED OUT INDIVIDUAL,] we did not assign you anything. I have lost my mind  
..... sorry.

**Comment:** Again, the email to which Poisson is referring is missing even though she explicitly acknowledges it was from her. Clearly, the omitted email is one that she was embarrassed by and one that was inconsistent with her emerging message of students as independent, adult-like professionals.

**January 16, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails to a half dozen or so blacked out individuals, presumably the top CRASC leaders responsible for lobbying the legislature. Her subject line is “time to call some legislators!!!”

Hello All,

Thank you for getting on this. Our first order of business is to verify that our legislators will be available for students to visit on the 19th. After I can see who is available, we will direct school to one building or the other to control traffic flow and insure that everyone gets to see someone. Each of you is assigned a certain number of offices to contact. DO THIS BY MAKING A PHONE CALL during business hours. Stick to the reps that we assigned last night so that we don't overbook ourselves. Before you make any calls, please refer to my spreadsheet. There was some confusion in the notes from last night so please just go with what I have assigned.

The script schedule and contacts are all attached. Please make sure that you read through everything and practice a few times before you call.

Thank you all!

**Comment:** Again, the tone is one of Poisson commanding the students to engage in lobbying based on a script she has assigned for them.

**January 16, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails to two blacked out individuals, presumably CRASC student leaders: “Can you write a press release about CRASC [sic] intention to oppose the bill. Can you get me something rough over the weekend?”

**Comment:** Again, Poisson presumes that she will edit anything the students produce.

**January 17, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails the CRASC executive staff letting them know that she has gotten approval and AACPS funding for a bus to take them out of school to lobby Maryland’s General Assembly on SB194.

OK Team,

We have a green light on this. On the January 29th, we will be heading downtown to provide testimony against this ugly bill.

..... and I got a bus for us. I am allowing anyone from the exec staff to attend the hearings. Selected students may speak, but don't plan on it unless you have been tapped already.

For now you can take these permission slips to your parents and arrange rides to the BOE by 11am on January 29th. The bus will bring you back to the BOE around 4:30. I figure you all will go across the street to grab dinner before the exec staff meeting. I am emailing your advisors, so they will be aware of what is going on. This will be an excused absence. If you are transporting yourself and/or other students please handle the driver transport form in accordance with your school's requirements.

Your school based advisor is not chaperoning this trip, I am. Please take this permission form directly to your principal for approval. I will collect them from you the morning of the event.

Give me a heads up if you are coming. As usual, self transportation downtown will not be allowed. If you decide to go downtown on your own, you will not be part of the field trip and it will not be an excused absence.

We are making progress people, let's stay in touch.

Aimee Poisson

**Comment:** The students are no longer addressed “Minions” or “Bambinos” but “Team.” But she still makes clear who is boss: “I am allowing anyone from the exec staff to attend the hearings” and “Selected students may speak, but don't plan on it unless you have been tapped already.” She also won't let the students transport themselves to the Maryland General Assembly unless it's under her direct supervision: “As usual, self transportation downtown will not be allowed. If you decide to go downtown on your own, you will not be part of the field trip and it will not be an excused absence.”

**January 17, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails her Montgomery County Public Schools counterpart, Karen L. Crawford, Coordinator for Student Affairs:

Hello Karen,

As previously discussed, can you please forward this note to your president and smob. As I am sure you are aware, we are assembling a team of representatives from various regions to provide testimony to the MDGA Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee. Karen Montgomery sits on this committee, so including your student testimony is a [sic] prudent. The hearing is at 1pm on January 29th in the Capital

Building. Would you be willing to join us and provide testimony on behalf of your organization?

Aimee Poisson

**Comment:** Note that the coordination is being done by school staff, not the students themselves. The Parents Coalition in Montgomery County has [complained](#) about this type of administrator control by Karen Crawford over student lobbying.

**January 18, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails Else Drooff, the current AACPS SMOB, in response to an undated email Drooff sent her. Drooff's email says:

Hey do you think you would write me a letter of recommendation for Scholarship for Scholars? I have a feeling a lot of the CRASC kids are applying as well but I was hoping you would do me a solid :) Also, would it be appropriate to ask Mamie to do one for me as well?

Poisson's reply says:

Yes and yes. Apply for the leadership one. Last year I only wrote of for [BLACKED OUT NAME] but they gave it to [BLACKED OUT NAME] I was not happy because I felt that [BLACKED OUT NAME] deserved it more but this year, its all you. Ask Mamie too.

**Comment:** Among the many Scholarship for Scholars awards, the SMOB and CRASC leaders typically seek the Civic Leadership Scholarship (\$5,000). Recommendations by the CRASC Advisor (Poisson), the superintendent (Mamie Perkins), and fellow board members are viewed as among the most valuable a student can get. This creates a fear in the students that if they do anything to alienate senior AACPS administrators they won't have a good shot at getting this highly sought after award. For the SMOB in particular, winning a top civics related scholarship can approximately double the earnings from serving on the Board of Education, which only pays regular adult and student members \$6,000/year (the president of the Board of Education gets a little more).

Scholarships for Scholars is administered by an independent foundation but that foundation uses an AACPS [website](#) that is maintained by AACPS, addressed [www.aacps.org](http://www.aacps.org), and directs mail to 2644 Riva Road—AACPS headquarters. It is funded via the government rather than a private entity, and AACPS provides negligible information about the foundation on its website except on how to apply for a scholarship. Not surprisingly, it is perceived by students to be heavily influenced by AACPS insiders. Understanding this economy of favors between ambitious students and administrators is critical to understanding administrators' leverage over not only the sitting SMOB but, more crucially, the nominating process for future SMOBs.

The original email from the SMOB was not provided in response to my Public Information Act request. It only shows up at the bottom of Poisson's response to the original email. Also, Drooff's name is blacked out in the To: field of Poisson's email, but Drooff's email address, which doesn't include her last name, was not blacked out in the body of Poisson's email. According to the AACPS Public Information Office, correspondence by the SMOB using AACPS email requires her name to be blocked out because, unlike other paid AACPS staff, she is a student rather than adult public official. Not only has this been a highly contested interpretation of the law regarding student officials (see my [October 6, 2014 email to the AACPS Public Information Office](#) complaining about certain omissions), it also undercuts AACPS's talking point that elected student representatives should have the same rights and responsibilities as adult representatives.

**January 18, 2014.** 23 minutes later, there is a second round of emails between Aimee Poisson and Else Droof, the current AACPS SMOB. Again, Drooff's email is only contained in the response from Poisson. Droof explains her worries about a competitor:

I'm worried though because [BLACKED OUT NAME] his resume probably looks better than mine. Oh well I guess I just have to try and THANK YOU!

Poisson responds, telling her what to put in a winning application:

No. His is fluff. Focus on the leadership that is about service and community instead of self aggrandizing titles. Find a way to show your impact and legacy. Make it the theme.

**Comment:** Whatever Poisson and Drooff end up doing, it is effective. Droof wins the Civic Leadership Scholarship for \$5,000. Note that even after becoming SMOB, Drooff still feels dependent on the CRASC advisor and is thankful for her continued favor. As we will see, Drooff's proposed "Teen Advisory" for underperforming youth will provide Poisson an opportunity to help her "show your impact and legacy." This improper dependency provides insight into the SMOB nomination process that is jointly controlled by the SMOB and CRASC Advisor, which jointly control two of the three votes on the secret SMOB nominating committee.

**January 18, 2014.** Karen Crawford, who holds the analogous position in Montgomery County to Aimee Poisson's position in Anne Arundel County, email Poisson and apparently cc's Montgomery County's SMOB and student organization president, although their names have been blacked out:

This is a coordinated effort from Anne Arundel County. You have been invited to testify (you or [BLACKED OUT NAME]).

Please let Ms. Poisson (advisor) and others listed if you will be able to testify. They are coordinating the testimonies and the talking points so all is covered without a lot of duplication.

Please REPLY ALL if you will be able to testify.

**Comment.** It is understood that Poisson, not the students, is coordinating the lobbying campaign and selecting the talking points.

**January 18, 2014.** After getting approval to testify from Montgomery County's SMOB and MCR president, Karen Montgomery writes back:

So, Ms. Poisson, if you want our SMOB and MCR president to testify, let them know. If you only want one, I could still drive to Annapolis to be there for support.

Poisson then replies:

Thank you very much. We would like both [BLACKED OUT NAME] and [BLACKED OUT NAME] to join us. I will be in touch on Monday with our talking points.

**Comment:** Again, it is AACPS administrators, not the students, who control the coordination and talking points.

**January 22, 2014.** In an email thread between Else Drooff and Aimee Poisson that begins on January 8, 2014 but blacks out Drooff's name and email address until a reply from Poisson on January 22, Drooff writes: **[For the next round in this correspondence, jump to January 27, 2014, the email that allows Drooff's correspondence to be linked to her.]**

What do you think about scheduling a meeting with mamie, ms.pelham, you, and me to discuss options for starting an advisory group for students that may be underacheivers? I was thinking it might be good for me to share my opinions with Mrs. Perkins and brainstorm what we could work out before I leave in July. I have decided to take a break from track so I am hoping to have a teeny bit more time (in February really haha) until Outdoor Track. I was missing so much practice and with this new project I havent [sic] been running so well so hopefully this break will help!

The same day Poisson responds and cc's Sarah Pelham, her boss:

I just kicked it to Ms. Pelham because she knows how we both feel about it and would support us in this endeavor. She says schedule the meeting. Why don't you speak to Ms. Perkins and set up a time that works best for you. I will work around your schedule.

PS- There is nothing wrong with taking a little time to be a normal teenager. Maybe you can use a bit of this time to creep on facebook and chase boys?

Drooff responds the same day:

I think I am going to try and fix my health problems once and for all! I have my Princeton interview on Sunday! .. hahaha just figured out I am spending two weeks in the Abacos in the summer. .. Im [sic] gonna be finding some tan island men.

Then Poisson responds moments later:

Good luck!! Princeton would be lucky to have you.

On January 22, 2014, Poisson reports back to Drooff that she can now set up a meeting with the superintendent's appointments secretary: "Let er'rip!"

**Comment:** Note the mix of things going on simultaneously: the SMOB's desire for a recommendation from the AACPS superintendent, the SMOB's desire to win approval from the AACPS superintendent for a teen advisory committee to help the underprivileged, and the SMOB's application to an Ivy League college, Princeton. Note, too, how Sarah Pelham, who carefully monitors the SMOB nominating process and has sat in on the nominating committee's supposedly secret voting, is involved as a power broker who controls whether the SMOB can get what she wants from the superintendent.

**January 23, 2014.** In an email entitled "SB 194—The gameplan," Aimee Poisson emails her counterparts in counties throughout Maryland, as well as her local team, explaining her game plan for January 29. It appears to be sent to hundreds of individuals, but it is hard to tell because most of the names are blacked out.

Good Morning All,

Thank you all very much for your enthusiasm and support as we move forward. I understand that this bill has created quite the buzz in the student leadership community. As we continue to speak with our counselors and refine our approach to this, we ask that you join our efforts to kill the bill in the committee.

We are approaching this issue with caution and a great deal of organization. Of course, everyone is welcome to lobby privately. However, we are coordinating the formal testimony to assure that we stay on message. We see this as an opportunity to demonstrate the maturity and sophistication of the student voice. This is how we would like to move forward.

1. Please designate one or two students to speak from your group. Make sure that this student (preferably your SMOB or president) is available and willing to travel to Annapolis on the 29<sup>th</sup>.
  - a. That student will be testifying at the hearing and should email me their written testimony no later than Monday January 27<sup>th</sup>.
    - i. Refer to our key points and addition resources to help students craft their message

ii. Written testimony should come on letter head, please proof read.

iii. We will make the necessary copies the official testimony and deliver it to the committee office by 11am on the 29th.

b. On the morning of the hearing, a volunteer will submit the 25 copies of all written testimony and sign students up to speak.

i. We would like the order of students to be CRASC rep •• MASC rep - other counties, state SMOB -, AACPS SMOB -I need to know who is planning to speak by Monday, so I can get everyone signed up.

ii. Aacps students, staff, and parents are encouraged to come to the Parham Building by 11am and take a bus downtown. (Yes, we have paid for an AACPS bus. Unfortunately we are unable to transport students from outside the county)

iii. We will meet in a reserved room at the Miller Senate Office Building at 11 Bladen Street, Annapolis at noon.

iv. The hearing will begin at 1pm. Game on.

c. Double check you logistics

i. My kids need a signed permission slip, I have attached it.

ii. I don't know what documentation is required from other counties, student please check with your advisors on this.

iii. Professional dress and superlative behavior! This bill is based on the belief that students cannot be mature enough to make adult decisions. The best way to fight it is to bring you're [sic] A game in terms of professionalism.

2. Write to your representatives!! I am sure that there will be many more students who are appalled by this bill. Please write directly to your representatives. Especially those senators who sit on this committee. It is very possible that this bill will not make it out of the committee.

Please see that attached resources for FAQ and guidelines for testimony. 25 hard copies must be provided by noon on the 29th, so please have your students email me their written testimony in a word format by Monday evening!! Legislators from Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Calvert, Charles, St. Mary's, PG, Washington, Fredrick, Montgomery, Harford, and Anne Arundel Counties all sit on the committee. So testimony of student speakers from these regions should be the most compelling.

Finally, please communicate your intentions and plans to me. I know I cannot avoid all surprises but I would like to have a handle on how many student reps will be joining as and speaking. THANK YOU ALL!!!

**Comment:** AACPS's Public Information Office did not provide the requested attachments in response to my Public Information Act request, but there is still a lot of information here that suggests the tone of AACPS administrator involvement.

The core message is: "We see this as an opportunity to demonstrate the maturity and sophistication of the student voice." And again: "Professional dress and superlative behavior! This bill is based on the belief that students cannot be mature enough to make adult decisions. The best way to fight it is to bring you're [sic] A game in terms of professionalism."

Poisson requests that she get a copy of all proposed written testimony at least two days before the hearing. In drafting their testimony, she asks all students to first consult her talking points. Using the AACPS copying machine, she promises to make 25 copies of the testimony required by the Senate Committee—and to do so free at AACPS expense. Also, as required by the Senate Committee, she promises to deliver the testimony before the hearing starts and at the same time sign up the students to testify. This must be done at least two hours before the hearing starts. All this gives here substantial control over the process.

Poisson notes that AACPS's generosity with using taxpayer funds for grassroots legislative lobbying is limited. AACPS has paid for a bus so AACPS students can lobby, but those coming from out-of-county will have to pay for their own transportation.

The Maryland Senate has provide AACPS with a meeting room in advance of the hearing so that Poisson and Pelham can provide the assembled students with instructions.

**January 23, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails the executive staff canceling its meeting. As a result, the executive staff won't have an opportunity to discuss and vote on her lobbying gameplan between now and the Maryland Senate's January 29 hearing on SB194: "In light of everyone's finals schedule and the unexpected snow days, there will be no exec staff meeting tonight."

**January 23, 2014.** Kara Ritterpusch, CRASC President, emails Aimee Poisson:

I just had a minor heart attack because I looked at the clock and remembered there was supposed to be a meeting tonight. Then I remembered I read this email this afternoon hahah. Oops

Obviously, I will be there on the 29th. Can I self transport or do I need to ride the bus?

Poisson emails back:

Im [sic] not sure about you. I don't really care if you follow the rules on that day because I already shaghai'd your mom into chaperoning (she is a saint, tell her how much you love her, everyday!!!!)

**Comment:** This exchange illustrates how rules often work at AACPS. If you help administrators, they'll wave the rules for your child.

**January 24, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails Pam Bukowski and another person whose email address is blacked out. Bukowski is on the board of the teachers' union and will soon be elected its vice president. She is also president of the Anne Arundel County PTA, the PTA's representative on the Countywide Citizen Advisory Committee, the PTA's representative on the Anne Arundel School Board Nominating Commission, and the PTA's representative on the AACPS Superintendent search committee. Presumably, she is here being addressed in her PTA role.

I don't doubt that you ladies have heard by now. Ed Reilly has authored this nasty bill to rescind the student member of the BOE vote. The hearing on it will be on the 29th at 1pm. Would you be interested in join [sic] us to testify against it?

**Comment:** The name of the second person may be a union or PTA official. If so, I'm not sure under what Public Information Act exemption their name could be blacked out.

**January 24, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails a student in another county: "Given your constituency, it would make the most sense if you spent your two minutes focused on how AACPS has set a tone of student involvement that most other counties would like to emulate."

**Comment:** Poisson's statement was not intended to be ironic.

**January 24, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails some 100+ individuals, most of whose names are blacked out.

Hello All,

I hope you will all be able to give this issue a bit of attention this weekend. I have attached our key discussion points for testimony. Please let me know if you will be joining us on the 29<sup>th</sup> and remember to write you elected officials. Thank you all so much!!

**Comment:** Once again Poisson takes on the role of grassroots' lobbyist-in-chief on the taxpayer's dime.

**January 24, 2014.** Karen Crawford, Aimee Poisson's counterpart in Montgomery County, emails dozens of blacked out individuals various logistical information and includes the following instructions: "See the information below from Ms. Poisson, the CRASC regional advisor, concerning the hearing next Wednesday. You need to send her your written testimony by a REASONABLE hour on Monday (no later than 6pm I would think as she didn't state a time)." The two students Crawford has lined up to speak are Justin Kim and Carmen Huynh.

**Comment:** Once again, all information must be funneled via Poisson.

**January 25, 2014.** Mary T. Poisson, AACPS Coordinator of Social Studies, emails her daughter, Aimee Poisson: “Have you let your contact at the Capital newspaper know about this event...”

**Comment:** In AACPS, family connections breed trust, especially in politically sensitive positions. That may help explain why so many Board of Education members have family members who work for AACPS.

**January 25, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails a blacked out name, presumably either the SMOB or CRASC president.

Yes. I need you to write your own testimony. I can help but we could get into an ugly area if it was suggested that I hand fed you your testimony. Refer to the discussion points but your main message is that you speak on behalf of the student in this county, who the senate also is supposed to represent ... and the students do not support this bill.

**Comment:** This is the first time Poisson has explicitly acknowledged the PR problem associated with the perception that an AACPS administrator might be heavily involved in drafting student testimony. One of the attachments, which was not included in the response to my Public Information Act request, was the “SB 194 Discussion Points.docx.” Note that the student query to which this email responds is missing from the email record.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails her counterpart in the Charles County Public Schools:

The hearing is Wednesday. Written testimony that will accompany, verbal testimony need [sic] to be in my in box by tonight/tomorrow morning. Addition [sic] written testimony should be in the legislators [sic] in boxes by the same time in order to be considered with this hearing ... if the bill moves forward we will need to continue to fight it, additional letter, email, and lobbying will take place if we come to that point.

I'm not sure that a petition would be as effective as independent letters and emails. I recommend have [sic] each student send a general email expressing their disapproval of this bill and copying all the legislators on this committee ... specifically the ones from your district.

**Comment:** Once again it is Poisson, not the students, who is serving as the master lobbyist. And she is effectively putting herself in the position where she (and the other AACPS staff she does not mention in these external emails) can effectively prescreen all testimony.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails someone, presumably one of the AACPS student leaders testifying on January 29: “Will you be submitting written testimony? It has to be printed and delivered so try and [sic] have it to me by tomorrow morning.”

**Comment:** Poisson is anxious that the student hasn't submitted his/her testimony on time. Note that most people who testify make their own print copies and sign up themselves, which would be easy for the students to do because they are all coming together and expected to be at the Maryland General Assembly by noon to meet in a reserved room to discuss their hearing strategy. One of the students or their accompanying parents could easily have dropped off the copies and signed up on behalf of all the student testifiers at that time. Poisson, however, doesn't tell the students that she is merely offering an option for their convenience. The impression is that she is using the copying and signup requirement as a convenient excuse so that she can prescreen and otherwise control the testimony. For an ambitious and politically attuned student, this request on specious grounds for prior review from a powerful individual could be highly intimidating.

**January 27, 2014:** Aimee Poisson's counterpart in Prince George's County emails Poisson that he has found a student to testify on January 29, and Poisson responds: "Awesome. Thank you."

**Comment:** The email is only addressed to Poisson, again indicating her role as master grassroots lobbyist at taxpayer expense.

**January 27, 2014:** Aimee Poisson emails the AACPS students who may be interested in attending the January 29 hearing: "Professional dress is required."

**Comment:** The Maryland General Assembly doesn't have such a dress code, so this is a code made up and enforced by Poisson because it is consistent with the message AACPS administrators are trying to convey.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails other public officials, including her counterparts in other Maryland counties and the Maryland Youth Advisory Council (the great majority of the names—many dozens—are blacked out): "With just a few days to go, I am scrambling to organize our student testimony against SB 194."

**Comment:** Again, it is Poisson, not the students, who are "organizing our student testimony."

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson appears to be emailing several students (with blacked out names) who represent AACPS on the Maryland Association of Student Councils. She wants to make sure she has the names of all the students from other counties who will be attending: "Do you know of anyone who I don't know of? NO SURPRISES PLEASE!!!"

**Comment:** The no surprises theme runs throughout the emails but this is the first time it has been stated so bluntly and forcefully to top AACPS student leaders in an email.

**January 29, 2014.** The grassroots coalition Aimee Poisson has put together under the supervision of Sarah Pelham meets at noon in Room 153 in the Lowe House Building in a secretive closed door environment. Poisson, with Pelham watching, explains to a crowded, standing room audience of students what is expected of them.

**Comments:** These types of rooms are secretly reserved by delegates on behalf of favored constituents. It's a great perk delegates can provide to favored grassroots lobbying groups to curry favor, and the General Assembly picks up the tab for cleaning up afterwards so the next group can use a clean room (in this case, there were loads of papers left everywhere). The Public Information Act provides an exemption so that the General Assembly doesn't have to disclose how these public assets are used by individual legislators.

**January 27, 2014.** The student advisor from Southern Middle School emails Aimee Poisson with the information that she has co-authored the testimony of one of the middle school student leaders: "I've attached his testimony that we were working on earlier today from the discussion points you sent out last week."

**Comment:** Here an AACPS employee is explicitly acknowledging her role in drafting a student's testimony.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails blacked out names at Youth for National Change:

Hello All,

I have heard that your group might be joining us for the SB 194 hearing on Wednesday. Can you please let me know what you are planning? We are really trying to assure that all testimony stays on message and that student leadership is portrayed in the best possible light. I am available to assist with messaging and testimonial registration. Please let me know what your game plan is.

**Comment:** Again, Poisson assumes the role of master lobbyist. It is not clear why the names are blacked out.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson receives confirmation that the bus paid for at taxpayer expense will be provided by Chesapeake Charter, which specializes in school field trips. It appears that the bus will be reserved for all day, picking students up at 11 am at Riva Road and returning them at 4:30 pm to Riva Road: "There is a trip scheduled for Wednesday, January 29, 2014. We are asking for a confirmation this trip will go on as scheduled."

**January 27, 2014 at 4:35 pm.** Aimee Poission emails a student leader with a blacked out name who has submitted testimony by her deadline.

I am going cross eyed right now. I am going to get home, walk my dog, hit the gym and look at it again. If its [sic] ok with you, I will edit out some of the phrasing that is repetitive or not on point. It looks like your central argument is that we need to be moving towards a more valid student representation by granting more counties a full student vote on their board of ed.

That's excellent. So it should be the primary argument.

Just remember that legislators don't care about how much it means to us, or that smobs are superheroes. Emotion and sentiment will be used against us in an argument about whether or not students are mature enough to vote on educational policy. So we have to be professional, on the verge of antiseptic. I put together some letterhead and will adjust the formatting to match the example that I sent out a few minutes ago. I just give me a little while to work on it.

I am sure I will be able to think straight after a get in a cardio session. If you want to talk to me about it, you can call or text me at [blacked out information]

**Comment:** Here Poisson acknowledges her direct editing role. She is preemptively editing the testimony but not doing it by fiat. Would it make any difference if this student leader wasn't an AACPS student? Poisson may have substantial power over AACPS students but for others she must rely on persuasion.

**January 27, 2014 at 4:39 pm.** Aimee Poisson emails what appears to be about a half dozen or more blacked out AACPS student leader names:

OK folks, I cant [sic] think straight anymore sol [sic] am headed home to walk my dog and hit the gym. I will sit down and look at testimony in a few hours. If anyone needs guidance call or text me at [blacked out information]

**Comment:** It appears that the students are indeed getting testimony to Poisson by her deadline and that she feels overwhelmed with the editing responsibility she has taken on.

**January 27, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails SMOB Drooff and other student leaders [Drooff's name is blacked out, but it is clear from the overall thread and a thread from January 22 that the thread is between her and Poisson]:

Good Morning All,

This is a final reminder to all who may be interested in attending the SB 194 hearing on Wednesday. Students will need to sign permission slip and must be at the BOE building at 11am. We will be heading downtown early and meeting up with student reps from other counties. Professional dress is required. We will stay for the entire hearing, I expect us back at the board before 4pm. Please let me know if you, or one of your students plans on attending!

Drooff emails back about what on the surface might appear to be a totally unrelated point, setting up a time on February 6 to meet with AACPS Superintendent Mamie Perkins and CRASC Advisor Poisson about Drooff's advisory for underprivileged teens (she is also seeking a recommendation from the superintendent):

How does the 6th work to meet with Mamie about changing up teen advisory?

Poisson answers Drooff's question and then gets down to the business that is on her mind: she wants to review Drooff's testimony.

I'm free all day .... were [sic] is your testimony???

I'm going brain dead try to get it to me before I burst into flames.

Drooff replies, with the last words after the question mark inexplicably blacked out. From Poisson's reply, "Yeah [BLACKED OUT NAME] will be there," it appears to be a question about who will be there (possibly Sarah Pelham, who would attend the meeting).

I just got home ... Can you look at it in the morning?

Poisson replies:

Yeah [BLACKED OUT NAME] will be there. I am going to bed so I can get my old as dirt butt into the gym before dawn .... try and get something into my in box before noon tomorrow. Use the resources I've sent over the last few days. Go with the personal approach. I'll double check your format.

**Comment:** Again, there is an intermixing of favors: Poisson anxious about legislative lobbying; Drooff focused on her own separate agendas and happy to let Poisson take the reins of the grassroots legislative lobbying effort.

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson corresponds with CRASC President Kara Ritterpusch about Ritterpusch's testimony. Ritterpusch's name is blacked out but can be inferred from the part of the thread that says: "your position as CRASC president." Both the To: and From: fields in this proposed testimony are blacked out. There are too many grammatical errors here to note them all with [sic]. The testimony reads more like note taking than a coherent speech.

[ABOUT THE FIRST TEN WORDS ARE BLACKED OUT] I noticed a universal theme in Maryland educational policies; set high standards for students. The belief behind this philosophy is that if you set the bar high for students they will step up and achieve and in most cases surpass expectations. This theme in educational policies also applies to students in the school board position. If you set the expectations high for one of your systems brightest and most hardworking students they will meet the standard and as most "adult" school board members can tell you, they almost always surpass it. Given this philosophy, which seems to be practiced concurrently throughout most systems the revoking of full voting rights would diminish the greatest example we have of how high expectations can foster student excellence. As a state I hope we stand by our belief in the high capacity of students and greatly consider an unfavorable report from the committee regarding SB 194.

quote it. paraphrase it. as long as the message that it is pretty much hypocritical to lower the bar for students. If we believe that student excellence comes from pushing students then why would be cap the potential of one of the best students in Anne Arundel County by lowering the standard.

Also heres something else

On the Board of Education, specifically in Anne Arundel County, many stakeholder groups are represented; democrats, republicans, liberals, conservatives, small business owners, mothers, fathers, different races, educational professionals, military/government employees, and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. These stakeholder groups are very important however, their stake in public education is marginal compared to the students who participated in the school system everyday. Looking through a business perspective, as school systems are businesses, it is essential to properly represent those who are most greatly affected by policies and strategic planning of the business and there is no better way to represent stakeholder groups then by allowing them to take an active role in the decision making that directly affects them. Thus the school system, or the business, operates most effectively and efficiency when their largest stakeholder can directly influence decision making.

Also, school systems as businesses produce a product, education. and their consumers are the students. IN a business to be successful a producer has to cater to the needs and the desires of their consumers. The consumers of a product know the improvements needed to make a product useful and effective. Thus to make the product reach its maximum potential it would make sense to have the influence of the consumer in the development process of the product. This ultimately makes students a school systems most valuable source of feedback. Not test scores, not demographics, but the active participation of a student or multiple students. If the student members voting rights were to be revoked it would take out the most essential piece in the feedback cycle and development process of education. feel free to use any of that too.

Please sprinkle my thoughts through out multiple testimonies. Feel free to correct any grammatical errors as well :p

Ritterpusch explains:

[BLACKED OUT NAME] called me about an hour ago and then sent this to me .. I'm working with him to use the first and third ideas, as well as some brief others so that I'm not rambling (or sounding like im "hyped up on latte and pixie sticks") :)

Let me know if you need help/ideas or if something in this is confusing.

Poisson responds (the lack of paragraph breaks is in the original and may be a purposeful effort to mimic the student's tone):

The stake holder argument appears in ever [sic] ones testimony, you need to show why that matters. By backing it up with the explanation of demographics and including the best interests of the 22.8%.

The high standard argument can be backed with some other evidence... I have some data about aacps student achieve millennial scholars, stem, college/ap classes, jack adroika and all that. This might do well as a separate argument with its own two minutes.

Do you want me to section it off and kick it over to Nathan? I've kept him on the back burner for exactly this type of last minute surprise?

That way you can focus on fully articulating your position as CRASC president.

**Comment:** This is the only copy of student testimony I was able to get because the testimony was pasted in the email rather than included as an attachment. Ritterpusch seems to feel that her job is to come up with the basic ideas and then have Poisson and others develop a polished draft for her to use. Given the nature of the draft she has submitted, her concluding comment, made without any sense of irony, is remarkable: “Let me know if ... something in this is confusing.”

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails the student government advisor for Meade Senior High School complaining about a student leader who has asked what to do with his permission slip and stating he has already been told 10 times what to do with it:

Tell him to hold onto it. I will collect them he has been told what to do about 10 times. Guess he doesn't read his email

**Comment:** Even with all the blacked out names, there doesn't appear to be an email record of Poisson sending out such an announcement ten times, so that it is probably an exaggeration. But the statement does reflect the intensity with which she is pursuing this grassroots lobbying effort.

**January 28, 2018.** Aimee Poisson signs off on meeting with Superintendent Perkins and her immediate boss, Sarah Pelham, on behalf of SMOB Else Drooff. An email from Drooff to Perkins's scheduler dated January 22 shows up for the first time in this thread:

Hi, this is [BLACKED OUT NAME] and I was wondering if Mrs.Perkins could find a time to meet with me as well as Ms.Poisson and Mrs.Pelham in the next few weeks or so ... I had some thoughts on our current Teen Advisory structure that I shared with them and they encouraged me to talk to Mrs.Perkins about it I just want to make sure I can address the problems I see with the current system before I leave in the summer and before a new superintendent is selected. Let me know of a time that would be convenient for her! Thanks!

Perkins's scheduler gets back to Poisson and Pelham:

Good morning,

Ms. Perkins is scheduled to meet with on Thursday, February 6th and would like you to join them. This meeting will be held in Ms. Perkins office at 1:30 p.m. Else would like to discuss the current structure of the Teen Advisory meetings.

Thanks,

Joan

Poisson responds:

Thank you. I will be there.

**Comment:** Note how the SMOB addresses Ms. Poisson, Mrs. Pelham, and Mrs. Perkins not by their first name and as colleagues—the way the adult Board of Education members would address these individuals, but as superiors from which she is seeking favors.

**January 28, 2014.** AACPS Public Information Officer Bob Mosier emails Aimee Poisson with the *Capital* article on tomorrow's hearing that will be distributed in citizens' mail boxes later that day. Debbie Ritchie, a school board member, is quoted and closely sticks to the AACPS administrators' central talking point: "They don't act like what you'd think a kid would act like."

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails a student leader, who appears to be from another county, with a query: "Has someone shared bullet points with you or vetted your testimony?" There is no reply to this email.

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails all AACPS attendees at tomorrow's hearing. The great majority of the names are blacked out. Once again, the students are told to look professional:

I am sure this message is redundant but ... professional dress is a must! Ties, skirts, shiny shoes. Ladies wear your hair up so you are not tempted to fidget with it. No animal prints, wooly tights/leggings, clubbing shoes, glitter, cartoon ties, clipons, hoodies, neon colors, noisy fabrics, or hipster ironic accessories.

We will have a secure area for you to leave warmer coats and backpacks.

**Comment:** Once again, all these instructions are coming from AACPS administrators, not student leaders.

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails CRASC President Kara Ritterpusch (Ritterpusch's name is blacked out but on another email in the thread it can be found at the bottom of the email).

It's being double checked for grammar and spelling but this is my clean [sic] up version of your testimony. I didn't change any of your points [sic] but I reworked your wording in a few areas. You misused the 22.8% data so review it and double check to see if the interpretation I have included here matches you [sic] use of the data in your testimony. I completely trust you to put together your speech [sic] but I want to hear you run it when we meet in the house building. Get it under 2 minutes and practice for your parents. Try to be a tad more expressive than normal. When addressing our crowd, it's very matter of fact, because you are known as the authority. The committee doesn't know who you are so think about speaking in a way that will make them pay attention.

This is excellent work and I am extremely proud of you.

Ps- [sic] I am wearing a blue top and black skirt. Let's try not to dress alike because that freaks me out!

**Comment:** Note the passive voice: "It's being double checked for grammar and spelling," not "I am double checking it for grammar and spelling." Since grammar and spelling are clearly not

Poisson's strong suit, it is likely that either her boss or someone in the legal counsel's office would review and edit at least some of the testimony, including the talking points template, on her behalf. I was unable to get the attached documents attached to this or to other emails (this one was labelled "K.docx"), which would provide a much better indicator of the nature of AACPS administrator editing of student testimony. Clearly, Poisson has a self-interest in underplaying the extent of her edits in such emails. She has everything to gain by making the students believe it is their testimony.

Ritterpusch replies 72 minutes later:

Here's round two from me.

Outfit wise.. I can't decide IfI want to wear a skirt or a dress. Suggestions? I'll try not to wear black and blue, just for you!

Poisson replies 2 minutes later:

I love your yellow dress. Pencil shirt with a simple top and a cool scarf is young and professional at the same time. Hair up.

**January 28, 2014.** Another student leader emails testimony to Aimee Poisson: "Might be too long or informal so feel free to make a few changes," to which Poisson replies 7.5 hours later: "Got it."

**January 28, 2014.** Another student leader claims not to have received a permission slip and asks if one is really necessary. Aimee Poisson emails back:

Yes you need one and I have sent it in about a dozen emails. here is it again.

**Comment:** Note that whereas Poission previously said she had sent ten email message reminders to the students, now she says the number has increased to twelve. This grassroots lobbying effort is clearly very, very important to her.

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails her counterpart at the Montgomery County Public Schools that the two student leaders who have promised to provide testimony haven't yet submitted it. The subject line of the email reads: "written test NEEDED" with the "NEEDED" in all caps and "test" short for "testimony." The Montgomery County advisor replies: "I haven't seen their testimony, but they are both reliable (I do not approve student testimony- only make suggestions)"

**Comment:** the Montgomery County advisor makes it clear that she doesn't "approve student testimony."

**January 28, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails the representative from the Maryland Association of Student Councils, who has not yet submitted testimony to her:

I can get you signed up to speak but I can't prefile any written testimony, because I don't have anything from you.

As [BLACKED OUT LONG NAME] I assume you know all this but I will run it by you anyway. Only those who are signed up to speak may do so. (I will sign you up in the morning). You get two minutes. Verbal testimony at a senate hearing is always accompanied by written testimony. 25 printed copies of all written work must be submitted to the senate building by noon tomorrow so that it may be distributed among the committee members at the hearing. If you get me something in the next hour, I can manage the copies. After that I can't help you with it.

Your written testimony should be in a letter format and can be much more thorough. You to [sic; she clearly means "your two"] minutes are concise. I have copied you on [BLACKED OUT NAME] letter [sic] so you have an example to go from. I also have the MASC letter head format so don't worry about that unless it gets to be too late for me to run copies for you.

I have vetted the written work for [BLACKED OUT NAME] and help [BLACKED OUT NAME] put together his arguments. You are welcome to run your bullet points or draft documents by me for cleaning and feedback.

**Comment:** Poisson acknowledges that she has "vetted" one student's work and helped another student "put together his arguments." She asserts: "Verbal testimony at a senate hearing is always accompanied by written testimony." But this assertion is patently untrue and as someone who is an expert on lobbying the Maryland General Assembly, she has to know that. Again, Poisson appears to be engaged in developing a variety of pretexts to justify her control of what is presented in testimony. Inventing rules that don't in fact exist in writing is a classic stratagem AACPS administrators use with students and parents to defend commands that they don't want to justify publicly with a reasoned argument that might be viewed as controversial or unjust.

**January 28, 2014.** At 4:00 pm, one day before the hearing and a half hour before AACPS administrators end their work day, Aimee Poisson emails a blacked out name with the message: "Call please. I am drowning in a sea of crap."

**Comment:** The claim: "I am drowning in a sea of crap" is quite different than the upbeat response she has generally been giving the students and that is consistent with her talking points.

**January 28, 2014.** Also at 4:00 pm, Aimee Poisson sends an email to a blacked out name with the subject line "stuff" and multiple attachments but no message.

**Comment:** Why would Poisson send an email with no message but including attached student testimony a moment after sending another email complaining about drowning in a "sea of crap"?

Maybe she is sending a student some edited testimony, or maybe she is sending testimony to someone who helps her with the editing, or maybe there is some other reason?

**January 28, 2014.** At 4:13 pm, Aimee Poisson sends an email to a blacked out name with the sole message: “I am panicking here.”

**January 28, 2014.** At 6:47 pm, Aimee Poisson sends an email to a blacked out cc: and a partially blacked out attachment with no subject line or message. However, the To: line says “Else,” which presumably stands for the AACPS SMOB Else Drooff.

**Comment:** Poisson appears to be sending the SMOB edited and approved testimony for tomorrow, possibly with her comments in the attachment itself rather than the body of the email message.

**January 28, 2014.** Else Drooff appears to email Aimee Poisson: “Here you go! Changed a few things just so it felt a little more like my voice.” Drooff’s name is blacked out as is, inexplicably, the time she sent the email. However, the time of Poisson’s reply, 11:37 pm, is noted. The reply, “Thanks you.” [sic] provides an idea why Drooff might have wanted to make some edits.

**Comment:** Here we have an acknowledgment that Poisson or whoever actually did the editing did more than change the grammar of a student’s testimony. Although all the identifying information was blacked out, I inferred that this email is from SMOB Drooff because the structure of the messaging is the same as the email with Drooff’s name at 6:47 pm earlier the same day.

**January 28, 2014.** A little after midnight a student leader writes to Aimee Poisson and cc’s Sarah Pelham:

Thank you for meeting with me this evening to discuss the content of my written testimony. It is attached. Don't worry about making copies ... I can take care of it You have enough on your plate for tomorrow. I would still really appreciate if you could register me to speak. Any last minute comments about my written testimony would be welcome and appreciated (from you too Ms. Pelham!)

Pelham replies to the student at 8:36 am the following morning and cc’s Poisson: “Good job [BLACKED OUT NAME] Will you be at the BOE this AM?”

**Comment:** This is the first explicit acknowledgment of Pelham’s role in the testimony editing process. Pelham will also be at the meeting at noon on January 29<sup>th</sup> to help Poisson orchestrate the students’ testimony.

**January 29, 2014.** With message importance set at “high,” Aimee Poisson emails Jessica Cuches, AACPS Counsel, the list of the 20 individuals she has signed up to testify. Even though this is public information, the names of 17 of the 20 on the list are blacked out. Even the name

of a former AACPS SMOB is blacked out. Poisson apologizes to Cuches for not having sent her the names earlier: “Sorry I should have gotten this to you earlier.”

**January 30, 2014.** One of Aimee Poisson’s friends who works for AACPS emails her that she “cracked up” with a statement Senator Ed Reilly made in a *Capital* newspaper article. Poisson responds:

This bill is completely moronic. It reduces the voting rights of the smob in a way that allows the "adults" to decide when the kid can vote on an issue. The kids were wonderful yesterday. They blew the opposition away with their candor and maturity.

Poisson’s friend responds with more encouragement and Poisson replies, explaining her political and press strategy and detestation of Senator Ed Reilly:

You know [BLACKED OUT NAME] brought that up. We were silent about our opposition to the bill until yesterday so the press only covered the other perspective on the bill. The state house reporter generally covers the bills from the legislators perspective. I considered emailing Sara Blumberg on it, because she can generally be counted on to stir up some stink but her past representations of students have left me in a place where I cant [sic] trust her.

I was concerned about our public image as we presented our argument so the strategy was to respond as measured and calculated so to reinforce the maturity and sophistication of our student leaders. (I was secretly horrified by the idea of a mob of angry teens having a temper tantrum on the state house steps and I wanted to avoid looking like a PETA protest)

The point came across loud and clear. The kids conducted themselves with superlative responsibility and intelligence. The Arundel delegation will have to take a position on the bill now. If they don't kill it, the committee will have to give a report on it. If they give it a favorable report, it would go the senate floor, but even then it would have to pass both houses so I don't realistically think there is reason to worry. But it certainly does raise questions about the moral compass of our elected leaders and their failure to connect with the under 18 demographic. Ed Reilly claims to have been making a statement about public policy but the only real statement he made was about how he is a condescending jackass with no sense of accountability towards his district.

**Comment:** What Poisson doesn’t mention is the great political sensitivity associated with the grassroots legislative lobbying campaign she and other AACPS administrators engaged in. Using taxpayer resources and the prestige of their offices for grassroots lobbying needed to be done below the public radar in order to be done effectively.

The line that Senator Ed Reilly “is a condescending jackass with no sense of accountability towards his district” is a good illustration why AACPS administrators have a strong incentive either to avoid putting anything controversial in writing or to delete controversial emails in response to a Public Information Act request (at worst, there is no penalty for doing so; at best, rewards for acting in AACPS’s institutional self-interest).

**February 11, 2014.** Aimee Poisson emails CRASC executive staff: “I’m sure you all know by now, SB194 only received 1 vote from the Anne Arundel senate delegation, so the bill will not move forward.... We will use this as our demonstration of effective lobbying techniques.”

**Comment:** What is the purpose of the SMOB and CRASC: to represent the students’ interest or the AACPS staff’s interest? AACPS administrators don’t explain the line of separation between their lobbying agenda and that of CRASC. Should AACPS administrators have a veto on the CRASC lobbying agenda? Demonstrating “effective lobbying techniques” leaves unanswered the crucial question for CRASC: on whose behalf are those techniques to be employed?

### ***October 6, 2014 Email From J.H. Snider To AACPS Public Information Office***

**From:** J.H. Snider  
**Sent:** Monday, October 06, 2014 12:05 PM  
**To:** Mosier, Bob  
**Subject:** RE: Public Information Act Request

Dear Mr. Mosier:

In my August 7, 2014 Public Information Act request, I requested e-mail correspondence for Aimee Poisson for two time periods:

- 1) All emails for Aimee L. Poisson from February 13, 2012 to February 20, 2012
- 2) All emails for Aimee L. Poisson from January 13, 2014 to February 21, 2014

On August 15, 2014, you wrote: “With regard to this request, AACPS estimates it will take approximately four hours to research and compile email documents from the computer of Aimee Poisson for the date ranges you specify.” You then go on to request a deposit of \$254.98 to conduct the search, with a balance of \$85.00 to be paid after the search was complete, for a total of \$339.98. In reply, I sent you a check for \$254.98 postmarked on August 16, 2014.

On September 5, 2014, you said the documents had been searched and that I would have to pay the \$85.00 to receive them. There was no mention that Aimee Poisson had deleted the emails from February 13, 2012 to February 20, 2012 and that this part of my request could thus not be fulfilled. You wrote: “As provided in the estimate emailed to you on August 14, 2014 [sic], the

research and compilation of documents from the computer of Aimee Poisson for the date ranges you specified took four hours....” In reply, I sent you a check for \$85.00 to cover the balance.

In your September 9, 2014 reply acknowledging my payment of the balance, you claimed to provide me with all the requested documents. Your wording was: “This completes your request.” Thank you again for responding to me within the 30 days specified by law.

### **February 13, 2012 to February 20, 2012 Emails**

But you didn’t send me any emails related to the request I made for emails between the dates of February 13, 2012 and February 20, 2012. Nor was there any acknowledgment between August 7, 2014 and the receipt of my payments that A) Aimee Poisson had deleted those emails for that period, and B), if so, Aimee Poisson’s physical files and other email repositories used for AACPS correspondence had been searched for the relevant missing emails. This is akin to a customer paying for a Tesla Motors Model S car (they cost about \$100,000) and receiving shipment of a toy version of that car. It’s breathtaking that you would attempt to get away with playing such a game, but we both know that Maryland politics and its Public Information Act richly reward such behavior.

Please fulfill the Public Information Act request that I actually submitted to AACPS. If Ms. Poisson deleted the relevant emails (I know that she sent and received many emails between February 13, 2012 and February 20, 2012), please say so. According to Ms. Poisson’s emails from 2014, she uses four computers for AACPS email correspondence, including a home computer, work computer, iPad, and Verizon smartphone. Please confirm with Ms. Poisson that she deleted the relevant email archival file from all four of her computers and that she has kept no physical copies of the relevant emails. Unless Ms. Poisson confirms that she has not deleted such files, there is no point in searching because she could easily delete or transfer them at any point in time and would face no penalty from AACPS for doing so. Indeed, I’d expect you and other AACPS officials to applaud her for trustworthy service for deleting sensitive information.

### **January 13, 2014 to February 21, 2014 Emails**

For my Public Information Act request for emails from January 13, 2014 to February 21, 2014, my request was partially fulfilled but included highly material omissions, including no attachments, missing emails, and highly questionable redactions. The reasons for the omissions were not stated, so can only be presumed.

Let me start with the generous premise that you are unfamiliar with the guiding principles behind the Public Information Act.

The Maryland Public Information Act provides that “[a]ll persons are entitled to have access to information about the affairs of government and the official acts of public officials and

employees.” Maryland Code (1984, 2009 Repl. Vol., 2012 Supp.), § 10-612(a) of the State Government Article.

In numerous cases, Maryland courts have reiterated that “the provisions of the Public Information Act reflect the legislative intent that citizens of the State of Maryland be accorded wide-ranging access to public information concerning the operation of their government.” Kirwan v. The Diamondback, supra, 352 Md. at 81, 721 A.2d at 199 (internal quotation marks omitted). See also, e.g., Montgomery County v. Shropshire, 420 Md. 362, 375, 23 A.3d 205, 213 (2011); Ireland v. Shearin, 417 Md. 401, 408, 10 A.3d 754, 758 (2010); University System v. Baltimore Sun, 381 Md. 79, 87-88, 847 A.2d 427, 432 (2004); Fioretti v. Maryland State Board of Dental Examiners, 351 Md. 66, 73, 716 A.2d 258, 262 (1998); A.S. Abell Publishing Co. v. Mezzanote, 297 Md. 26, 32, 464 A.2d 1068, 1071 (1983).

While the Public Information Act makes access to government information generally available to the public, it also shields some government information from disclosure. Over many years, I have repeatedly asked you to explain why you exempt certain information from disclosure. During that period, you have rarely cited the specific exemptions you have used. Merely citing the Public Information Act is inadequate. Once again, you have liberally used exemptions with minimal explanations or incorrectly. Here is the written guidance, [Responding to Requests Under the Maryland Public Information Act](#), from Attorney General Doug Gansler to Public Information Officers:

(ii) If you determine that the records are to be withheld in whole or in part, promptly send the requester a letter explaining why those records are exempt from disclosure, citing legal authority and telling the requester how to seek review of your decision.

On its website under the heading [What is the Public Information Act?](#) the Office of the Attorney General provides similar advice to requesters.

If an agency denies all or part of your request, it must provide you with a written explanation that includes the reason for the denial, the legal authority justifying the denial, and your appeal rights.

### **Exemptions Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act**

Here I’ll focus on the one specific exemption you mentioned: the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#). That law protects the privacy of student education records. But I believe it is at least partially and possibly completely misapplied in this context.

What we have here are students using government resources to lobby the state legislature. Moreover, the goal of the joint lobbying effort by the students and AACPS staff was to argue that students, especially the SMOB and the students who elect the SMOB, should have the same political rights as adults. In making this political argument, the students must accept the adult responsibilities that come with stewardship over public resources. They—and AACPS

staff—cannot have it both ways. The authors of FERPA most certainly did not have in mind that the law would be used as a shield from public accountability when government staff sought to use government resources to engage in a secret grassroots lobbying campaign employing students and parents.

You might take some pleasure in knowing that, according to a [white paper by the Student Press Law Center](#), the AACPS Public Information Office isn't the only government office that misuses FERPA. The Student Press Law Center represents student journalists. Here is an excerpt from its white paper:

The clash between student privacy interests and the public's right to newsworthy information about the workings of schools and colleges can be a frustrating one for journalists at all levels. Many of the arguments raised against disclosure of government records turn out to be based on myths and misunderstandings about what are – and are not – confidential student records.

A 1974 federal law, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (“FERPA”), requires schools to enact and enforce policies to safeguard the confidentiality of students’ “education records.” Virtually every court that has been asked to define “education records” has applied a limited and commonsense understanding of the term, like this definition by a Maryland appeals court:

[FERPA] was not intended to preclude the release of any record simply because the record contained the name of a student. The federal statute was obviously intended to keep private those aspects of a student's educational life that relate to academic matters or status as a student....

The Owasso case is especially significant for those seeking records from student government associations or similar student organizations. Although some student governments have attempted to claim that their correspondence and meeting records are confidential unless every participant executes a FERPA waiver, there is no reason to think this is the case. Records created by students and kept by student organizations are not records of the educational institution, and under Owasso, they should be exempt from FERPA....

When FERPA has been raised as an obstruction to journalists' requests for public records, the courts have overwhelmingly applied a narrow, common-sense reading of FERPA that covers only academic and disciplinary records, or records of that nature, that directly identify students. Nonetheless, many schools and colleges continue operating under the oversimplified shorthand that if a document names or refers to a student, it is a FERPA record, without exception.

Don't misunderstand me: I support 1) student election of the Student Member of the Board (SMOB), 2) a SMOB with full voting rights over the \$1 billion plus AACPS budget and some 10,000 employee, 120+ public schools, and 79,000+ full-time students, and 3) the students' right to lobby the legislature. But the public has a right to understand how the students exercise those

substantial rights, especially when government resources are used in their exercise. FERPA was never intended to undermine that public right.

### **Missing Attachments**

The most notable omission in what you sent me in response to my Public Information Act request was the complete omission of attachments. From my perspective, the attachments were of greater interest than the emails. It is striking that in the fulfillment of my previous similar Public Information Act request for Sarah Pelham's emails, you included attachments as a matter of course (in that case, they were unrelated to the purpose of my request). This time you excluded the attachments without explanation. I am especially interested in any attachment related to the lobbying over SB194. Again, I consider these to be the most important documents in my Public Information Act request.

### **Missing Emails**

There are also obviously missing emails. For example, on January 16, 2014 at 4:32 pm Ms. Poisson wrote to a redacted correspondent: "I am confused and have not slept in a bit... please disregard my previous email. [blackout] we did not assign you anything. I have lost my mind.... Sorry."

But there is no previous email in the record. The email was sent to: and cc'd to multiple blacked out individuals. The email is especially noteworthy because it was sent out one day after Senator Reilly introduced SB194, which was the subject of the grassroots and elite lobbying campaign she helped organize.

Another possible set of missing emails was to Jessica S. Cuches, AACPS Legislative and Policy Counsel, who, along with Sarah Pelham, was part of the Superintendent's Executive Team. Ms. Cuches was the counsel who guided the legislative lobbying strategy implemented by Ms. Pelham and Aimee Poisson. Of course, being a sophisticated lawyer, it is quite possible that Ms. Cuches chose to do most of her communications in a way that wouldn't leave a public record.

Of course, the lack of an email may have been the result of poor procedure rather than an omission. For example, I would imagine that Ms. Poisson would confirm in writing the cost of the bus to transport students to the General Assembly, which presumably came out of her budget. She personally booked the independent bus contractor to take her student minions to and from the General Assembly to lobby on SB194 (students are not allowed to drive to the General Assembly on their own without AACPS supervision). But there is no record of such confirmation in her email. Of course, it's possible that confirmation may have been done via fax or another AACPS office. Similarly, I would imagine that there would be some confirmation in writing of the room at the State House that AACPS reserved for coordinating the lobbying on SB194.

As an aside, similar omissions occurred in the emails provided by Ms. Pelham. This was confirmed by the fact that many of the emails she claimed she didn't have in any of her email files were included in the correspondence to and from her in Ms. Poisson's emails. Indeed, the attachments, such as student testimony, were also cc'd to Ms. Pelham for her approval.

### **Missing Names and Email Addresses**

Another category of notable omissions were the blacked out redactions of names and email addresses. It is, of course, difficult to know what one doesn't know. The fact that Ms. Poisson appears to have often sent grassroots lobbying solicitations and instructions to more than a hundred individuals at a time (e.g., see January 27, 2014 at 4:17 pm) makes it especially difficult. But it is clear that the blacked out redactions include some of the following:

- 1) Else Drooff, the SMOB. I believe that a student school board member who has the same rights and compensation as adult school board members should not be exempt from the Public Information Act when acting in her official capacity.
- 2) Kara Ritterspusch, CRASC President. The CRASC President has substantial control over government resources, including school buses, meeting space, and staff. Under Maryland statute, the President is also one of three individuals to nominate the three candidates for SMOB that student representatives are allowed to vote for. She also should not be exempt from the Public Information Act when acting in her official capacity.
- 3) Christian Hodges, State SMOB and former CRASC Vice President. The State SMOB represents more than 1 million students across the State of Maryland. He has the same voting rights as the adult members of the State Board of Education on all matters except appeals and personnel disputes.
- 4) Other students with a government e-mail address acting in their official capacity. For example, the Montgomery County SMOB uses a Montgomery County Public School Systems email address. Although such SMOBs may have only partial voting rights, they should also be covered under the Public Information Act when acting in their official capacity. Similarly, although the names of individual advisors in other Maryland public school districts appear to be included, they may have been redacted when sent as a group, perhaps because they included email addresses rather than names.
- 5) All government staff, whether they work for the Anne Arundel County Public Schools or not, should not be exempt from disclosure when using a government resource to lobby. The fact that they may have used a personal email address in their lobbying should not exempt them from the Public Information Act.
- 6) Unspecified authority figures for Ms. Poisson. For example, on January 28, 2014 at 3:44 pm, Ms. Poisson forwarded the SMOB's final testimony to some individual whose name is

blacked out. There is no accompanying message. It doesn't appear that she was sending the testimony to the SMOB. My guess is it was being forwarded to one of the AACPS staff members helping edit the student testimony. Sixteen minutes later, at 4:00 pm, she sent the SMOB's testimony to another blacked out individual with the recipient's name blacked out and only "stuff" in the subject line. Also at 4:00 pm, Ms. Poisson responded to some written testimony by sending the following message to a blacked out party: "Call please. I am drowning in a sea of crap." Ms. Poisson is presumably writing to one of the AACPS staff assigned to help her in the editing process. I doubt Ms. Poisson would plead for help this way from the CRASC executive staff, her "bambinos" and "minions." Thirteen minutes later, at 4:13 pm, she responded to another blacked out recipient: "I am panicking here." Again, that sounds like an email sent to a colleague, not one of her students.

Perhaps you are not aware of a 2013 Maryland court ruling concerning the illegality of email address redaction. The case was brought by the *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, and other Maryland area newspapers and was funded by a Knight Foundation Freedom of Information grant. The court ruling received national attention in the open government community and was [summarized](#) by the National Freedom of Information Coalition.

Of course, as I've said, I don't know what I don't know. The Public Information Act presumes that you will act in good faith in responding to my Public Information Act request. In your response, I hope you will act so as to justify the faith the authors of that act placed in you.

Please fulfill my August 7, 2014 Public Information Act request. Today marks the two-month anniversary since I submitted it to you.

Sincerely,

J.H. Snider

## ***Links to Related Articles on eLighthouse.info***

### **Political Activity**

Menu item: [K12 Elections: Adult Board Members](#)

Menu item: [K12 Elections: Student Board Member](#)

Menu item: [K12 Elections: Countywide Citizen Advisory Committee](#)

Snider, J.H., [The Leopold case: bad behavior, vague crimes](#), *Baltimore Sun*, January 29, 2013.

### **Email Policy**

Snider, J.H., [AACPS Superintendent Arlotto's Speech to the PR Association of America \(a satire\)](#), *Anne Arundel Patch*, April 7, 2015. Select Public Information Act correspondence is included as an attachment.

Snider, J.H., [The Clinton email scandal: a double standard?](#), *Baltimore Sun*, April 1, 2015. Select Public Information Act correspondence is included as an attachment.