Brunswick County Board of Commissioners Urged
To Consider Carefully Purchase of School Surveillance Equipment

Members of the Brunswick County Democratic Party (BCDP) urged the Board of Commissioners at its meeting Monday night to carefully review a request from the Brunswick County Board of Education before approving the purchase of a sophisticated school surveillance system costing more than $1 million.

"That's a huge amount to invest on this unproven technology," declared BCDP Chair Shelley Allen. She expressed concerns based on media reports about what the School Board is preparing to spend on new surveillance technology to be placed in the schools.

She also questioned the "level of due diligence" that was involved, given that "research has shown that student safety is <u>not</u> improved by surveillance technology such as cameras and facial recognition software."

"So, I'm asking that this board consider whether spending such a huge amount of money on technology that appears great at feeding on fears and invading students' privacy — vs. protecting children and teachers — is the best use of our <u>education</u> bond funds."

Also speaking during the meeting was Dale Todd, a BCDP member who regularly attends Board of Education meetings and was disappointed with the lack of transparency about this issue. "I've been unable to find any details on the proposal, beyond the $1 million price tag," he reported. "I'm concerned about the purchase, installation, and use of such advanced technologies without any public indication of what problems we're trying to solve, why we think these technologies are appropriate and, most importantly, without any information on the policies to be used to manage the use of technologies in county schools."

Allen is an educator who has spent her career working with public school children. She earned a Ph.D. in reading education from Ohio State University and conducted literacy research at Vanderbilt University. She cited several reputable organizations and studies to support her strong reservations about the Board's pending purchase. She quoted a University of North Carolina School of Law study of K-12 public school surveillance, which she said found evidence of this technology's effectiveness is thin at best.

The study also found that policymakers failed to consider issues of student privacy and influence on child development; the unequal impact on poor, Black and LGBTQ youth; and possible liability for school officials.

Allen also pointed the county commissioners to even more damning comments by Albert Cahn, Executive Director of a legal nonprofit called the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project.

--more—

School Surveillance System 2-2-2

"Facial recognition is biased, broken, and it gets it wrong," Cahn reported. "It's going to put a lot of students in danger, especially students of color. We know that this technology will get it wrong quite a bit, and we also have no evidence to show that it has any public safety benefit whatsoever…"

Further, Cahn warned of mission creep. "Facial recognition could do more than notify officials when potentially dangerous suspects enter schools… it could turn into questionable surveillance of students."

In an interview with WECT News, Brunswick County School Board Chair Steven Barger denied the board planned to use facial recognition software. But, as Allen pointed out, he left the door open for using that technology later.

Finally, Allen pointed the Board to an extensive research report published last October by the ACLU entitled "Digital Dystopia: The Danger in Buying What the EdTech Surveillance Industry is Selling." The report emphasizes that Ed Tech Surveillance companies play on the fears about school safety. "They aggressively promote their products as highly effective interventions to keep students safe," the report noted. "However, there is no independent, unbiased, data-driven evidence that they do so."

In fact, the report continues: "Student surveillance technologies harm all students by: (1) teaching students the wrong lessons about issues like authenticity, risk-taking, and the right to live free from surveillance; (2) undermining their privacy; (3) eroding student trust in teachers, school staff, and administrators; (4) inhibiting students' ability to engage in self-help; and (5) increasing student fear and criminalizing youth."

Allen said BCDP supports generously funding public schools; however, it questions whether spending $1 million on slick but unproven surveillance equipment is in the best educational and safety interests of students, teachers, and staff.

####