



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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January 24, 2023

The Honorable Delegate Carrie Coyner  
Chair, Education - Early Childhood/Innovation Subcommittee  
900 East Main Street  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

**Re: OPPOSE HB 1434, Opposition Letter from American Atheists regarding a dangerous and discriminatory bill pertaining to trans students**

Dear Chairperson Coyner and Members of the Early Childhood/Innovation Subcommittee:

As a Virginia resident, a parent, and volunteer for American Atheists, which has more than 1,700 constituents in Virginia, I write in opposition to HB 1434, a bill that would require teachers to misgender and deadname students. I strongly urge you to reject this harmful bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that all Americans should be equally protected under the law, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious beliefs or lack thereof. No individual should be subjected to discrimination and harassment due to the religious beliefs of others.

HB 1434 would add a provision that governs student records, requiring that changing a student’s name on official records may only be done by a court order. This bill not only creates barriers for students who want to be called by their chosen names at school, but also for parents who support their kids, who would be required to obtain a court order under HB1434. Requiring such from parents hinders their ability to affirm their child and support them fully.

This bill also ties the hands of teachers, who would like to be supportive of their students and create a welcoming classroom for *all* students but are placed in a difficult position and required to out trans children by calling them the names on their records. While student’s given names may be appropriate for official records, there is simply no good reason to restrict how teachers and staff address students, so long as it is done respectfully. To require teachers to misgender and use incorrect pronouns for trans students, which is known to exacerbate gender dysphoria and be psychologically damaging to trans students, is needless cruelty.

In a 2014 survey of trans people, nearly 33% of participants felt very stigmatized when misgendered. Misgendering was also found to result in participants feeling lesser authenticity and lower confidence in their appearance. Deadnaming or using old names for trans people rather than the names they identify with, has similar effects, resulting in depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior. In comparison to their cisgender counterparts, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey showed that 52% of transgender adults who suffered anti-transgender treatment in grades K-12 had attempted suicide at least once by the time they participated in the survey. In contrast, the number of transgender students who did attempt suicide, but did not suffer mistreatment at school dropped by 15%. Furthermore, medical authorities have long established that social transition can be medically necessary and beneficial health care for trans youth. However, if trans youth are not protected from harassment based on gender identity and expression, they are more likely to suffer lifelong negative psychological consequences.

Most Americans believe that there are already explicit non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people across our country. Unfortunately, they are wrong. Until Virginia passed the bipartisan Virginia Values Act in 2020, it was one of just 26 states that did not offer these critical protections in areas such as public education. A 2016 report showed that one in four LGBTQ people experienced discrimination in the past year. Virginia lawmakers, supported by major Virginia employers and advocacy and faith leaders, wisely acted to remedy this injustice by passing the Virginia Values Act, but HB 1434 undermines protections for LGBTQ students.

Being called the right name and pronouns are a critical and important part of belonging in school. All students should feel safe and included, especially for them to learn and thrive. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to reject this unnecessary and harmful legislation that supports discrimination against trans students. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to HB 1434, or similar bills, please contact American Atheists' State Policy Counsel, Brittany Williams, by email at [bwilliams@atheists.org](mailto:bwilliams@atheists.org).

Sincerely,



Matthew DeGrave  
Chair, Virginia Secular Advocacy Team  
American Atheists