



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

February 17, 2022

The Honorable Del. Vanessa Attebeary
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
Maryland House of Delegates
82 Smith Street
Providence, Maryland 02903

Re: OPPOSE MD HB 618, Testimony from American Atheists

Dear Chairperson Attebeary and Members of the House Committee on Ways and Means:

As a Maryland resident, parent, and National Field Director for American Atheists, which has nearly 1,100 constituents in Maryland, I write in opposition to HB 618, which would undermine education in Maryland public schools and needlessly endanger our youth. Under the pretext of a concern for “parents’ rights,” the bill creates a host of draconian new restrictions on teachers and school staff. We 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. Religious liberty is an individual right guaranteed by the First Amendment, and American Atheists opposes efforts to misuse these constitutional protections to undermine the civil rights or religious freedom of others.

Although this bill is framed about protecting parents’ rights, the only rights protected are those of a narrow fringe worried that the school will steal their children’s DNA or biometric data and those paranoid about what clubs their children have joined. And in order to protect these absurd “rights,” this bill would sacrifice the health and safety of other students.

For example, this bill prohibits school health practitioners, such as nurses and counselors, from providing any care without written authorization from a parent — or be subject to criminal penalties and fines. There is no exception for emergencies. Regardless of circumstances, if a student needs medicine for a headache or they break their arm, the school staff are powerless to help.

HB 618 harms LGBTQ students by denying them a place of safety in Maryland schools. It creates a specific parental opt-out for any classes or information about sexuality and requires disclosure of school clubs offered, which can be an important refuge for LGBTQ youth.

Maryland's public schools are meant to be safe and welcoming for all students. Lawmakers should not manufacture "parent's rights" that endanger students or undermine their civil rights. I strongly urge you to reject this unnecessary and harmful bill. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to HB 618, please contact Brett Parker, American Atheists State Policy Manager, at bparker@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Samantha McGuire
National Field Director
American Atheists