

A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO Parental Rights

HELPING THE FAMILIES IN YOUR CARE NAVIGATE WHAT THEIR CHILDREN ENCOUNTER AT SCHOOL

ALLIANCE DEFENDING FREEDOM

A GUIDE FROM THE ADF CHURCH & MINISTRY ALLIANCE



A SHEPHERD'S CALLING

When called to shepherd the flock, most pastors sense a deep responsibility that goes beyond the pulpit. Families, marriages, and children often seek pastoral care and guidance as they pursue a life of discipleship in a fallen world.

As many public school systems increasingly push ideas, agendas, curricula, and policies that contradict God's design, a new set of challenges has emerged. And those challenges have multiple dimensions — pastoral, theological, and sometimes even legal. Families don't know what to look for, what to ask, how to ask it, or where to turn for help.

This guide aims to help pastors as they accompany families navigating the public school system in this moment.

The content in this guide serves as an educational resource and is not intended as, nor a substitute for, legal advice. We encourage you to reach out to an ADF attorney for specific religious liberty questions or situations related to your school.

PARENTS HAVE *Rights*

AFFIRMED BY THE SUPREME COURT FOR OVER 100 YEARS

For more than a century, courts have recognized a basic truth: Parents—not the government—hold the primary responsibility for directing their children's upbringing and education.

That includes decisions about schooling, values, moral and religious instruction, and other sensitive topics related to identity, sexuality, and gender.

For many years, courts gave public schools wide discretion, especially in curriculum decisions. While parents have always had the freedom to choose public, private, or home education, families who chose public school often found themselves left out of the conversation. In some cases, parents were surprised by lessons or policies they were never informed about, which raised real concern for their families. That imbalance is now beginning to shift, putting parents back in the driver's seat of their children's education.



WHAT THE SUPREME COURT CLARIFIED IN *MAHMOUD V. TAYLOR*

In 2025, in a case called *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed an important principle: that parents have a constitutional right to guide their children's religious upbringing—and public schools may not bypass or override parents when classroom materials contradict those beliefs.

In that case, parents challenged a school district that refused to provide notice or allow opt-outs when introducing instructional materials that conflicted with their religious beliefs—specifically "LGBTQ+-inclusive" books that normalize progressive views on sex and gender in grades K-5. The Court concluded that exposing children to such ideological materials without parental notice, or the ability to opt out, burdened parents' constitutional rights because it "substantially interferes" with the religious upbringing of their children.

Parents' decisions about educating their children in accordance with their religious beliefs receive a generous measure of protection under the Constitution.

In practical terms, *Mahmoud* strengthens parents' ability—when religious beliefs are implicated—to ask questions, request notice, seek opt-outs from certain materials, and expect transparency from public schools. Yet parents continue to encounter a lack of transparency in everyday school settings.



WHAT FAMILIES IN YOUR CHURCH *May Be Encountering:*

A parent may not always recognize what they're facing or know that it's something they can respond to. These are three of the most common situations showing up across the country.

1 CURRICULUM INTRODUCED WITHOUT NOTICE

Parents sometimes learn about controversial lessons or books only after their child has already been exposed to them, including material involving sensitive topics like identity, sex, and gender.

2 SOCIAL TRANSITION WITHOUT PARENTAL CONSENT

Some schools facilitate a student's secret social transition by treating them as the opposite sex at school, using a new name and inaccurate pronouns — without parental notification or consent. These schools help students adopt a new "gender identity" while actively concealing this critical information from parents by using a student's given name and correct pronouns with parents, but a different name and wrong-sex pronouns with students and staff.

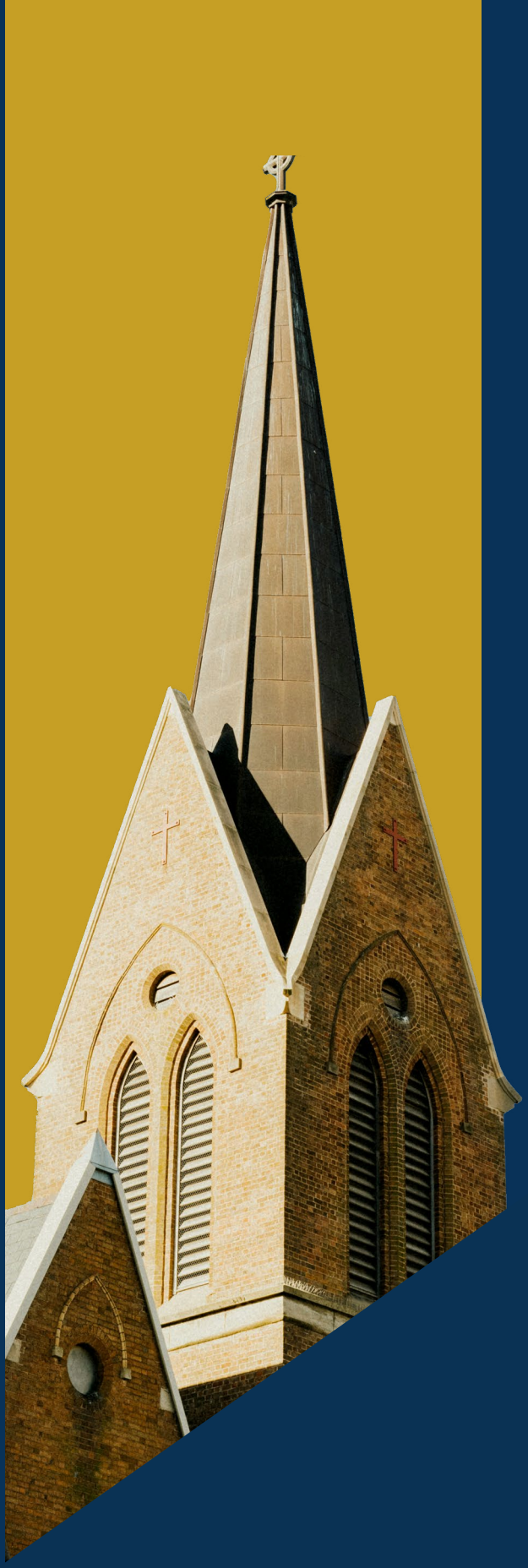
3 SURVEYS THAT GO FURTHER THAN A FAMILY EXPECTS

Some schools administer surveys that ask students about controversial topics like sexuality or gender identity, mental health or self-harm, political or religious beliefs, or other deeply personal matters—sometimes without first obtaining required parental consent. Federal law requires schools to notify parents and obtain consent before asking certain sensitive questions, yet families are not always made aware. These surveys are often digital, making them difficult for parents to review and raising concerns about how responses are stored or shared.

A PASTOR'S PARENTAL RIGHTS *Action Plan*

You don't need special training to help equip the families in your flock. These straightforward steps can help parents stay informed, protect their children, and create a clear paper trail if concerns arise.

The following pages explain how parents can put their rights into action. ››



STEP 1: Request Access to Curriculum

Parents have the legal right to understand what their children are being taught in school. However, the level of transparency and the procedures for reviewing instructional materials can vary depending on state law, school district policies, and the subject matter involved.

Across the country, many states provide parents with notice and opt-out rights for some types of instruction, often limited to health or sex education. Outside of those areas, however, access to curriculum and the ability to opt out of specific lessons or materials can differ widely, and some school districts have adopted policies that make reviewing or opting out of certain content more difficult.

Even so, parents can and should request transparency and ask to review materials used in their child's classroom.

PARENTS MAY REQUEST ACCESS TO MATERIALS USED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S CLASSROOMS, INCLUDING:

- books and readings
- lesson plans and learning activities
- videos and multimedia resources
- surveys and questionnaires
- supplemental or teacher-generated materials introduced during the school year

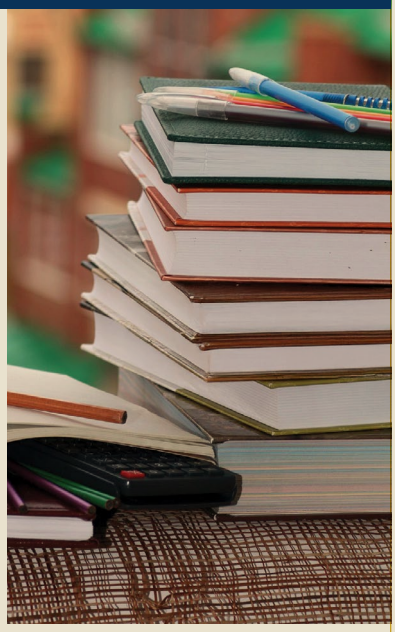
This applies not only to materials listed at the start of the year but also to anything new introduced later on, which matters because a parent who only asks once may miss what comes later.

EQUIP PARENTS

You can encourage parents to submit a written request at the beginning of each school year, or as soon as their child enrolls, asking to review classroom materials.

WHEN THEY MAKE THE REQUEST, SUGGEST THEY:

- **Ask to review all instructional materials, including books, handouts, videos, online resources, assemblies, and teacher-created content.**
- **Understand that "curriculum" includes anything used to teach or influence their child, not just textbooks.**
- **Request ongoing notice and access throughout the school year, since curriculum can change mid-year—especially in districts where formal opt-out options are limited.**



! **WHY THIS MATTERS:** A parent can't make informed decisions about their children's upbringing if they don't know what's being taught, and they shouldn't have to navigate that alone.

STEP 2: Request Advance Notice

A parent can ask for advance notice before their child is exposed to certain topics or materials, especially those involving identity, sexuality, or gender, religion or belief systems, personal values, and mental health.

EQUIP PARENTS

When parents request curriculum access, encourage them to also ask the school to provide advance notice before student surveys are administered or before lessons involving sensitive or controversial topics are taught.



SUGGEST THEY:

- **Submit this request in writing, alongside their curriculum access request.**
- **Ask for the opportunity to review materials ahead of time, not after the fact.**

! **WHY THIS MATTERS:** A parent can't exercise their rights if they're kept in the dark. Notice gives a family time to review the content and decide what's best for their child.

"A classroom environment that is welcoming to all students is something to be commended, but such an environment cannot be achieved through hostility toward the religious beliefs of students and their parents."

— The U.S. Supreme Court on *Mahmoud v. Taylor*

STEP 3: Submit an Opt-Out Request

Parents may request that their child be opted out of specific lessons, activities, or materials that conflict with their family's beliefs or values. Opt-out requests should be:

- Submitted in writing (see sample letter on the last page)
- Specific (and not overly broad)
- Renewed each school year

If an opt-out request is based on religious, moral, ethical, or other beliefs, encourage the parent to state that clearly and specifically.

EQUIP PARENTS

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO SUBMIT A WRITTEN OPT-OUT REQUEST AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH SCHOOL YEAR, NAMING THE MATERIALS OR ACTIVITIES THEIR CHILD SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN, INCLUDING:

- **Objectionable books, lessons, or instructional materials, like those addressing sexuality, gender identity, graphic violence, occult or spiritual themes, or curriculum units covering similar content.**
- **Opt-outs from student surveys or questionnaires, which can be requested the same way. Some surveys ask about sexuality, gender identity, mental health, or personal beliefs, which is why a parent may want to submit a general opt-out covering surveys as well.**

WHEN THEY SUBMIT THE REQUEST, SUGGEST THEY:

- **Clearly identify the applicable academic year (for example, "2026–2027")**
- **Ask that the opt-out be placed in their child's education record**
- **Ask that relevant teachers and administrators be informed**
- **Request notice if new or supplemental materials or surveys are introduced during the school year**



WHY THIS MATTERS: Opt-out requests don't carry over automatically. A family needs to renew the request every year.

+ ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO STATE THEIR REASON CLEARLY

If a request is based on religious, moral, ethical, or scientific beliefs, state that briefly and plainly in writing. You do not need to justify your beliefs, but explaining why certain material conflicts with them can help the school respond appropriately.

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO ADDRESS SOCIAL TRANSITION IN WRITING

A parent may submit a written request stating that their child:

- Should not be socially transitioned at school
- Should be treated consistently with their biological sex
- Requires parental consent for any changes related to name or pronouns

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO PROTECT PRIVACY IN FACILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

A parent may request that their child:

- Not share restrooms or locker rooms with students of the opposite sex
- Not be assigned overnight lodging with students of the opposite sex on school trips

Parents can frame these requests around privacy, dignity, and parental consent.

ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO KEEP DOCUMENTATION

If questions or concerns arise later, written records matter. Encourage a parent to keep copies of relevant communications and responses from the school in case a situation calls for legal help down the road.



WHEN LEGAL HELP *May Be Needed*

In some situations, though, a parent may need to seek legal guidance, particularly if a school:

- Refuses to provide access to curriculum or instructional materials
- Ignores or denies a request for advance notice
- Rejects an opt-out request, with or without explanation
- Withholds information about a child's education or well-being
- Asks staff to conceal information about a student from parents

If a family in your church encounters any of these, free and confidential legal help may be available. Point them to Alliance Defending Freedom at ADFlegal.org/request-legal-help

PREPARING YOUR MINISTRY

Parental rights are one of many questions ministry leaders are navigating right now. The ADF Church & Ministry Alliance exists to help your ministry understand and address a range of legal and pastoral questions impacting your religious mission. Membership gives you ongoing legal resources, direct attorney access when appropriate, and a community of pastors working through similar questions.

Learn more at ADFChurchAlliance.org

THIS SAMPLE LETTER provides an example of what a letter to a school district could look like for any of the topics addressed in this guide. This sample letter does not constitute legal advice or create an attorney-client relationship with the reader.

[Date]

Subject: Opt-Out Request for James Doe

Dear [school district] Superintendent and [school] Principal:

We are the parents of James Doe, who is enrolled in [school] for the 2026-2027 school year.

We recently became aware that [school district] implemented a new comprehensive human sexuality curriculum. A review of the curriculum reveals several issues, including inappropriate content and gender theory throughout.

The curriculum conflicts with our religious beliefs concerning human sexuality and undermines the religious and moral values we wish to instill in our child. With this letter, we exercise our right to opt-out James Doe from this curriculum. See *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 606 U.S. 522, 550 (2025). This request also includes any other LGBTQ instruction or participation, including but not limited to:

- assigned books, readings, lessons, or curriculum units;
- classroom activities or presentations addressing sensitive topics;
- student surveys or questionnaires; and
- compelled name and pronoun usage that conflicts with biological sex.

We also request advance notice of all LGBTQ instruction, including new or supplemental materials or surveys introduced during the school year, so that we may review them in a timely manner. See id.

To ensure compliance with this notice and opt-out request, please place a copy of this letter in James Doe's education records and notify all of James Doe's teachers. Please also confirm that you have received this letter and that you will comply with it by emailing us at doefamily@email.com.

Thank you,

John and Mary Doe



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