



# PARENTS *in control*

## PARENTS' GUIDE TO PROTECTING YOUR CHILD AT SCHOOL

Most parents send their children to school with basic expectations—that schools will teach academics and keep parents informed. Yet across the country, many families are discovering that important decisions about curriculum, surveys, and student policies are being made without their knowledge or consent. In some cases, parents have been surprised by lessons or policies they were never told about, raising real concerns for their families. This guide is designed to help parents understand their rights, what schools should be communicating, and when a school may be crossing a legal line.

## 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—are the primary educators of their children and bear the main responsibility for directing their upbringing.

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, restoring a more appropriate role for parents in 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 books normalizing progressive views on sex and gender in grades K-5. The Court concluded that exposing children to such materials without parental notice or consent burdened parents' constitutional rights.

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 PARENTS *are seeing:*

### 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.

### 2. Social Transition Without Parental Consent

Some schools facilitate a student's social transition by using a different name or pronouns, recognizing a new "gender identity," and withholding this information from parents— sometimes communicating differently with parents than with students and staff.

### 3. Student Surveys That Go Too Far

Some schools administer surveys that ask students about 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.



# *your parental* **ACTION PLAN**

You don't need special training—or permission—to be involved in your child's education. These steps help you stay informed, protect your child, and create a clear paper trail if concerns arise. Here is how to put your rights into action.



## **STEP ONE**

### **ACCESS TO CURRICULUM**

Parents have the legal right to understand what their children are being taught in school, but in some states, those rights are limited and can vary depending on the subject matter and the school district.

At the state level, Washington law provides clear notice and opt-out rights for sex education. However, outside of sex education, curriculum-access and opt-out practices vary widely, and some districts have adopted policies that make opting out of certain materials or lessons difficult or, in some cases, refuse opt-outs altogether—like Seattle Public Schools.

Even so, parents can and should request transparency.

**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 beginning of the year but also to new or supplemental content introduced at any point during the school year.

## **TAKE ACTION**

**Request Curriculum Access at the beginning of each school year (or when your child enrolls), by submitting a written request asking to review classroom materials.**

### **When making your request:**

- Ask to review all instructional materials, including books, handouts, videos, online resources, assemblies, and teacher-created content.
- Remember that “curriculum” includes anything used to teach or influence your 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:** Parents can't make informed decisions if they don't know what's being taught.

## STEP TWO

### ADVANCE NOTICE

**Parents can request advance notice before their child is exposed to certain topics or materials, especially those involving:**

- Sexuality, gender identity, religion or belief systems, personal values, and mental health.

## TAKE ACTION

### Ask for Advance Notice

When requesting curriculum access, also ask the school to provide advance notice before:

- *Student surveys are administered, or lessons involving sensitive or controversial topics are taught.*
- *Submit this request in writing and ask for the opportunity to review materials ahead of time.*

**>WHY THIS MATTERS:** Parents can't exercise their rights if they're kept in the dark.

Notice gives parents time to review content and decide whether their child should participate.

## STEP THREE

### ABILITY TO OPT OUT

**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 form on the last page)
- specific (and not overly broad)
- and renewed each school year.

If an opt-out request is based on religious, moral, ethical, or other beliefs, parents should state that clearly and specifically.

## TAKE ACTION

### Submit Annual Opt-Out Requests

At the beginning of each school year, parents may submit a written opt-out request identifying the materials or activities their child should not participate 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/questionnaires may also be requested.*
- *Some student surveys ask questions related to sexuality, gender identity, mental health, or personal beliefs. For this reason, parents may choose to submit a general opt-out request covering surveys.*

## TAKE ACTION

When submitting an opt-out request:

- *clearly identify the applicable academic year (for example, “2026–2027”)*
- *request that the opt-out be included in the student’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 do not automatically carry over from year to year.*



## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS

### State Your 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.

### Address Social Transition in Writing

Parents 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

### Protect Privacy in Facilities and Activities

Parents 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

These requests can be framed around privacy, safety, dignity, and parental consent.

### Keep Documentation

If questions or concerns arise later, written records matter. Keep copies of relevant communications and responses from the school.



## A NOTE *to parents*

You are not alone. Many parents across the country share concerns about transparency and involvement in their children's education—and are taking thoughtful steps to stay informed.

Parents have a fundamental, constitutionally protected right to raise and educate their children. Exercising that right does not require confrontation. In most cases, calm, clear, and concise communication is the most effective approach when requesting notice, access, or opt-outs.

## WHEN LEGAL HELP *may be needed*

In some situations, parents may wish to seek legal guidance—particularly if a school:

- refuses to provide access to curriculum or instructional materials
- ignores or denies requests for advance notice
- rejects opt-out requests, with or without explanation
- withholds information about a child's education or well-being
- requires staff to conceal information about a student from parents

In some circumstances, free and confidential legal help may be available.

Parents should not have to fight simply to stay informed about their own children.



Navigating legal issues with schools can be challenging. Alliance Defending Freedom is here to help. Parents seeking additional guidance are encouraged to contact us. [ADFLegal.org/request-legal-help/](https://adflegal.org/request-legal-help/)



*\*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.*

September 1, 2025

Subject: Opt-Out Request for James Smith

Dear Seattle Public Schools Superintendent and Loyal Heights Elementary School Principal:

We are the parents of James Smith, who is enrolled in Loyal Heights Elementary School for the 2025-2026 school year.

We recently became aware that Seattle Public Schools compels students to read books that include LGBTQ+ characters, share preferred pronouns, and learn LGBTQ+ history, among other things—in “any grade” and without “specific prior notice.” See <https://bit.ly/4qRxr7s>. The sample “K-5 Gender Book Kit Lessons” on the Seattle Public Schools website (<https://bit.ly/4s5Tl80>) reveal lesson plans “clearly designed to present certain values and beliefs as things to be celebrated and certain contrary values and beliefs as things to be rejected.” *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 606 U.S. 522, 550 (2025).

The LGBTQ+ curriculum conflicts with our religious beliefs concerning marriage and sexuality and undermines the religious and moral values we wish to instill in our child. We exercise our right to opt out James Smith from all LGBTQ+ instruction. *Mahmoud*, 606 U.S. at 569. This request includes but is not limited to:

- assigned books, readings, lessons, or curriculum units;
- classroom activities or presentations; and
- student surveys or questionnaires.

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. *Mahmoud*, 606 U.S. at 550.

To ensure compliance with this notice and opt-out request, please place a copy of this letter in James Smith’s education records and notify all his teachers. Please also confirm that you have received this letter and that you will comply with it by emailing us at [smiths@email.com](mailto:smiths@email.com).

Thank you,

*John and Mary Smith*

John and Mary Smith