

Mr. Warren C. Holland
Accomack County
PO Box 330
Accomac, VA 23301

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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acluva.org

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

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Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Dr. Matthew S. Haas
Albemarle County
401 McIntire Road
Charlottesville, VA 22902

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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Eugene P. Kotulka
Alleghany County
P.O. Drawer 140
Low Moor, VA 24457

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Dr. Lorena Harper
Amelia County
8701 Otterburn Road Suite 101
Amelia, VA 23002

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Robert Arnold
Amherst County
P. O. Box 1257
Amherst, VA 24521

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Annette A. Bennett
Appomattox County
P.O. Box 548
Appomattox, VA 24522

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

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acluva.org



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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Ms. Cintia Johnson
Arlington County
2110 Washington Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22204

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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Student Publications: Schools may review and control the content of school sponsored student publications including student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, on-campus videos, and radio broadcasts. But schools cannot control student publications that are not sponsored or funded by the school, not done as part of a class or school project, or that are done on a student's own time with their own resources. *See, e.g., Burt v. Barker*, 861 F.2d 1149 (9th Cir. 1988); *Fujishima v. Bd. of Ed.*, 160 F.2d 1355 (7th Cir. 1972); *Eisner v. Stanford Bd. of Ed.*, 440 F.2d 803 (2d Cir. 1971).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

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701 E. Franklin Street
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Eric W. Bond
Augusta County
P O Box 960
Verona, VA 24482

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mrs. Sue F. Hirsh
Bath County
PO Box 67
Warm Springs, VA 24484

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Douglas R. Schuch
Bedford County
310 S. Bridge St
P.O. Box 748
Bedford, VA 24523

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

David Scott Meade
Bland County
361 Bears Trail
Bastian, VA 24314

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Lisa Chen
Botetourt County
143 Poor Farm Rd
Fincastle, VA 24090

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Claire G. Gastañaga". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Claire" being more prominent.

Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Keith Perrigan
Bristol
220 Lee Street
Bristol, VA 24201

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Kristy Somerville-Midgett
Brunswick County
1718 Farmer's Field Road
Lawrenceville, VA 23868

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mrs. Melanie L. Hibbitts
Buchanan County
1176 Booth Branch
Grundy, VA 24614

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Daisy M. Hicks
Buckingham County
15595 West James Anderson Rd.
Buckingham, VA 23921

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. John Keeler
Buena Vista
2329 Chestnut Ave. Suite A
Buena Vista, VA 24416

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

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Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Robert Johnson
Campbell County
P.O. Box 99
Rustburg, VA 24588

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Sarah Calveric
Caroline County
16261 Richmond Turnpike
Bowling Green, VA 22427

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org



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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Shirley A. Perry
Carroll County
605-9 Pine St
Hillsville, VA 24343

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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Dr. David W. Gaston
Charles City County
10035 Courthouse Rd
Charles City, VA 23030

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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acluva.org

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Robbie Mason
Charlotte County
PO Box 790
Charlotte Court House, VA 23923

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Rosa S. Atkins
Charlottesville
1562 Dairy Rd
Charlottesville, VA 22903

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Jared A. Cotton
Chesapeake
312 Cedar Rd
Chesapeake, VA 23322

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Mervin B Daugherty
Chesterfield County
P.O. Box 10
Chesterfield, VA 23832

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. See Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. See, e.g., *Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
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RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Chuck Bishop
Clarke County
317 W Main St Ste A
Berryville, VA 22611

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Virginia

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acluva.org

Mr. Dashan Turner
Colonial Beach
16 N. Irving Ave
Colonial Beach, VA 22443

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. William D. Sroufe
Colonial Heights
512 Boulevard
Colonial Heights, VA 23834

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Melinda D. Snead-Johnson
Covington
340 E Walnut St
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Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Ms. Jeanette Day Warwick
Craig County
PO Box 245
New Castle, VA 24127

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Anthony S. Brads
Culpeper County
450 Radio Lane
Culpeper, VA 22701

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Amy Griffin
Cumberland County
PO Box 170
Cumberland, VA 23040

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Stanley B. Jones
Danville
PO Box 9600
Danville, VA 24543

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mrs. Haydee Robinson
Dickenson County
P.O. Box 1127
Clintwood, VA 24228

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Kari Weston
Dinwiddie County
P.O. Box 7
Dinwiddie, VA 23841

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Kim Evans
Emporia
105 Ruffin Street
Emporia, VA 23847

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Harry Thomas III
Essex County
P.O. Box 756
Tappahannock, VA 22560

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Dr. Phyllis Pajardo
Fairfax
10455 Armstrong St.
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Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Scott S. Brabrand
Fairfax County
Gatehouse Adm Ctr
8115 Gatehouse Rd
Falls Church, VA 22042

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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(804) 644-8022
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Peter Noonan
Falls Church
800 W Broad St Suite 203
Falls Church, VA 22046

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. David Jeck
Fauquier County
320 Hospital Drive
Suite 40
Warrenton, VA 20186

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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acluva.org

Dr. John Wheeler
Floyd County
140 Harris Hart Rd NE
Floyd, VA 24091

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Chuck Winkler
Fluvanna County
14455 James Madison Highway
Palmyra, VA 22963

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. See Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. See, e.g., *Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
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701 E. Franklin Street
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AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Tamara Sterling
Franklin
207 W Second Ave
Franklin, VA 23851

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

Dr. W. Mark Church
Franklin County
25 Bernard Road
Rocky Mount, VA 24151

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. David T. Sovine
Frederick County
P O Box 3508
Winchester, VA 22604

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Marceline Catlett
Fredericksburg
210 Ferdinand Street
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mr. William H. Sturgill
Galax
223 Long St
Galax, VA 24333

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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(804) 644-8022
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Terry E. Arbogast II
Giles County
151 School Rd
Pearisburg, VA 24134

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Walter Clemons
Gloucester County
6099 T.C. Walker Road
Gloucester, VA 23061

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Jeremy J. Raley
Goochland County
PO Box 169
Goochland, VA 23063

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mr. Kelly Wilmore
Grayson County
PO Box 888
Independence, VA 24348

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Andrea Whitmarsh
Greene County
P.O. Box 1140
Stanardsville, VA 22973

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Suite 1412
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Dr. Kim F. Evans
Greensville County
105 Ruffin Street
Emporia, VA 23847

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Mark Y. Lineburg
Halifax County
PO Box 1849
Halifax, VA 24558

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Dr. Jeffery O. Smith
Hampton
1 Franklin Street
Hampton, VA 23669

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Michael Gill
Hanover County
200 Berkley St
Ashland, VA 23005

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



701 E. Franklin Street
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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Suite 1412
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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acluva.org

Mr. Michael Richards
Harrisonburg
One Court Square
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Amy E Cashwell
Henrico County
3820 Nine Mile Rd.
Henrico, VA 23223

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mrs. Sandy C. Strayer
Henry County
PO Box 8958
Collinsville, VA 24078

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Thomas Schott
Highland County
P.O. Box 250
Monterey, VA 24465

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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acluva.org

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
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RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Melody D. Hackney
Hopewell
103 N. 12th Avenue
Hopewell, VA 23860

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. James Thornton
Isle of Wight County
820 West Main Street
Smithfield, VA 23430

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Olwen Herron
James City County
PO Box 8783
Williamsburg, VA 23187

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Robert B. Benson
King George County
P.O. Box 1239
King George, VA 22485

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. David O White
King William County
PO Box 185
King William, VA 23086

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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CENSORSHIP

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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701 E. Franklin Street
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Carol B. Carter
King and Queen County
P.O. Box 97
242 Allens Circle Rt 681
King And Queen CH, VA 23085

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mr. Dan Russell
Lancaster County
P.O. Box 2000
Kilmarnock, VA 22482

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Brian T Austin
Lee County
155 Vo Tech Drive
Jonesville, VA 24263

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mrs. Rebecca Walters
Lexington
300 Diamond St
Lexington, VA 24450

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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701 E. Franklin Street
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Eric Williams
Loudoun County
21000 Education Court
Ashburn, VA 20148

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Very truly yours,



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

Mr. Doug Straley
Louisa County
953 Davis Hwy
Mineral, VA 23117

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Charles M. Berkley Jr.
Lunenburg County
P. O. Box 710
Kenbridge, VA 23944

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Crystal Edwards
Lynchburg
P. O. Box 2497
Lynchburg, VA 24505

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Ms. Anna Ruth Graham
Madison County
60 School Board Court
Madison, VA 22727

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Richmond VA 23219
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Kevin Newman
Manassas
P.O. Box 520
Manassas, VA 20110

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. C. Bruce McDade
Manassas Park
One Park Center Ct Ste A
Manassas Park, VA 20111

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Zebedee Talley
Martinsville
PO Box 5548
Martinsville, VA 24115

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Mrs. Nancy B. Welch
Mathews County
PO Box 369
Mathews, VA 23109

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Paul C Nichols
Mecklenburg County
P.O. Box 190
Boydton, VA 23917

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Peter M. Gretz
Middlesex County
P.O. Box 205
Saluda, VA 23149

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Mark Mear
Montgomery County
750 Imperial St.
Christiansburg, VA 24073

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



701 E. Franklin Street
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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

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RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Martha Eagle
Nelson County
PO Box 276
Lovingston, VA 22949

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Brian Nichols
New Kent County
PO Box 110
New Kent, VA 23124

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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acluva.org

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AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. George Parker III
Newport News
12465 Warwick Blvd
Newport News, VA 23606

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Sharon Byrdsong
Norfolk
PO Box 1357
Norfolk, VA 23501

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Charles Eddie Lawrence
Northampton County
7207 Young St
Machipongo, VA 23405

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Holly Wargo
Northumberland County
2172 Northumberland Hwy
Lottsburg, VA 22511

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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acluva.org

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Gina Wohlford
Norton
P. O. Box 498
Norton, VA 24273

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Dr. Tameshia Grimes
Nottoway County
P.O. Box 47
Nottoway, VA 23955

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Cecil Snead
Orange County
200 Dailey Drive
Orange, VA 22960

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Virginia

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Suite 1412
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Dr. Wendy Gonzalez
Page County
735 W Main St
Luray, VA 22835

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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David Martin
Patrick County
P.O. Box 346
Stuart, VA 24171

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.



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Suite 1412
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Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Claire G. Gastañaga". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Maria Pitre-Martin
Petersburg
255 South Boulevard East
Petersburg, VA 23805

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
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acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Mark R. Jones
Pittsylvania County
P. O. Box 232
Chatham, VA 24531

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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Student Publications: Schools may review and control the content of school sponsored student publications including student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, on-campus videos, and radio broadcasts. But schools cannot control student publications that are not sponsored or funded by the school, not done as part of a class or school project, or that are done on a student's own time with their own resources. *See, e.g., Burt v. Barker*, 861 F.2d 1149 (9th Cir. 1988); *Fujishima v. Bd. of Ed.*, 160 F.2d 1355 (7th Cir. 1972); *Eisner v. Stanford Bd. of Ed.*, 440 F.2d 803 (2d Cir. 1971).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Jennifer B. Parish
Poquoson
500 City Hall Ave
Room 219
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RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Student Publications: Schools may review and control the content of school sponsored student publications including student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, on-campus videos, and radio broadcasts. But schools cannot control student publications that are not sponsored or funded by the school, not done as part of a class or school project, or that are done on a student's own time with their own resources. *See, e.g., Burt v. Barker*, 861 F.2d 1149 (9th Cir. 1988); *Fujishima v. Bd. of Ed.*, 160 F.2d 1355 (7th Cir. 1972); *Eisner v. Stanford Bd. of Ed.*, 440 F.2d 803 (2d Cir. 1971).

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Elie Bracy
Portsmouth
PO Box 998
Portsmouth, VA 23705

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Eric L Jones
Powhatan County
2320 Skaggs Rd
Powhatan, VA 23139

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.



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Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Claire G. Gastañaga". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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Dr. Barbara A Johnson
Prince Edward County
35 Eagle Drive
Farmville, VA 23901

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Lisa Pennycuff
Prince George County
PO Box 400
Prince George, VA 23875

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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701 E. Franklin Street
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acluva.org

DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
FOUNDATION

Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Steven L. Walts
Prince William County
P. O. Box 389
Manassas, VA 20108

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

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Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

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701 E. Franklin Street
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Kevin Siers
Pulaski County
202 N Washington Ave
Pulaski, VA 24301

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Suite 1412
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. Robert Graham
Radford
1612 Wadworth St.
Radford, VA 24141

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Shannon Grimsley
Rappahannock County
6 Schoolhouse Road
Washington, VA 22747

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Jason Kamras
Richmond
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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. James Gregory Smith
Richmond County
PO Box 1507
Warsaw, VA 22572

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Rita D. Bishop
Roanoke
P O Box 13145
Roanoke, VA 24031

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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Dr. Ken Nicely
Roanoke County
5937 Cove Rd NW
Roanoke, VA 24019

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Phillip J. Thompson
Rockbridge County
2893 Collierstown Road
Lexington, VA 24450

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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(804) 644-8022
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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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acluva.org

Dr. Oskar Scheikl
Rockingham County
100 Mount Clinton Pike
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Greg Brown
Russell County
P. O. Box 8
Lebanon, VA 24266

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. H. Alan Seibert
Salem
510 South College Ave
Salem, VA 24153

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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Mr. John Ferguson
Scott County
340 E Jackson St
Gate City, VA 24251

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS* (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Mark Johnston
Shenandoah County
600 N Main St Suite #200
Woodstock, VA 22664

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Dennis G Carter
Smyth County
121 Bagley Cir Ste 300
Marion, VA 24354

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Gwendolyn Page Shannon
Southampton County
21308 Plank Road
Courtland, VA 23837

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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Dr. Stephen Scott Baker
Spotsylvania County
8020 River Stone Drive
Fredericksburg, VA 22407

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Scott R. Kizner
Stafford County
31 Stafford Avenue
Stafford, VA 22554

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Garrett M. Smith
Staunton
116 W. Beverley Street
Staunton, VA 24401

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Deran R. Whitney
Suffolk
PO Box 1549
Suffolk, VA 23439

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Michael E Thornton
Surry County
P. O. Box 317
Surry, VA 23883

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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Dr. Arthur L. Jarrett Jr.
Sussex County
21302 Sussex Drive
Stony Creek, VA 23882

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Christopher Stacy
Tazewell County
506 Jeffersonville Street
Tazewell, VA 24651

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

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Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Aaron C. Spence
Virginia Beach
PO Box 6038
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Mr. L. Gregory Drescher
Warren County
210 North Commerce Avenue
Front Royal, VA 22630

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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acluva.org

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Brian C. Ratliff
Washington County
812 Thompson Dr
Abingdon, VA 24210

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



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School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Jeffrey D. Cassell
Waynesboro
301 Pine Ave
Waynesboro, VA 22980

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
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(804) 644-8022
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acluva.org



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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

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Virginia

701 E. Franklin Street
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Mrs. Laura K. Abel
West Point
PO Box T
West Point, VA 23181

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Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
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Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Michael D. Perry
Westmoreland County
141 Opal Lane
Montross, VA 22520

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Olwen Herron
Williamsburg-James City County
PO Box 8783
Williamsburg, VA 23187

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Richmond VA 23219
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Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Jason Van Heukelum
Winchester
12 N Washington St
Winchester, VA 22601

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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(804) 644-8022
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It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
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Dr. Gregory Clark Mullins
Wise County
628 Lake Street NE
Wise, VA 24293

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

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Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

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Richmond VA 23219
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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
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Dr. Scott L. Jefferies
Wythe County
1570 W Reservoir St
Wytheville, VA 24382

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.

Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,



Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director



701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.



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701 E. Franklin Street
Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org

Dr. Victor D. Shandor
York County
302 Dare Rd
Yorktown, VA 23692

RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
Richmond VA 23219
acluva.org



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STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student's religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

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RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ("LGBTQ") students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to "out" students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX, 20 U.S.C. § 1681* (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).



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Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).



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DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.,* Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.



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RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access, including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.



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Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Claire G. Gastañaga". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

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Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part



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Suite 1412
(804) 644-8022
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of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access,

including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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RE: Students' Rights Reminder for the 2019-2020 Academic Year

Dear Superintendent,

As our communities prepare for the new academic year and students head back to school, it is important to be aware of the key issues affecting Virginia's students and their rights. Being aware of students' rights under state and federal law can help school officials avoid any potential legal complications and contribute to a positive learning environment that will allow each student to thrive.



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Federal and state laws afford children enrolled in school protection from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or disability. Schools are responsible for ensuring these rights are protected and for promoting a safe school atmosphere. Additionally, schools are responsible for ensuring that students' right to free speech is respected and that the freedom to practice their religion—or no religion at all—is upheld.

Summarized below you will find information regarding: student speech rights; the Pledge of Allegiance; censorship; religious beliefs and accommodations; the rights of students who identify as LGBTQ; discipline and arrests; the rights of students with disabilities; the rights of students who are immigrants; and the rights of students who are pregnant.

We hope this information will help your school district understand the rights of students in schools and guide you in taking actions that ensure student rights are protected in a safe and supportive environment. Please do not hesitate to contact the ACLU of Virginia if you have any questions about these issues or if we can be of any assistance to you in evaluating and formulating school policy on any of these matters. We can be reached at (804) 644-8022 or acluva@acluva.org.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Claire G. Gastañaga". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Claire G. Gastañaga
Executive Director

STUDENT SPEECH RIGHTS

The First Amendment ensures that students cannot be punished for exercising free speech rights, even if administrators do not approve of their message. In the landmark Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School*



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District, the ACLU successfully challenged a school district's decision to suspend three students for wearing armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court declared that students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Id.* at 506. Over the years, the ACLU has also successfully defended the right of students to wear an anti-abortion armband, a pro-LGBTQ t-shirt, and shirts critical of political figures. Schools may not discipline students for expressing an idea or political viewpoint in class or during school activities, as long as it does not cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

It is true that the constitutional rights of students in public school are not the same as those of adults exercising First Amendment rights on public streets. Students' speech rights may be limited by reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions because of the unique characteristics of the school environment. A school may limit student speech, for example, through reasonable school-wide policies against cyberbullying. Additionally, schools may prohibit vulgar or offensive speech that is inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education." *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 685-86 (1986).

School officials should take care, however, not to define peaceful assembly as behavior that causes a substantial disruption to school activities. If students engage in a walkout, school officials may choose to discipline students for missing class but may not engage in harsher punishment because of the message or political nature of the action. School officials must not draw distinctions based on the content of a student's speech or expressive activity in imposing discipline.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Schools cannot punish students for refusing to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. *W.Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943); *Sherman v. Comm. Consol. Sch. Dist. 21*, 980 F.2d 437 (7th Cir. 1992). School officials also cannot force students to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance or leave the room if a student refuses to recite the Pledge. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-202(C) ("[N]o student shall be compelled to recite the Pledge if he, his parent or legal guardian objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds to his participating in this exercise.")

CENSORSHIP

Books: Banning books, removing books and materials from a classroom or library, or otherwise making it difficult for students to read a broad array of literature limits intellectual freedom. Making books and ideas unavailable based on their content or viewpoint or taking books out of schools because they are controversial, unpopular, or offensive, may violate the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). Courts view school libraries as the main place where students exercise their freedom "to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." *Id.* at 868.

Student Publications: Schools may review and control the content of school sponsored student publications including student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, on-campus videos, and radio broadcasts. But schools cannot control student publications that are not sponsored or funded by the school, not done as part of a class or school project, or that are done on a student's own time with their own



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resources. *See, e.g., Burt v. Barker*, 861 F.2d 1149 (9th Cir. 1988); *Fujishima v. Bd. of Ed.*, 160 F.2d 1355 (7th Cir. 1972); *Eisner v. Stanford Bd. of Ed.*, 440 F.2d 803 (2d Cir. 1971).

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Free Exercise Clause: Under the First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause, students have the right to worship as they see fit, with only limited restrictions. This means that while at school, students are free to practice their religion or nonreligion and to express themselves religiously without interference by school officials. Students may, for example, wear religious attire or clothing with religious messaging to school; post religious messages or images on their lockers; or bring religious materials, including religious texts or objects, to school. School officials may not, for instance, require students to remove their hijab, yarmulke, or other head covering, as it substantially burdens the practice of the student’s religion. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203.1 et seq.*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

Establishment Clause: Under the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, school officials cannot favor one religion over another or favor religion over nonbelief. In practice, this means that school officials and teachers cannot conduct prayer or bible-reading sessions, organize or participate in student-led prayer, or hold a prayer at graduation or sporting events, even when participation is voluntary. *See, e.g., Abington Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962); *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 308 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992). Teachers cannot lead students in devotional activities or encourage student participation in religious activity before or after school, during class, or at school-sponsored activities. In fact, in the public-school context, the Supreme Court has invalidated almost every instance of school- or teacher-sponsored religious expression. Under Virginia law, school boards are permitted to establish a daily observance of one minute of silence, but the school board must be careful to ensure that its policy has secular justifications and is not merely a pretense to encourage prayer. *See, e.g., Va. Code § 22.1-203*; VIRGINIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995).

RIGHTS OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

Cultivating a Safe Environment: Bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (“LGBTQ”) students has been documented as pervasive at many schools and is all too often ignored, or even encouraged, by school officials. LGBTQ students have a right to live their authentic lives and express themselves at school. Students have a right to be out of the closet at school, and conversely, public schools are not allowed to “out” students publicly. School officials and administrators must ensure they are creating a safe learning environment and protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and harassment. *See, e.g., Title IX*, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (schools may be liable if they act with deliberate indifference in failing to protect students from severe harassment on the basis of sex).

Restrooms & Locker Rooms: Transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom facilities consistent with their gender identity. Schools cannot create policies that require transgender students to use restrooms or locker rooms that do not correspond with their gender identity, and schools may not create policies that



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require transgender students to use single-user facilities. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019).

Dress Code: School officials cannot force students to wear clothing inconsistent with their gender identity. Public schools may have dress codes, but dress codes cannot treat students differently based on their gender, force students to conform to sex stereotypes, or censor particular viewpoints. Schools cannot enact dress codes based on the stereotype that only girls can wear some types of clothes and only boys wear other types of clothes. *See, e.g., U.S. v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 533 (1996) (government actors must not treat male and female students differently because of “overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females.”). Schools may, for example, require that skirts be a certain length; however, they cannot require that some students wear skirts and prohibit others from doing so based on the student’s sex or gender expression. This also applies to pants, ties, or other clothing associated with traditional gender roles. And it applies to attire requirements for homecoming, prom, graduation, and other special school events.

Discipline: The intimate relationships of LGBTQ students must be treated with equal dignity as those of heterosexual students. Policies that prohibit same-sex couples or dates from attending prom, homecoming, or other dance functions violates students’ rights under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights of the Virginia Constitution. LGBTQ students should not be punished more severely than heterosexual students for similar behavior, including for displays of affection.

LGBTQ Student Organizations: Students interested in forming a student organization, typically called a gay-straight alliance (“GSA”), are to be treated the same as students forming any other noncurricular organization or club. *See, e.g., 20 U.S.C. § 4071(a)* (if a school allows any noncurricular student group to meet, it cannot deny other groups the same access based on the content of their interest); *Gay All. of Students v. Matthews*, 544 F.2d 162 (4th Cir. 1976).

Gender Markers, Pronouns, and Student Records: Students should be addressed using their preferred names and pronouns. Refusing to do so, or refusing to update the gender markers on a student’s records when provided with appropriate documentation, may be considered a form of sex-based discrimination under federal law. *See Grimm v. Gloucester County Sch. Bd.*, Civil No. 4:15-cv-52, 2019 U.S. Dist. Lexis 138246 (E.D. Va. Aug. 9, 2019). Likewise, a student’s right to privacy includes a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity. It is against the law for school officials to disclose or compel students to disclose this information, even if the student appears open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. *See C.N. v. Wolf*, 410 F. Supp. 2d 894, 903 (C.D. Cal. 2005).

DISCIPLINE AND ARRESTS

Generally: School discipline policies and practices should be fair and equitable and should prioritize prevention and intervention rather than harsh punishments like suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement. The goal of discipline should



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be to teach appropriate behaviors and minimize the time students spend out of class. In Spring 2015, the Center for Public Integrity released a study finding that Virginia led the country in schools referring students to law enforcement, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Additional studies conducted by the Virginia Department of Education found that African American students and students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in both suspensions and referrals to law enforcement throughout Virginia schools. These disparities open up school districts to potential legal challenges for race and disability discrimination under federal civil rights laws. *See, e.g.*, Complaint against Richmond Public Schools, available at <https://acluva.org/en/cases/equal-treatment-richmond-public-school-students>. In order to avoid potential legal problems, and to provide a more equitable school environment, school officials should reevaluate and revise their current discipline policies and practices to create a more positive and preventative approach to student conduct. The Virginia Board of Education has provided a blueprint for schools to use in revising their outdated practices – the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

Due Process: The U.S. Constitution requires that students receive due process before disciplinary measures are imposed. This means that school officials must follow certain procedures before they can suspend or expel students from school. Students are generally entitled to receive notice prior to any suspension or expulsion. The notice must include the facts concerning the suspension or expulsion, and the basis for any accusations. The notice must also provide students an opportunity to explain their side. *See, e.g., Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). For Virginia’s specific procedural requirements, see Va. Code § 22.1-276.01 *et seq.*

Corporal Punishment: Corporal or physical punishment of students is strictly prohibited by Virginia law. *See* Va. Code § 22.1-279.1.

School Resource Officers: School Resource Officers (“SROs”) can protect students from outside danger, but often punish minor behaviors through ticketing and arrests. Law enforcement intervention should typically be a last resort for minor violations best handled by schools as discipline issues. For additional resources on how to limit disproportionate school-based arrests or referrals to law enforcement, visit the Model Guidance for Positive, Preventative Code of Student Conduct Policy and Alternatives to Suspension, available at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/index.shtml.

RIGHTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are provided legal protections under several federal laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“IDEA”) requires that public schools provide eligible students with disabilities a “free, appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. *See* 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* As part



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of the IDEA, schools must affirmatively locate, identify, and evaluate children in their district for special education and related services, a process known as “child find.” Parents may also request an evaluation at any time in writing or by speaking to a teacher or administrator, and the school district must respond to the parent’s request. Schools must educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting possible, with an emphasis on inclusion and integration in the regular education classroom where feasible. Additionally, students receiving special education services under the IDEA, as well as students suspected of being eligible to receive services, are entitled to certain protections and safeguards in the school discipline process. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 300.530 *et seq.*

Students with disabilities are also provided with protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 (“Section 504”) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities. This means that schools are prohibited by federal law from denying students with disabilities equal access to academic courses, field trips, extracurricular activities, school technology, and health services. School officials also have a duty to ensure that students with disabilities are not being discriminated against by being denied necessary accommodations. Restricting access to educational activities and opportunities, ignoring harassment and bullying, and failing to train staff on compliance with these laws is also prohibited under Section 504 and the ADA. *See also* Va. Code § 22.1-213 *et seq.*

RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Schools cannot discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin. This includes discriminating against students on the basis of their immigration status. Undocumented students have a right to a free public education in your school district regardless of their immigration status, and schools cannot deny students of this right. *See, e.g., Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). Likewise, schools are not permitted to deny enrollment to a student based on their undocumented status; treat a student differently to determine residency; make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status; require social security numbers from parents or students for purposes of enrollment; or engage in any other practices which may chill the right of access to school. Schools cannot turn away students with limited English proficiency; they must be provided with language instruction. *See, e.g., Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

School officials should not allow immigration enforcement actions on school grounds without a judicial warrant based on probable cause that a criminal violation of the immigration laws has occurred. Schools should not call immigration authorities on students or consent to any immigration enforcement on school grounds without a criminal warrant. There is no state law requiring any state or local official to contact immigration officials nor any state or federal law prohibiting adoption of a policy that protects students and teachers from immigration action in the absence of a judicial criminal warrant.

RIGHTS OF PREGNANT STUDENTS

Schools are prohibited from excluding pregnant students and students with children under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This means that schools must also ensure that pregnant students or students with children have access to educational instruction, school activities, and reasonable accommodations, to the same extent that students with temporary medical conditions are given access,

including the ability to make up missed classwork and learn in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Schools are also not allowed to punish students who choose to terminate a pregnancy or to reveal a student's private medical information.



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