



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

February 19, 2025

The Honorable Sen. Floyd Prozanski
Chair, Senate Judiciary Committee
900 Court St. NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SUPPORT SB 548, Ending Child Marriage

Dear Chairperson Prozanski and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,000 constituents in Oregon, supports a bill to protect young people by ending child marriage. This bill would protect children from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all too frequently across the country. We urge you to support this necessary legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage, especially due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Currently, Oregon allows children as young as seventeen to marry with parental consent. Appallingly, there are no guardrails in place to protect children from forced marriage so long as consent is given – a dangerous loophole inviting abuse and endangering young people in Oregon. Over 3,500 children were married in Oregon between 2000 and 2018, with more than 1,200 marriages in which the age difference between the child and their spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape.¹ This means the current loopholes in state law have allowed criminal conduct against children in Oregon. These loopholes must be closed immediately to prevent further harm.

The harm caused by child marriage cannot be understated. Young people who marry before the age of eighteen are significantly more likely to experience disastrous health, education, and economic outcomes and have a heightened risk of experiencing violence. They have a 70- to 80-percent

¹ *Child Marriage in Oregon. Unchained at Last.* (2025). Available at: <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-oregon/>

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chance of getting divorced, and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are much more likely to end up in poverty than teen mothers who remain single.² Even if the marriage does not end in divorce, child brides are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and often spend their lives in poverty.³ Raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen means that hundreds of children in Oregon will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage.

The fact that a minor's parent or guardian consents to the marriage does not provide sufficient protection against entering a marriage the child may never be able to leave. In fact, one of the main reasons a child is compelled into marriage is because of parental coercion. Children experiencing teen pregnancy and financial instability, for example, are at risk of being coerced into entering a marriage they do not want by their parents.⁴ When this happens, the children face overwhelming legal and practical barriers to escaping the marriage because, as minors, they are unable to access many of the resources that are available to adults, including domestic violence shelters or even retaining a divorce attorney. Simply requiring judicial or parental consent is not a safeguard against the potentially horrific outcomes associated with child marriage. On the contrary, it provides a legal mechanism for parents and guardians to irreversibly limit the rights of vulnerable children.

Enacting SB 548 would close the dangerous loopholes that currently exist and ensure children throughout Oregon can no longer be placed in harm's way. We strongly urge you to advance this bill and protect young people from coerced marriage. Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for SB 548, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Anderson
State Policy Counsel
American Atheists

² Hamilton, Vivian E., "The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage" (2012). *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository, Faculty Publications*, 1430. Available at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.

³ Fraidy Reiss, "Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications" (2021). *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Available at: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext).

⁴ Paige Cassidy and Tyehimba Turner, "The Fight Continues to End Child Marriage in the U.S." (2021). UNICEF USA. Available at: <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/fight-continues-end-child-marriage-us>.