



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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May 8, 2023

The Honorable Representative Kelly Breen  
Chair, House Judiciary Committee  
Anderson House Office Building  
124 North Capitol Avenue  
Lansing, Michigan 48933

**Re: SUPPORT for MI HB4293-4302, Ending Child Marriage in Michigan**

Dear Chairperson Breen and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

As an adopted child who grew up in Michigan, I am especially concerned about child welfare issues. Therefore, I write today in support of HB 4293-4302 on behalf of American Atheists' nearly 1,700 constituents in Michigan. HB 4293-4302 would protect young people by ending child marriage in Michigan, preventing young people from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all too frequently across our nation. We urge you to swiftly pass this important 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 atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage, especially due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Current Michigan law has loopholes that permit young people under the age of 18 to marry with parental consent and judicial approval. Appallingly, there is no minimum age for such marriages. More than 5,400 minors were married in Michigan between 2000 and 2021, including a number of marriages in which the age difference between the child and spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape. In other words, this loophole has allowed criminal conduct against children in Michigan, and it must be closed immediately.

The harm caused by child marriage is daunting, particularly for young women and girls. It damages their health, irrevocably reduces their education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence. Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% 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 stay single. Nearly 300,000 minors were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2018, with 86% of child marriages between 2000 and 2015 being between a minor and an adult.

In fact, the U.S. State Department has called marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.” However, children can easily be forced to marry before they turn 18 and become legal adults, because they face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic-violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action. Unfortunately, a requirement of parental "consent" hardly mitigates the danger of forced child marriage because when a child is forced to marry, the perpetrators are almost always the parents. There will always be parental “consent” when there is parental coercion in the first place. Therefore, Michigan law currently contains no effective procedural safeguard against the danger of forced child marriage.

Child marriage robs young people of the right to choose their own path in life. By adopting HB 4293-4302, Michigan would effectively eliminate existing loopholes and join states such as New Jersey, Delaware, New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont in taking proactive steps to end child marriage. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation to protect young people in Michigan. If you have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for HB 4293-4302, please contact Brittany Williams, American Atheists’ State Policy Counsel, at [bwilliams@atheists.org](mailto:bwilliams@atheists.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Fish". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nick Fish  
President  
American Atheists  
cc: All Members of the Michigan House Judiciary Committee