

Florida teacher loses job for calling student by preferred name (without parental consent)

April 10, 2025 By [Laura Meckler](#) and [Lori Rozsa](#)

It's the first known dismissal stemming from the conservative campaign to limit schools' recognition of transgender identity. [Story source: Washington Post](#)

A Florida high school teacher lost her job after calling a student by an alternative name without parental permission, sparking community backlash in the conservative birthplace of Moms for Liberty as school officials sought to comply with state law.

It's the first known dismissal resulting from the campaign to shut down recognition of alternative gender identities — a policy piloted by Florida that spread to other Republican states and now has been taken up by the Trump administration.

Melissa Calhoun had taught in Brevard County for 11 years when she ran headlong into a state rule that bars school staff from deviating from students' legal names without written parental permission. The rule applies to students who choose an alternative name because of a change in gender identity, as well as those who might want to use a nickname. In this case, Calhoun was respecting the wishes of a student whose legal name is associated with girls, a person familiar with the situation said.

One of the student's parents complained to the school district, which investigated the matter. The teacher admitted to knowingly using an alternative name without permission, district spokeswoman Janet Murnaghan said in a statement. This "directly violates state law" and district procedures, she said. The teacher received a letter of reprimand and was told last week that her annual contract, which expires in May, was not renewed, though she will finish out this school year.

The school district "supports parents' rights to be the primary decision-makers in their children's lives, and Florida law affirms their right to be informed," Murnaghan said. "Teachers, like all employees, are expected to follow the law."

Calhoun's contract was not renewed because the state of Florida will be reviewing her teaching certificate based on this case, Murnaghan said, and the district will not bring her back until the issue is resolved with the state. A spokesperson for the Florida Department of Education did not respond to a request for comment.

Calhoun, who has worked at Satellite High School since 2019, could not be reached for comment.

The action prompted a surge of student and parent activism on Calhoun's behalf — a striking response in a county where one of the founders of Moms for Liberty, a national group on the front lines of the education culture wars, once served on the school board.

More than 7,400 people signed a [change.org petition](#) calling for her to be reinstated. Students planned a walkout of classes on Thursday afternoon in support of the teacher. And while the matter was not on the agenda at the school board's meeting this week, several members of the community spoke on her behalf during a public comment period.

"There was no harm, no threat to safety, no malicious intent. Just a teacher trying to connect with a student. And for that her contract was not renewed, despite her strong dedication and years of service," Kristine Staniec, a media specialist at Satellite High School, told the board. She said her children were students of Calhoun's.

“I’m seeing people who never got involved before signing the petition and commenting on Facebook,” said Amy Roub, a parent in Brevard County and volunteer with Florida’s chapter of Defense of Democracy, a group formed to oppose Moms for Liberty. “I think people have just had enough of this from the school board. They’ve gone too far this time.”

Two of Roub’s four children had Calhoun for a teacher in their Advanced Placement Literature class, and Roub recalled being struck by her love for teaching when she first met her. Calhoun also made it a point to attend student performances at the school, Roub said.

(Satellite is an arts magnet school set on a barrier island south of Cape Canaveral.)

“She is a beloved teacher, a teacher that changed her students’ lives,” Roub said.

But school board member Katie Campbell said teachers are trained to follow state rules, and it’s reasonable to expect that they will do so. She said people may think the rule is “silly,” but she said it’s important.

“The parents are the number one decision-makers for their children. That’s why we send out the form, that’s why the State Board of Education made the rule,” Campbell said. Asked about the rights of the students, she said it was not the district’s place to interfere in family relationships “unless we legally have a reason to.”

Tiffany Justice, a founder of Moms for Liberty who lives in neighboring Indian River County, asked, “Would you want your kids’ teachers keeping secrets from you with your child?”

The “nickname” rule, with official documentation in the [Parental Authorization for Deviation from Student’s Legal Name Form](#), stems from a 2023 law, one of several championed by Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) as part of his “war on woke.” Other DeSantis-backed measures led to a crush of challenges to books in school libraries and restrictions on how race and gender can be taught.

Similar rules prohibiting schools from using alternative names or pronouns are in place in 13 other states, but this appears to be the first time a teacher has lost his or her job for violating the policies, said Brian Dittmeier, director of public policy for GLSEN, an advocacy group for LGBTQ students.

“Not only is this a direct attack on educators who support trans students, but it also is an indicator of the bureaucratic overreach of antitransgender policy,” Dittmeier said. “A teacher could potentially be fired for calling a student Tim instead of Timothy.”

The Trump administration is also taking action on this front. On his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed an [executive order](#) stating that “it is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female.” Last month, the federal Education Department announced it was investigating the states of California and Maine over policies that limit school communication with parents about their children’s gender.

The California law, signed last year, bars school districts from requiring staff to notify parents of their child’s gender identification change. Maine policy allows students to use alternative names or pronouns without parental notification, the federal agency said.

“Parents are the primary protectors of their children. Yet many states and school districts have enacted policies that presume children need protection from their parents,” Education Secretary Linda McMahon wrote in [a letter to educators](#) delivered with new guidance about how states should interpret federal privacy law.

[The guidance](#) said that under federal law, parents have a right to see their students’ records, but schools do not have a legal obligation to inform parents about information in those records absent a request.