

A STARK REALITY

A 2013 study by the Higher Education Research Institute found that 32% of 18-to-24 year-olds and 29% of 25-to-34 year-olds are religiously unaffiliated. Yet secular students' views are often dismissed. Furthermore, many students face daily social and moral dilemmas at common school functions.

Types of Discrimination Experienced by Secular Students

- Verbal Harassment
- Coercion
- Social Ostracism
- Stereotyping/Slander
- Being "Outed"
- Proselytization
- Repeated Vandalization of Adverts for Secular Events

Students who self-identify as atheist or agnostic are most vulnerable to discrimination, which is why many conceal their secular identities and withdraw from their social environment.

Common Secular Stereotypes

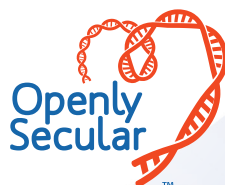
- Miserable
- Arrogant
- Devil-worshipper
- Immoral
- Anti-Christian
- Self-centered
- Evil
- Sinner
- Empty

Perceived stigma and secular discrimination has a negative impact on the educational and social outcomes for secular students. The greatest challenge for secular students aware of their minority status is to overcome stigma and misinformation.

ABOUT OPENLY SECULAR

Openly Secular is a coalition project that promotes tolerance and equality of people regardless of their belief systems. Founded in 2013, the Openly Secular coalition is led by four organizations - Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and Stiefel Freethought Foundation. This campaign is also joined by national partner organizations from the secular movement as well as organizations that are allies to our cause.

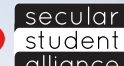
The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by getting secular people - including atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and nonreligious people - to be open about their beliefs.



Openly Secular

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Special thanks to the Secular Student Alliance, www.secularstudents.org, for allowing us to adapt pieces of *Secular Students in Your School* for this text.

For Educators: Understanding Secular Students
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UNDERSTANDING SECULAR STUDENTS: A Toolkit for Educators



WELCOME

Despite the large and growing numbers of secular students, the unfortunate truth is that they face real discrimination that diminishes their educational experience. This brochure helps educators understand and support students who have decided to live openly secular. We believe that it is important for educators to refrain from labeling students of any age.

SECULAR STUDENTS' BELIEF

A secular student is an individual who does not believe in a higher power or supreme being. Secular students come from diverse cultural, economic, and religious backgrounds and will have vastly different experiences and identities. A secular student might choose to identify with one or more labels. Common terms include atheist, agnostic, freethinker, skeptic, humanist, or naturalist.

An **atheist** is someone who does not believe in any gods. An **agnostic** either sees the existence of a god or gods as unknowable, or makes no individual claim to know the answer. **Freethinkers** and **skeptics** see science and reason as more dependable than religious doctrine and revelation.

Humanism is a nontheistic philosophy that focuses on improving the human condition.

For **naturalists**, only the natural world warrants consideration (as opposed to the supernatural), and empirical evidence is the core of their worldview.

For more information about labels, secular symbols, and supporting secular students, visit:

www.secularstudents.org/educators

DISPELLING MYTHS

There are many common misconceptions about secular students. Educators play an important role in correcting these stereotypes, which are often presented in our culture and the media. Schools are uniquely positioned to educate in order to put an end to these myths.

For example, it is commonly believed that someone without belief in a god has no moral compass and cannot find purpose in their life. However, there is no evidence that a lack of belief in a higher power leads to immoral behavior, nor that such a worldview results in unhappiness. According to researchers Goodman and Mueller:

Recent research...shows that many students who identify as atheist or related designations, such as humanist or freethinker are, in fact, quite thoughtful about their purpose, morals, and values...They state that their life purpose is to use their skills and talents in service to the environment, humanity, and all living creatures. Their purpose and morality are less about personal salvation after death and more about celebrating and contributing to the human condition.

Another misconception is that secular students wish to convert others to their views or redesign society. In reality, most secular individuals, and especially secular students, simply want to be accepted for who they are. Reshaping society or converting others is rarely a priority. In fact, academic studies of religiosity on campus climates consistently show these ideas to be false. Instead of engaging in secular proselytizing, secular students:

- 🌀 Conceal their secular identities, largely as a way to manage stigma.
- 🌀 Remain silent in classrooms and other social settings to avoid offending religious classmates.
- 🌀 Report higher rates of negative peer interaction, group conflict, and feelings of coercion compared to religious majority students.
- 🌀 Exhibit lower levels of well-being compared to religious majority students.
- 🌀 Report the lowest rates of college satisfaction.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Teachers, school officials and administrators bear a legal and moral obligation to safeguard the well-being of secular students. **All students are entitled to be treated with respect** in a public school environment, regardless of their beliefs. As you learn more, you will become aware of both the pervasiveness of misconceptions and also ways to counter those stereotypes.

Staff and administrators should **create a welcoming environment for secular students**. Provide information in the form of brochures, library books, or knowledgeable staff to help all students as they develop their own worldviews. When religion or worldview topics are discussed, don't shy away from speaking openly about secular worldviews – **silence can imply a taboo. Remain alert for instances of harassment or bullying and make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable**, enforcing the same discipline that would be applied in any other case of harassment.

The Openly Secular coalition is happy to connect you to the Secular Student Alliance, whose staff can assist you and your students in forming a secular student group at your school. This group can serve as a community for students who feel they must hide this aspect of their identity in other social settings, and provide a “safe haven” for students who may face harassment or social difficulties due to their beliefs.

If your public school has other extra-curricular clubs, **denying the formation of a secular club is illegal**. So is stonewalling or otherwise discriminating against students forming a secular club. **Several court cases and legislation such as the Equal Access Act ensure equal protection for secular students under the law.**

The **Secular Safe Zone** is another great way to support secular students in your school. By training educators to be allies and role models, we hope to create safe spaces for secular students to explore their worldview and become the leaders of today and tomorrow.

For more information about the Secular Safe Zone, visit: www.secularsafezone.org

For more information on supporting other secular people in your life, visit: www.openlysecular.org/toolkits