



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 7, 2024

## Fired Teacher's Victory Over Pronoun Police Has Wide-ranging Implications

A Virginia school board recently agreed to pay over half a million dollars to a teacher they fired for his refusal to use a transgender student's preferred pronouns, a move one attorney said has "seismic implications."

According to a [press release](#) from the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), in late September, the West Point School Board settled with former high-school teacher Peter Vlaming, paying him \$575,000 in damages and attorneys' fees and expunging his firing from his employment record. In addition, the board "changed its policies to conform to the new Virginia education policies established by Gov. Glenn Youngkin that respect fundamental free speech and parental rights," though this was not part of the settlement.

ADF attorneys represented Vlaming in his lawsuit, which took five years to be resolved.

### Pronoun Predicament

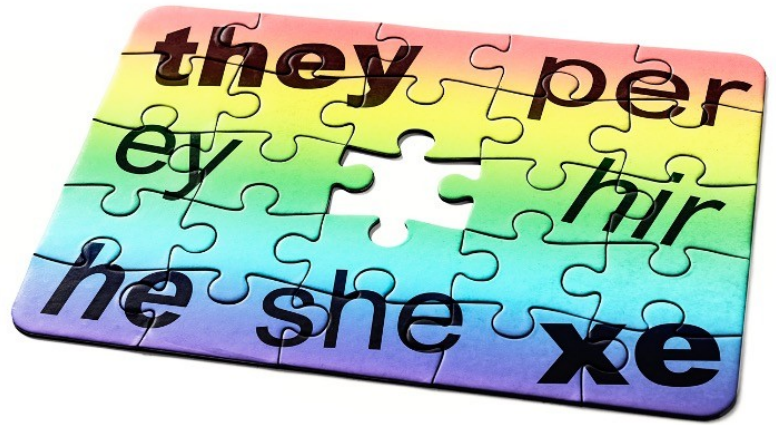
Vlaming's troubles began when a student in one of his French classes decided to "transition" from female to male, including by undergoing surgery. Vlaming, reported [The New American](#), "referred to her by her preferred male name which, in French, sounded equivalent, but he refused to use any male pronouns in referring to her."

The student and her parents complained to school officials, saying that "they felt disrespected," as Superintendent Laura Abel [put it](#). Abel said Vlaming's actions created "a hostile learning environment" for the student.

Assistant Principal Suzanne Aunspach warned Vlaming, a Christian, that failure to refer to the student with male pronouns could lead to his termination. ADF claims that Vlaming was ordered to use those pronouns "even when the student wasn't present."

However, as the [Virginia Supreme Court](#) observed:

For Vlaming, this request asked him to violate his conscience. He holds religious and philosophical convictions that reject the idea that "gender identity, rather than biological reality, fundamentally shapes and defines who we truly are as humans" and instead accept as a verity that "sex is fixed in each person, and that it cannot be changed, regardless of our feelings or desires." ... "Mr. Vlaming's conscience and religious practice," the complaint states, "prohibits [sic] him from intentionally lying, and he sincerely believes that referring



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to a female as a male by using an objectively male pronoun is telling a lie.”

Vlaming’s refusal to abide by his superiors’ orders ultimately resulted in the board’s unanimously firing him in late 2018. ADF attorney Shawn Voyles contended those orders were based on a district policy that did not pertain to preferred pronouns.

“Peter wasn’t fired for something he said; he was fired for something he *couldn’t* say. The school board violated his First Amendment rights under the Virginia Constitution and commonwealth law,” ADF senior counsel Tyson Langhofer said in the press release. (Emphasis in original.)

### **Productive Pleading**

In September 2019, Vlaming filed suit. He argued that the board’s actions “violated his due process, free speech and free exercise rights under the Virginia Constitution.”

The King William Circuit Court dismissed Vlaming’s case because it “did not believe Vlaming had any valid reasons for the law to accept his suit,” reported the [Virginia Mercury](#).

But, in December, the Supreme Court reinstated the case and remanded it to the circuit court for further proceedings. According to an ADF [press release](#) following that decision, the court

correctly recognized that the Virginia Constitution “seeks to protect diversity of thought, diversity of speech, diversity of religion, and diversity of opinion.” The ruling continued, “Absent a truly compelling reason for doing so, no government committed to these principles can lawfully coerce its citizens into pledging verbal allegiance to ideological views that violate their sincerely held religious beliefs.”

Rather than continue to fight a battle that they were virtually certain to lose, the school board settled with Vlaming.

In a statement, Vlaming said:

I was wrongfully fired from my teaching job because my religious beliefs put me on a collision course with school administrators who mandated that teachers ascribe [sic] to *only one* perspective on gender identity — their preferred view. I loved teaching French and gracefully tried to accommodate every student in my class, but I couldn’t say something that directly violated my conscience. I’m very grateful for the work of my attorneys at Alliance Defending Freedom to bring my case to victory, and hope it helps protect every other teacher and professor’s fundamental First Amendment rights. [Emphasis in original.]

### **Pedagogues’ Protection**

ADF President and CEO Kristen Waggoner certainly believes it will. She told [Fox News Digital](#) Friday the settlement has “seismic implications.”

“We’re grateful that, because of this decision, tolerance is now a two-way street, not a one-way ratchet for totalitarian ideology,” she said.

Given the Supreme Court’s reasons for reinstating the case, “it protects all teachers in Virginia and its rationale should guide other courts addressing similar issues.” Waggoner explained:



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Peter’s Christian faith prevented him from lying to his students about biological reality by using pronouns inconsistent with a student’s sex. Since his victory in court, we have seen overwhelming gratitude and support on social media from people who, like Peter, teach or work in places that might punish them for living according to their beliefs.

According to Fox News, Vlaming is now permitted to resume his career as a teacher. That seems unlikely, however, based on a December article in [The New American](#). “Vlaming was blacklisted in every school district in Virginia following his lawsuit and was forced to move. He now lives in France with his wife and family and works in an unrelated field.”





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