



COLUMN: Do we need more ‘parental rights’ — or help fixing the real problems in education?

Liz Willen

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Whenever you hear the phrase “parental rights in education,” listen carefully.

What sounds like increased protection for children is part of a Republican campaign slogan, one that may or may not resonate with our country’s fragile public-school parents, teachers and children in the post-pandemic era. Republicans hope it will, though many parent groups and Democrats disagree.

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the “[Parents Bill of Rights Act](#),” which would guarantee parents access to more information online, including curriculum, budgets, reading lists and library books, while requiring them to be notified of student requests to change their gender-identifying pronouns.

“This is about empowering the parents, it’s about opening up the schools to the parents,” said Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

“Orwellian to the core,” [countered](#) Democrat Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who said it has no chance of passing the Senate. The bill some Democrats dubbed “the politics over parents” bill passed the House 213 to 208, in part because five Democrats were absent.

Empowered by a new era of book bans, GOP lawmakers are ramping up their push for federal control over what topics teachers teach and what books children read. The blatant hypocrisy was not lost on Schumer: Republicans who once treasured small government are now asking for more governmental oversight.

“If passed, schools across the nation would be forced to adhere to a panoply of federal regulations that take power away from parents and school districts,” Schumer said.

Still, GOP arguments – fueled by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ “[Don’t Say Gay](#)” restrictions and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott’s [hardline stance](#) against transgender students – have become part of the national education conversation, drowning out talk about immediate and pressing post-pandemic issues of learning loss, teacher pay and student mental health.

[Related: Pop quiz: What state just banned a high school advanced placement American studies course?](#)

Book banning and federal oversight will likely become a feature presentation of the next presidential election, but is the Republican agenda what a majority of public school parents really want?

Right now, at least 10 states have proposed bills requiring school administrators to list activities, books and readings that teachers use in their lessons, and some want parents to review all library additions and curriculum.

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At the same time, [The Hechinger Report](#) has been documenting dire post-pandemic struggles in all 50 states, including vastly unequal funding; crumbling school facilities; overly large class sizes; a lack of committed, qualified teachers, and enormous disparity in the quality of course offerings, resources and college and career preparation.

Overwhelming post-pandemic challenges are looming, including an [exodus](#) of public-school students, plunging test scores and learning loss. Parents are increasingly concerned about school safety in the wake of high-profile school shootings, anxious for teacher contract issues to be settled following [the strike](#) that shuttered Los Angeles schools last week and worried about their children’s mental health.

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Concerns remain about state takeovers of schools like the one underway in Houston, where parents, educators and students are pushing back hard, while new research and our own reporting show fewer students are going to college at a time of increasing disillusionment with higher education.

In my years as an education reporter, I've covered many fights over book bans. As the ideological debates fade, the giant challenges facing the nation's public schools loom ever larger.

To me, the GOP's push to empower parents seems far removed from these painful realities. DeSantis is instead bent on energizing school officials to take stronger action against teachers, even proposing expanding a Florida ban on restricting teaching young children about sexuality and gender issues through 12th grade.

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Last week, a Florida charter school fired a principal after parents objected to their kids being shown a picture of Michelangelo's David. DeSantis has even proposed banning all discussion of menstruation before sixth grade.

For his part, President Joe Biden insists none of this is what helps parents support their children at school. "Legislation should not politicize our children's education. It should deliver the resources that schools and families actually need," Biden said in a statement.

And many parent groups are reacting angrily, as has the American Library Association. The bill is "nothing more than a scare tactic by extremist politicians trying to make it harder for educators to work with parents to teach children what they need to learn," noted Heather Harding, executive director of the nonprofit Campaign for Our Shared Future.

Politics, as always, will continue to play a big part in what happens to our students and their parents going forward. Former President Donald Trump is adding his own spin to "parental rights," as he prepares to run for office again, pushing for abolishing teacher tenure, reducing the number of school administrators and adopting a parental bill of rights.

Meanwhile, Democrats have proposed their own version of a parent rights bill, backed by dozens of advocacy groups like the NAACP, the National Parents Union and the National Parent Teacher Association. It calls for "responsive and inclusive" public schools, the protection of

students' civil rights and instruction that prepares kids to think critically and actively participate in a democracy.

To drill down further on what parents really want, I looked back at a [CBS poll released early last year](#). In it, more than eight in 10 Americans said they don't think books should be banned from schools for "discussing race and criticizing U.S. history, for depicting slavery in the past or more broadly for political ideas they disagree with."

Related: Let's listen to what parents and not politicians really want from their public schools

What's more, the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, [isn't a fan](#) of the bill Congress passed last week: The group has long pushed school choice, including vouchers that allow parents to choose alternatives such as homeschooling and religious institutions.

Even some Republicans oppose this bill, which is more consistent with their longstanding belief that the federal government should have less involvement and a smaller role in curriculum.

That leaves us at The Hechinger Report with many questions about what parents want.

More than ever, it's time for public school parents across the U.S. to make their voices known, before politicians with little knowledge of what is happening in their children's classrooms drown them out.