



Fear-Based “Parental Bills of Rights” Are a Right-Wing Siege on Public Education, Advocates Say

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If the U.S. right wing has its way, educational programming during Women’s History Month will sideline Billie Jean King, Rosa Parks and Gloria Steinem in favor of Amy Coney Barrett, Nikki Haley and Condoleezza Rice. Trans athletes will be barred from competing in school sports, and comprehensive sex education classes that cover gender identity and sexual preference will be disallowed. What’s more, history classes that include a robust discussion of the racist foundation of the U.S. — referred to by conservatives as critical race theory (CRT) — will be prohibited.

“Every Republican-controlled state where a legislature is meeting is considering an educational gag order,” *Vox* reports. In some places, this has resulted in the banning of books like George Matthew Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, LC Rosen’s *Jack of Hearts (And Other Parts)* and Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer: A Memoir*.

Many state legislatures have also gotten into the act. In Florida, for example, lawmakers have passed legislation to allow parents or guardians to sue school districts that provide information about sexual orientation or gender identity “in a manner that is not age appropriate.” What “age appropriate” actually means is never revealed, leaving it open to a wide variety of potentially discriminatory interpretations.

And that’s not all. Florida’s Parental Bill of Rights requires caregivers to be notified before sex ed instruction begins and no student can enroll without parental permission. In addition, even if the adults sign the requisite forms, state law mandates that abstinence be stressed “as the expected standard.”

Meanwhile, in the first two-and-a-half months of 2022, five states banned gender-affirming medical care, classifying it as child abuse, and two states — Oklahoma and Tennessee — are currently considering bills make illegal to bar conversion therapy, also called “reparative therapy,” a largely fundamentalist-driven counseling program to change people’s sexual orientation or gender identity. The American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association are just two of the groups that oppose these efforts, noting that this so-called therapy increases distress, anxiety and suicidal ideation among those who receive it.

Needless to say, this has not deterred GOP lawmakers.

To wit, earlier this year, Idaho lawmakers attempted to make it a felony for a parent, guardian or physician to provide puberty blockers or gender confirmation surgery, or take a minor child out of state for this care. Although the measure failed, the proposed punishment included life in prison and removal of the child from the home.

The right calls this an exertion of “parental rights,” and model bills to elevate parental authority are being floated by the libertarian Goldwater Institute, a 34-year-old organization with deep ties to the Charles Koch Foundation, Donors Trust, and numerous well-established conservative entities including the Cato Institute, the Mercatus Center and the American Legislative Exchange Council. (The Goldwater Institute did not respond to *Truthout*’s request for an interview.)

One legislative prototype, called the Sunlight in Learning Act, has already been introduced in numerous states. It requires every school to post faculty training documents, classroom instructional materials and information about all in-school activities on its website and mandates that every document and video be available for in-person perusal by parents or other caretaking adults. The goal, the institute’s website states, is to keep “radical politics” — which it defines as gender theory, Marxism and CRT — out of the classroom.

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These attacks are not confined to the 50 states. On the federal level, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Missouri) has introduced a copycat Parents’ Bill of Rights Act to allow parents or guardians to sue federally funded schools if they are denied access to curricular materials or information from outside groups, like Planned Parenthood, that are often brought in to run supplemental programs or assemblies. The act also gives adults the right to visit schools whenever they wish, allows them to sit in on classes, and allows them to review their child’s academic and medical records.

But despite its purported interest in all things academic, the right’s recent preoccupations have generally fallen into three main areas: comprehensive sex ed, the teaching of U.S. history and the participation of trans athletes in school sports.

Rep. Virginia Foxx (R- North Carolina), the ranking member of the House Education and Labor Committee, and Congresswoman Mary Miller (R-Illinois), have introduced the Safety and Opportunity for Girls Act to bar trans competitors from participating in sports. The act cuts against the basic tenets of the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the law that mandates equal opportunity for girls and women in education, by explicitly excluding trans students from school-based teams.

As you might expect, numerous groups on the right — Concerned Women for America, the Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council and Heritage Action for America — have lined up to support this legislation. Likewise, lawmakers Lauren Boebert (R-Colorado), Andrew Clyde (R-Georgia), Doug Lamborn (R-Colorado), Yvette Herrell (R-New Mexico) and Marjorie Taylor-

Greene (R-Georgia) are among its cosponsors and their transphobic messaging has been amplified by *Fox News* and other conservative mediums.

That the bill rests on patently false assumptions about gender identity seems not to faze them.

Katrina Karkazis of the Global Health Justice Partnership, writing in *The Lancet*, states that, “policymakers who formulate sex categorizations and definitions overwhelmingly rely on biological features to ground membership.” Biological factors, Karkazis explains, hold appeal because “biology” and “science” sound both neutral and objective. Nonetheless, she writes, “biological definitions are at odds with the understanding that sex involves multiple biological and social factors.”

This, of course, does nothing to appease a right wing hell-bent on maintaining a rigid gender binary.

Day Al-Mohamed is a Washington, D.C.-based writer, filmmaker and disability policy expert who has taught sex education. She says that current conservative campaigns — against CRT, sex education, trans athletes, as well as against COVID-19 proactive masks and vaccines — are predicated on a deep distrust of science and government, and infused with transphobia, racism and misogyny. “There is widespread opposition to COVID-19 vaccines, denial of climate change and misinformation about gender that is based on stereotypes about what it means to be a man or a woman,” she told *Truthout*. “Hot-button phrases like ‘protect the children,’ take advantage of people’s fears and get them mobilized.”

Massachusetts educator Pam Chamberlain, a longtime scholar of the right, agrees with Al-Mohamed and sees the groundswell of conservative activism as rooted in social anxiety and deep-seated oppressive structures. “The right is responding to progressive social change. The U.S. is no longer a Christian-dominant nation. There is tremendous economic worry and fear that immigrants are taking away ‘our’ jobs,” Chamberlain told *Truthout*. “This is coupled with COVID, with masks seen as another attempt by government to control people’s lives. Many also feel like they can’t control their children.” This, she says, provides fertile terrain for conservative activists. “When a right-wing group or leader comes in and says, ‘This is how you build social and political power.... This is how you save yourself and your country,’ many find the message extremely comforting.” Furthermore, it connects many dots, linking issues like COVID, CRT, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Martha Kempner, creator of the blog, *Sex on Wednesday*, notes that many people find change — any change — threatening, particularly given the realities of structural racism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism. “Two decades ago, marriage equality was [the right’s] issue and they lost. They are now losing the trans battle,” Kempner told *Truthout*. “Every time they start to lose, they shake the snow globe and look at ways to generate outrage among their base. A lot of people don’t understand what it means to be trans or nonbinary and the issue is a good bogeyman.” School-based sex ed, she says, is also an evergreen outrage generator.

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At the same time, Kempner points out that the right is supremely hypocritical. On one hand, she says, they advocate parental rights to control what goes on in the classroom and what books are available in libraries. But when it comes to obtaining health care for a trans kid, the tables turn and the parent is told that they lack the parental authority to seek the treatment their child needs.

“In the short run,” Kempner concludes, “a lot of people are going to suffer because of these short-sighted regulatory restrictions. But you can’t squeeze the genie back into the bottle. In the long run, the right wing will lose because society is becoming more accepting and appreciative of diversity.”

The short run, however, is lined with potential pitfalls. “The fact that fights are happening over Title IX, trans inclusion in sports, and including sexual [orientation] and gender identity in sex ed classes creates a hostile environment for many young people, which makes it especially important for kids to feel supported and affirmed,” Christine Soyong Harley, president and CEO of SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change, told *Truthout*. “Groups of Christian fundamentalists have created a marriage of convenience with QAnon and the Proud Boys. We know that their campaigns stem from a fear of loss of power in society, but it is up to progressives to speak out about the importance of inclusion and acceptance.”

Many are rising to the challenge, supporting nonbinary and trans athletes, pushing back against Title IX restrictions and opposing parental interventions in curricular decision-making. Among them are lawmakers like Rhode Island’s Rebecca Kislak, who continue to introduce legislation into their statehouses. Kislak’s still-pending bill affirms the importance of “sex ed for students of all races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds,” and recognizes the importance of pleasure in erotic life.

But as important as legislation is, many activists are paying close attention to the 2022 midterm elections and the many issues that will be raised by those who are campaigning.

One group, the relatively new Red Wine & Blue, is working to promote progressive values among women living in non-urban swing districts. Founded by suburbanites, its Book Ban Busters campaign has created a map to highlight every place where book restrictions have been proposed or enacted, and their weekly online Troublemaker Training has helped push back against censorship and other reactionary measures. All of this is with an eye on electoral reform and opposition to “parental control.”

Still other activists are focused on providing direct support to children and teens. Scout Bratt, outreach and education director at the Chicago Women’s Health Center, runs workshops for youth that challenge “the homophobic, transphobic and adultist framework” of many well-meaning educators who center adult viewpoints in their programming. “Our workshops honor youth voices, and celebrate all bodies, all sexualities and all genders,” Bratt told *Truthout*. “Young people know their bodies and identities. They know that there are more than two genders. We, as adults, need to unlearn adultism because youth empowerment requires us to recognize that young people know their desires and know what they need.”

Still, the work is often fraught. Lillian Rivera, director of family programming at Gender Spectrum, an organization that works to create gender-inclusive environments for children, teens and their loved ones, says that fear, grief and shame are nearly ubiquitous among the people they serve. “I wish the folks who are making legislative decisions about trans health care and acceptance could see the faces of the children and adults who are being impacted by their policies and laws,” she says. Both children and caregivers, Rivera explains, worry about safety, and bear the costs of living with disrespect and social disapproval.

It takes a toll.

According to the Trevor Project, LGBTQIA+ youth face enormous stress and are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers, with trans and youth of color at highest risk.

Nonetheless, helping vulnerable youth harness their power, says Bratt, is the antidote to erasure. “It’s the key to a truly feminist future for everyone.”