

## Educators warn bills to give parents more power could push teachers out

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Mostly Republican governors and legislators in more than a dozen states are fighting to give parents more control over what their children learn in public schools, banking on so-called parents' rights bills as a political winner. But educators worry that empowering parents to veto books and history lessons would push many already stressed teachers out of the profession.

During the pandemic, many parents have bristled at school administrators' decisions on in-person learning, masks and quarantines. Newly elected Virginia GOP Gov. Glenn Youngkin had made parental involvement in education a central pillar of his successful campaign, airing an ad in which a parent was upset about her high school son's assignment to read Toni Morrison's "Beloved" in a college-level English class. Youngkin's victory invigorated parental rights groups and Republican politicians around the country, helping to pave the way for the parents' rights bills.

Under a Georgia bill, parents would be able to access their children's school records and review "all instructional materials" used in their children's classrooms — and school officials would have three days to produce the documents, with some exceptions.

Iowa's version would allow parents to have information on their children's teachers, access to all school records related to their child, and the right to review "textbooks, books, articles, outlines, handouts, presentations, videos and any other similar materials" used in the classroom. Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott last month promised a push to amend his state's constitution to broaden parents' involvement.

A Utah bill would permit parents to refuse to allow their children to participate in school lessons they find objectionable and to sue schools or education officials for any perceived infringement of their rights as parents. A bill in Florida would allow parents to sue over perceived violations of a parents' bill of rights that was enacted last year. And a Missouri bill would allow the state's attorney general to sue schools.

"The role of state and local government is to support and assist, rather than to interfere or conflict with, the primary authority of parents for the education of the parents' children," the Utah legislation asserts.

Indiana's bill explicitly connects parents' rights to the continuing controversy over how schools discuss race and racism. It would mandate the creation of parent-led curriculum review committees and require posting all learning materials online. It also would bar the teaching of eight different concepts related to race and religion, including the idea that "an individual, by virtue of their sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or political affiliation is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously."

Some critics of the parents' rights bills dismiss them as political posturing since many of the same rights already are embedded in state law. The federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act likewise includes some parental rights, including the ability to access education records and some personal information and to amend records.

It's not unusual for local school districts to receive objections from parents about classroom materials, supplemental resources or certain library books, and there is an "exhaustive process" to register those concerns, said Terry Spradlin, executive director of the Indiana School Boards Association. Parents also can engage with schools through parent-teacher organizations and school improvement groups, or through events and extracurricular activities, he said.

Spradlin noted that the Indiana bill, beyond creating a committee, would allow the state Department of Education to revoke or suspend the licenses of educators or school administrators who teach the banned concepts or refuse to allow parents to view material or curriculum.

"There's more political grandstanding than having a legitimate value or impact about what should be taught," Spradlin said. "I think [the bill] could have a profound effect, driving more educators out of the classroom, and really hamper their skill and ability to teach curriculum effectively."

Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said GOP lawmakers are signaling to "the most dissatisfied parents" that their concerns are being heard — especially when it comes to how schools discuss race and gender identity. He noted that as soon as Youngkin became governor, he issued an executive order barring schools from teaching "inherently divisive concepts" such as critical race theory, the academic framework that has become a catch-all term for critics who don't want schools to focus on race and racism in teaching students about U.S. history.

"That is giving a particular group of parents what they want, empowering parents," McCluskey said.

Susan MacManus, a political analyst and distinguished professor emeritus at the University of South Florida, said supporters of such bills are reacting to what they perceive as a constant "barraging of their particular ideology," whether religious or political, in mainstream media.

Even before the pandemic, MacManus said, many parents felt they were losing control over their children's education because of sophisticated curriculums, different methods of teaching and their own busy schedules. Frustrations over school closures, masking rules and quarantines have only exacerbated those feelings. Even a parent's inability to help their child with a math problem could fuel this discontent, she said.

"A lot of this comes from the time that parents feel they have with their children and even the means of communicating with their kids," MacManus said. "How many parents know what even TikTok is? I feel like they can't really track how to communicate with their kids."

Marshawn Wolley, the father of a fourth grader in an Indiana public school, said legislators pushing the bill there are ignoring the concerns of Black parents, who are mostly worried about the racial achievement gap and school discipline issues.

"You have parents in the suburbs who express a concern about a false issue, and now both chambers of the legislature are activated and moving," said Wolley, an Indianapolis-based consultant who helps companies deal with diversity issues. "The advancing bill is disproportionately detrimental to students of color."

He added that he is very concerned about how his son will be taught African American history.

"How can you teach Jim Crow and not cause discomfort at what other people did to other people? And why would we want to hide that?" Wolley asked. "Why would we want to be impartial about slavery? Why would we want to be impartial about Jim Crow?"

"It's an attempt to really just kind of whitewash history and make it just neutral, when in reality, the discomfort is learning about the challenges and how we've overcome situations, so we don't repeat some of these things."

Glenda Scherer, a parent who is pushing for a parental review bill in Oregon, said she's less concerned about what schools teach than whether they are tailoring it to the ages of the students being taught. Scherer, who was an English teacher for a decade, said parents should be allowed to speak out at school meetings, select curriculum and, despite the pandemic, visit schools any time.

"It's crazy to me that I can't go into my son's school right now at all. Some of this is based on what happened during the pandemic, but I think it's important to have an overview that parents are the ones who know those kids the best," Scherer said. "Instead of shutting parents out, schools need to be welcoming them in."

But Christianne Beebe, an elementary school teacher in Brownsburg, Indiana, said many of the parents she's seen raising concerns on social media don't even have students in the public schools. Too often, she said, legislators automatically dismiss educators' expertise on what and how to teach.

"We need to continue to look at the fact that the most important thing that happens in a classroom and the people that should be making these decisions are our teachers," Beebe said. "They understand pedagogy. They understand their content."

Over the past two years, the teaching profession has become more stressful, partly because of teacher shortages and an increased workload. And some educators have cited the political back-and-forth on education policies as one of the contributing factors.

A recent survey by the National Education Association, which represents teachers, found that 55% of educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than planned, with a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic teachers, at 62% and 59% respectively, planning their departures. Many fear the attacks on a fragile workforce will result in worse shortages.

But McCluskey of the Cato Institute predicts that the easing of the pandemic will turn down the temperature, even as the debates continue.

"I think you'll see a decrease in the number of teachers leaving the profession or saying they're going to leave," McCluskey said. "I don't foresee an immediate end to these more philosophical and political debates that we have, which are encapsulated by the debate on the so-called critical race theory and transgender students."

Alex Patton, a Republican consultant and pollster based in Gainesville, Florida, said "a lot of these bills are part of the culture war." Today's debates, he said, often are animated by "how we define what we're not."

"[Parents say], 'I'm defining myself as somebody that is a good parent and not part of that elite egghead educational machine,' and that message sells very well," he said.

Some Republican lawmakers would rather debate other issues, but they understand today's political climate, Patton said, so they won't push back publicly. Until voters demand more from politicians, they will continue to take "the easy route," he added.

"Legitimate policy discussions are being drowned out by politics and are being drowned out by the shouting," Patton said. "Both sides are trying to win the shouting match, and at this stage, the Republicans are just better at it."