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— News From The States —

EVENING WRAP



By [Kate Queram](#)

Today's stories are about education and, separately, politics — except all of the education stories are rife with politics, so it could probably just be one big section. But this is a newsletter, so I am going to serve it up in two parts, because *newsletters* have *sections* and also because I am not sure I can explain U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz through an apolitical lens.



The Big Takeaway

I tried to open with the least political story of the bunch, but even that one is ... kind of political, forcing me to scrap my *extremely witty* apolitical intro for, well, this. (You're welcome.) (I am a professional writer!) Still, it's the only story that does not use terms like "libs" or "parents' rights," so it will remain in the coveted first space. Congratulations, New Hampshire! You've made it!

Alas, that is the only victory I have to report today from New Hampshire, where only 10% of eligible schools have opted into a federal program that covers the cost of free meals for students. It's not for lack of need, or even lack of interest, officials said — it's that dealing with the federal government is a logistical and financial nightmare, [the New Hampshire Bulletin reported](#).



Slide on down.

(Photo by Getty Images)

Theoretically, the program is simple: Schools with a certain percentage of low-income students agree to provide free meals for *all* students in exchange for extra funding from the federal Department of Agriculture. Schools get more money, kids get free meals without the stigma of having to apply for benefits, everyone wins! Except of course nobody wins, because the extra cash doesn't cover the full cost of the meals. Instead, it's based on an individual school's proportion of low-income students. Schools with fewer kids below the income threshold receive less funding, meaning they're forced to cover the remaining cost by tapping into their budgets. For some schools, that cost is more expensive than eschewing the program altogether.

Which is probably why not many of them opt in. Just two of 20 eligible schools participated in the program this school year, according to data from the state Department of Education. USDA said last month it would aim to boost participation by lowering the threshold for schools to participate, expanding eligibility to roughly 3,000 additional schools, including 85 in New Hampshire. But few

have applied so far.

On its own, the expansion is unlikely to increase interest in the program. Most of the newly eligible schools have smaller proportions of low-income students — it’s why they did not qualify previously — which means they’ll receive less funding and will likely have to cough up more of the cost. (This is not a great way to attract new applicants.) Advocates are urging state lawmakers to cover any resulting shortfalls and to ensure that participating schools do not lose state funding that’s tied to the number of students receiving free or reduced-price meals. If lawmakers agree, those provisions would likely be included in a broader anti-hunger bill that’s slated to debut when the legislature reconvenes in January.



Yeah, nobody is arguing otherwise. Nice sign though!

(Photo by Dana DiFilippo/New Jersey Monitor)

In New Jersey, legislative candidates are focused on their version of substantive school policy: The ever-evolving issue of “parental rights,” which debuted decades ago as a polite way of opposing desegregation and more recently evolved into a thinly veiled protest against the

existence of transgender kids. For right-wing candidates and parents, it's little more than a buzzword or a target for their unease over a rapidly changing world. For trans kids, it's agony, teachers [told the New Jersey Monitor](#).

“There are not hundreds of trans kids in any school building, so this political rhetoric and panic ends up spotlighting one or two kids,” said Kate Okeson, a high school art teacher in Monmouth County. “You have like one trans kid who’s on the hot seat and getting blowback because everybody’s up in arms about the one visibly slightly different kid. Folks that are running for office are not thinking about the actual impact this is having on children.”

Some politicians insist that it’s not about trans kids — or even about one specific issue.

It’s about “parents having a say,” according to state Sen. Ed Durr, a Republican seeking re-election in November, when all 120 legislative seats are up for grabs.

He’s not *entirely* wrong. The current wave of parental rights crusaders began during the thick of the pandemic, when parents flooded administrators and school board meetings with complaints over virtual learning, mask mandates and vaccine requirements. But by the end of 2020, the group had a new focus: [Updated sex education standards](#) that required, among other things, lessons on gender identity and expression.



Bless your heart, no one's treading on you.
(Photo by Dana DiFilippo/New Jersey Monitor)

For whatever reason, the right-wingers *could not abide* the idea of teaching kids about the concept of non-cisgender humans. Their outrage quickly expanded, encompassing everything from [allegedly salacious reading material](#) to the notion that a transgender child might prefer to come out to their parents [on their own timetable](#). On the fringes, activists described those efforts in blatantly transphobic ways, referring to trans and nonbinary kids as “alphabet soup identities” and a “dangerous and extreme contagion.”

Politicians have generally chosen their words more carefully. Take state Sen. Michael Testa Jr., who accused education officials of “infusing progressive identity politics into the classroom” by allowing kids to play on sports teams that correspond with their gender identities. Testa, a Republican, was similarly dismissive of [guidance](#) that encourages schools to ensure confidentiality for transgender students. Because minors should have no expectation of confidentiality, period, he said.

“If you’re under 18, you can’t be questioned by police without parental consent, you can’t go to the doctor without parental consent, you can’t go on a field trip without parental consent,” he said. “But you can have discussions about a mental health issue like gender dysphoria and gender transitioning with teachers and you’re able to keep that away from parents.”

The statement is a master class in subtle transphobic messaging (being trans is not a mental health issue! You should *absolutely* be the one to decide who learns about your gender identity, and when!), which is basically a microcosm of the whole movement. It’s the same old bigotry, with ever-so-slightly better packaging, said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“It hasn’t been that long since there was basically just pure discrimination against gay people. It was ugly, but it was more straightforward. Today, it’s: ‘We don’t want you teaching our kids about gay people or transgender people.’ And that seems part of a bigger pattern of ‘we don’t want the way this pluralistic society has developed,’” Froomjian said. “To me, this parental rights thing would not have any legs at all if it weren’t on issues that go to that wistfulness of wanting things to be the way they were, when they were more comfortable for the majority.”



I miss when TikTok was just a Kesha song and I had never heard of Ryan Walters.

(Photo illustration by Oklahoma Voice)

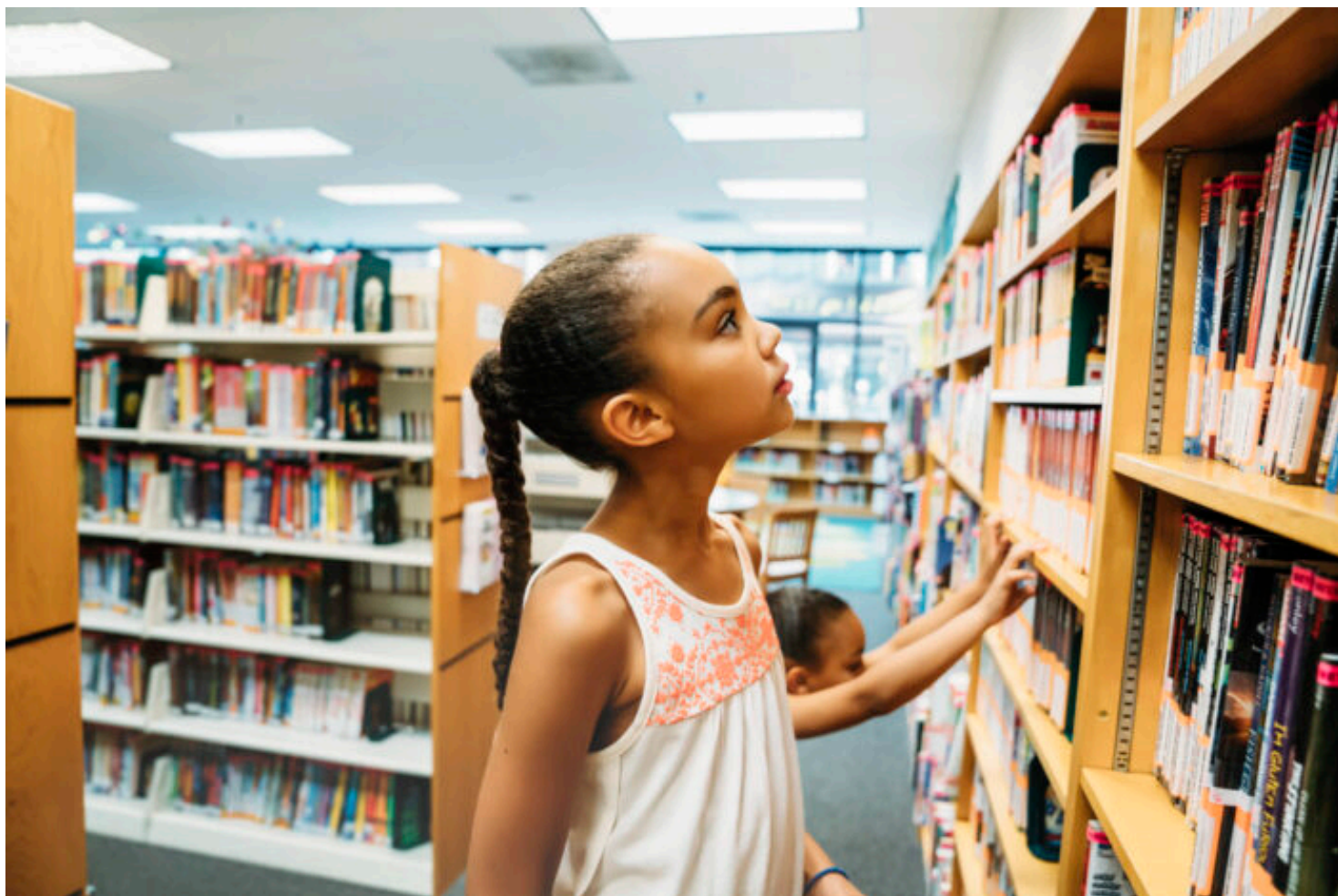
At least in the olden days, there was no TikTok, which means there was no Libs of TikTok, a conservative social media account that exists to stoke culture wars, spread anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and generally make life terrible for the people and institutions caught in its crosshairs. In Oklahoma, two school districts faced bomb threats after being featured on the account. The state superintendent responded by meeting with — and then praising — Chaya Raichik, the account’s creator, [per the Oklahoma Voice](#).

“Great meeting with you,” Oklahoma Superintendent of Education Ryan Walters [wrote on social media](#). “You’ve done more for transparency and accountability in schools than most elected officeholders.”

Oookay, let’s unpack all of this. [In one post](#), Raichik outed an elementary school principal as a drag performer who was charged with possession of child pornography. She failed to mention that the case was dismissed and the charge was expunged, or that the [principal had claimed](#) the charge was part of a “bias against gay educators,” probably because those details do not fit the right-wing narrative, which is that non-cisgender people are somehow inherently deviant. (Because I probably have to explain this: *No they aren’t.*)

In another post, Raichik uploaded an altered version of a satirical video featuring a district librarian describing her plan to push a “woke agenda” in public schools. Conveniently, the video cut off before the librarian explained the details of that “agenda,” which aimed to teach kids to

love books and be kind. (Egad, *the humanity!*)



STEP AWAY FROM THE BOOKS, WE CAN STILL DEPROGRAM YOUR KINDNESS AND LITERACY
(Photo by Getty Images)

Rather than defend his educator or, I don't know, demonstrate computer literacy skills by doing a cursory Google search, Walters reposted the doctored video, saying the librarian was proof that “woke ideology is real.” He went further with the principal, using a series of national television interviews to criticize the decision to hire him and then [launching an investigation](#) into the school district for what he said constituted a “failure to act within the law to protect students.”

Both districts subsequently received bomb threats, which Walters spokesman Dan Isett said had nothing to do with the superintendent's posts/behavior/life choices. You can't hold him responsible for stuff on the Libs of TikTok account, because most of that stuff was *already out there on the internet anyway*.

“I cannot vouch for every tweet from Libs of TikTok,” Isett said. “I'm not going to be put in that position. As far as I'm aware, everything that's been pushed out by that account or others that have had concerns about that particular librarian or the situation at Western Heights have all been pulled from their own social media accounts.”

That explanation seems fairly at odds with Walters' assertion that the account is improving "transparency" — and it's *really* not clear how posting a doctored video would fit anyone's definition of the term — but I'm not a hateful content creator or a hungry-for-attention administrator, so what do I know? Obviously far less than Raichik, who would like you to know that she is just attempting to *educate the masses*, which unfortunately includes a lot of reposting the *hateful lessons* being pushed by *hateful educators* who *hate you*.

"Teaching kids about gender ideology is more hateful than anything I've ever said or done or posted," she said.

Uh-huh: [Kansas private school students and home-schoolers joining in public school sports under new law](#) ... [One of '100 greatest film books' was published by University Press of Kentucky](#) ... [Revised stalking, threat policies at University of Missouri may make punishment more difficult](#) ... [Montana lawyer: 'School choice commission' can address legal concerns in bylaws](#) ... [Governor begins Ohio's K-12 education overhaul despite judge extending temporary restraining order](#) ... [Forget UFOs. URI dean has a close encounter with UAP](#) ... [Support for Houston ISD's Spanish speakers has dwindled under state-appointed leader, parents say](#) ... [Vermont State University president recommends cutting 10 degree programs and up to 33 faculty positions](#) ... [Enrollment is growing at Virginia HBCUs. But they face historic underfunding.](#) ... [Attempts to restrict library materials increased this year, data shows](#)



State of Our Democracy

U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) on Monday [filed a motion](#) to dethrone House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, [our D.C. bureau reported](#). The procedural move, known as a "motion to vacate," is ostensibly retribution for the grave sin of working with Democrats to [fund the federal government](#), but it's also a clear ploy to keep Gaetz in the national spotlight. Because the world is finally paying attention to Matt Gaetz, and Matt Gaetz *likes it*.



*“Hi, it’s me, I’m the problem, it’s me.”
(Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)*

There’s little risk for Gaetz, at least in his current legislative district, which ranks as the [most conservative-leaning](#) in all of Florida, a state so conservative it’s where [woke goes to die](#). Gaetz took office in 2016 after besting his Democratic opponent by 38 points and has been reelected three times, each by a margin of at least 32 points. His job, in other words, is safe. But if he’s eyeing a new one — say, [a 2026 gubernatorial bid](#) — the vengeance tour might come back to haunt him, said Aubrey Jewett, a political science professor at the University of Central Florida.

“If he’s just trying to continue being a congressman from the Pensacola area, then I don’t know that there’s a whole lot of risk, because his base there really seems to like him,” Jewett [told the Florida Phoenix](#). “Perhaps there’s a little more risk if he’s trying to go to a higher office at some point.”

It could also alienate him from [other House Republicans](#), many of whom are already thoroughly

exhausted by his antics, including but not limited to “using floor speeches to complain about McCarthy *all the time*” and “holding the government hostage for reasons known only to himself and possibly Lauren Boebert.” With the chamber nearly evenly divided, there’s a lot of incentive for Republicans and Democrats to work together, and if they all decide to turn on Gaetz, he won’t have much of an active role, Jewett said.

“There’s a fine line between ‘being the squeaky wheel that gets the grease,’ meaning, OK, you’ve caused enough problems that you can actually affect policies and get some things that you want,” Jewett said. “And then, going so far out there that you just tick everybody off, including most of your colleagues, and they sort of banish you to the political wilderness and you’re just not effective and you don’t get anything done.”

Of course, that assumes that Gaetz cares about being a productive member of Congress — and that that’s something he can control, which may no longer be the case now that House Republicans [are plotting to expel him](#), depending on the outcome of an ongoing ethics investigation. [The probe](#), confirmed by the House Ethics Committee in April 2021, is based on allegations that Gaetz may have engaged in sexual misconduct, shared inappropriate campaign images or videos on the House floor, misused state identification records, converted campaign funds to personal use, used illicit drugs and/or accepted a bribe, improper gratuity or impermissible gift.

The news — of the plan to expel Gaetz, not the extremely long list of allegations — was extremely upsetting for U.S. Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, a fellow Florida Republican who loves Gaetz and possibly did not understand that the plan hinges on a guilty verdict from the House Ethics Committee and not Gaetz’s weird fixation on McCarthy.

“TO be clear: It is UNETHICAL to threaten to expel a member for following and using House rules that the ENTIRE conference agreed too [*sic*],” Luna said Sunday [in a social media post](#). “This game works both ways just FYI to any MEMBER who thinks they can blackmail a legislator into not legislating.”

She got so close with the word “ethical,” but then she just veered right off into nonsense! Still, it was a post defending Matt Gaetz that probably boosted Matt Gaetz’s visibility, and so I am confident that Matt Gaetz still appreciated it.

In non-Gaetz news: [Federal court will ‘rule shortly’ on Alabama’s new congressional map ...](#) [Biden touts blue-collar roots in latest Arizona ad ...](#) [Florida elections supervisors ask GOP lawmakers for no major changes to election laws in 2024 ...](#) [After errors hamper reports, Idaho State Controller’s Office says new Luma system works ...](#) [Indiana state Rep. Jerry Torr to retire after nearly 3 decades in office ...](#) [How some Michigan Muslims united with extremist Republicans against LGBTQ+ rights ...](#) [Minnesota lawmaker who rode nonprofit fame to House](#)

[seat gets tax exempt status revoked](#) ... [St. Louis mega-donor drops \\$425K into Missouri campaigns in last week](#) ... [Republican U.S. Senate candidate avoids abortion issue on campaign, but attends anti-abortion rights gala](#) ... [North Carolina Elections Board sued over 30-day residency requirement](#) ... [Ohio Attorney General clears third attempt for 2024 anti-gerrymandering amendment proposal](#) ... [Building more homes is Kotek's top priority for 2024 Oregon legislative session](#) ... [Pennsylvania primary: State House committee advances one bill to change the date, rejects another](#) ... [U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar \(D-Texas\) carjacked at gunpoint near his Washington home](#)



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One Last Thing

The Stevie Nicks Barbie doll [debuted Sunday](#) and sold out in less than 24 hours. (Finally, something makes sense.)

"When I look at her, I see my 27 year old self," Nicks said in a statement. "All the memories of walking out on a big stage in that black outfit and those gorgeous boots come rushing back — and then I see myself now in her face. What we have been through since 1975 — the battles we have fought, the lessons we have learned — together. I am her and she is me. She absolutely has my heart."

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