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— News From The States —

EVENING WRAP



By [Kate Queram](#)

Today's newsletter is not about Kevin McCarthy. (Small mercies.) Instead, it's about schools — places where, unlike Congress, a person might actually learn something.



The Big Takeaway

If you can get there, that is — and since the pandemic, a lot of kids aren't making it to school. Before COVID-19 entered the popular lexicon, around 8 million were considered [chronically absent](#), meaning they'd missed at least 10% of the school year. By spring 2022, [that number had doubled](#). It still hasn't recovered, which officials nationwide have attributed to the same handful of problems: Transportation, mental health, poverty, and a lingering wariness of sending kids to school when they're not feeling well.



...Bueller?

(Photo by Getty Images)

Rates of absenteeism vary by state, but all 50 saw increases of at least 18% between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years. Some have improved since then, but most remain well above their pre-pandemic levels. Last year in Indiana, 19.3% of students were chronically absent, down 2.8% from the year before but nowhere near the pre-COVID rate of 11.2%, [the Indiana Capital Chronicle reported](#).

“It’s October — the first quarter is gone. We have to draw attention to this right now. And there’s no time to wait,” Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner told state officials on Wednesday. “I think this is really a rally cry for us to look at our parents, families, caregivers, and also our community leaders to come up with some solutions that might help.”

Missing as few as three days of school can affect students’ grades, test scores and overall academic performance, experts said. Long-term, poor attendance is better than test scores at [predicting a student’s likelihood](#) of dropping out before graduating high school. The negative impacts are already evident in Indiana, where chronic absenteeism [has been linked](#) to dismal scores on standardized tests for language arts and math.

Absences were most common among the state’s most vulnerable students, including Black children, kids from low-income families, and pupils with housing insecurity or mental health challenges. Accordingly, rates were highest in high-poverty urban school districts and charter schools, officials said.



An empty class at Coral Glades High School, Tamarac, Florida.

(Photo by Dan Forer/GettyImages)

There’s no magic solution to the problem, though board members and education officials generally agreed that better data and more granular statistics would help the brainstorming process. It’s a national crisis, Jenner said, and until the greater tide begins to turn, it will likely be difficult to fix it at the state level.

“The reality is that culture eats policy for breakfast,” she said. “So, if we have a national culture of chronic absenteeism, we could sit as a board and pass a number of policies today, but the culture is not there.”

The culture is plenty toxic in Ohio, where Republican lawmakers defended their proposal to restrict bathroom and locker room usage for transgender students as an attempt to “protect our

children,” [the Ohio Capital Journal reported](#). [The bill](#), awaiting a verdict from the House Higher Education Committee, would require both K-12 schools and colleges to require students to use facilities that align with their sex assigned at birth rather than their gender identity.



I am pretty tired of writing about other people's bathroom usage!

(Photo by Getty Images)

“Essentially, this bill says that only boys will be allowed in the boy’s restroom and only girls will be allowed in the girl’s restroom,” Republican state Rep. Adam Bird said during his wildly offensive and misgendering testimony. “We want to protect our children from exposure to the opposite sex while in a private place like a restroom or locker room.”

He was joined in the land of ignorance by his co-sponsor, state Rep. Beth Lear, who told the higher ed committee that “boys cannot become girls and girls cannot become boys.”

“You cannot change DNA,” she added.

Democrats attempted to push back, sort of, by asking mostly irrelevant questions, like

whether Bird and Lear could discern a transgender woman from a cisgender woman on sight. (“Some people can, some people can’t,” Lear replied.) Others had more practical inquiries, like whether the policy really made sense for colleges and universities.

“Why not separate this out?” asked state Rep. Joe Miller. “As an adjunct professor at a college, I’m not going to know who these kids are and I’m not policing the bathroom.”

No can do, Bird replied. The reason? There are trans kids at colleges, too, and god forbid they be allowed to just live their lives. Not on Bird’s watch!

“It’s a problem in both areas,” he said.

You’ve certainly seen to that: [Fewer than half of Alabama school buses have air conditioning](#) ... [Georgia officials aim to open college doors to more of state’s students with mail outreach](#) ... [When saltwater reaches New Orleans, here’s how higher ed campuses will handle it](#) ... [Report highlights benefits of Maine’s free community college program](#) ... [Federal lawmakers ask IRS to waive penalties for families in troubled Maryland college savings plan](#) ... [‘Critical infrastructure’: Missouri child care shortage called a crisis for employers](#) ... [New Jersey panel to hear dispute over anti-teachers union emails sent to educators](#) ... [Search committee announced to find next chancellor of N.C. A&T](#) ... [West Texas A&M University receives \\$20 million gift for new institute to promote “Texas Panhandle values”](#) ... [Virginia budget puts millions toward support staff as schools struggle to find teachers](#) ... [Washington may avoid child care cliff, but many providers are still struggling](#)



State of Our Democracy

A federal court on Thursday picked a new congressional map for Alabama, ordering the state to adopt a plan that creates one Black-majority district and another near-Black majority district. The ruling caps a two-year legal battle in which state Republicans tried their hardest to preserve their own gerrymandered plan, which [the U.S. Supreme Court deemed](#) in violation of the Voting Rights Act. Judges said the new plan, drafted by a court-appointed special master, did the best job of both preserving Black voting blocs and keeping communities intact, [the Alabama Reflector reported](#).



This is not the map.

(Photo by Brian Lyman/Alabama Reflector)

“We find that Remedial Plan 3 completely remedies the vote dilution we found and satisfies all applicable federal constitutional and statutory requirements while most closely approximating the policy choices the Alabama Legislature made in the 2023 Plan,” the three-judge panel wrote in its 49-page opinion.

Alabama Secretary of State Wes Allen confirmed that the map that “the federal court has forced upon Alabama” would be in place for the 2024 election — not because he *likes* it, but because he *has* to, OK?

“A full hearing on the redistricting issue will take place in the future and I trust Attorney General (Steve) Marshall to represent Alabama through that process,” Allen said in a supremely pouty statement. “In the meantime, I will keep our state’s elections safe, secure and transparent because that is what I was elected to do.”

The ‘tude probably stems from the fact that the map will likely flip a Republican congressional seat, further whittling the GOP’s already razor-thin margin in [the largely useless House](#). This is how it should be, because the state’s Black voters should have always been able to elect their

candidates of choice, said Eric Holder, who heads the Democratic party's [redistricting committee](#).

“In spite of the shameful intransigence of Alabama Republicans, justice has finally prevailed in the state,” he said in a statement. “With this new, fairer map, and for the first time ever, Black voters in Alabama could have two members of Congress representing their interests.”

So there: [A murky outlook for Ukraine aid with U.S. House leadership in turmoil](#) ... [States that send a mail ballot to every voter really do increase turnout, scholars find](#) ... [Ruling on DeSantis veto of Black congressional district in North FL could reshape political map](#) ... [Pacers executive Danny Lopez to run for open Indiana House seat](#) ... [GOP attorney general candidate supports exceptions to Kentucky's abortion ban for rape, incest](#) ... [Report: Emmer not Trumpy enough to be U.S. House majority leader](#) ... [Even before office move is complete, Ohio Sec. of State LaRose appears to blur ethical lines](#) ... [Top Oklahoma lawmakers mull ways to make state budget process more transparent](#) ... [Will Nashville's mayor bridge rift between city and state leaders?](#)



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One Last Thing

An online cheese delivery service (!) and Shark Tank partnered to create [the world's largest charcuterie spread](#) in Palm Beach on Wednesday, filling a 20-by-14 board with 769 pounds of cheese, meat and other snacks. The food was donated to a local nonprofit, which also received roughly \$10,000 from a charity auction featuring the Guinness World Record certificates.

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