

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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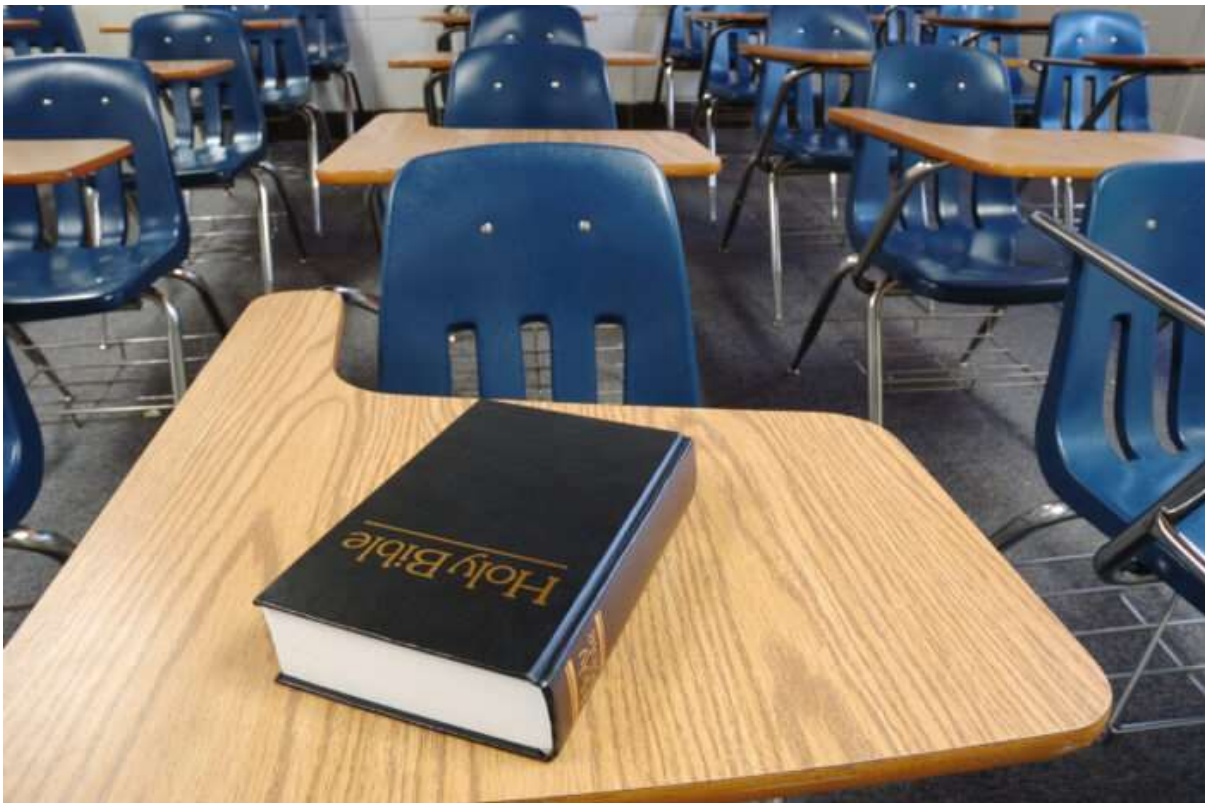
By [Kate Queram](#)

I was all set to send you into the weekend with a school-themed newsletter and a break from politics, right up until I remembered that, *doy*, *everything is politics*. Even schools. Maybe *especially* schools.



The Big Takeaway

Schools are a convenient foil for right-wing lawmakers, because they're a catch-all for every single one of the big conservative culture wars. Public education funding! Vaccines! America's troubling history of racism! The existence of LGBTQ+ kids! Mostly, those fights take place at the state and local level, but they're part of a [broader right-wing push](#) to reimagine public education as a private, free-market, Christian-based institution.



*Coming soon to a “public” school near you.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

It’s not a new focus. Conservatives have been at war with public education since the 1960s, when backlash against school desegregation pushed the religious right [to political prominence](#). Republicans have sought to defund the U.S. Department of Education [since it began operating](#), a rallying cry that reached its inevitable peak with Education Secretary [Betsy DeVos](#). Those efforts have expanded post-pandemic, encompassing [school board races](#), [LGBTQ+ issues](#) and the nebulous topic of “parents’ rights,” but really, it’s all the same fight. The goal is to destabilize the system. Everything else is background noise

The behind-the-scenes coordination is laughably evident once you zoom out. From January 2021 to June 2023, lawmakers in 46 states introduced [392 bills](#) indirectly censoring classroom curriculum, often under the guise of “[parental rights](#).” School book bans and restrictions [rose by 33%](#) in that same time period, jumping from 2,532 bans in the 2021-22 school year to 3,362 in 2022-23. More than 40% of those were in Florida, where a restrictive “[Don’t Say Gay](#)” law took effect in July 2022. Across the country, Republicans took note: If you empower them to do it, conservative parents are more than happy to meddle in school policy.

Most lawmakers simply introduce copycat versions of bills that succeed in other states, but sometimes they seek additional help. In Wisconsin, Republicans outsourced much of a parental rights bill to the Wisconsin Institute for Law &

Liberty (WILL), a conservative law firm that's best known for [suing municipalities](#) over policies that allegedly infringe on "parents' rights." This is a decidedly niche expertise, but it was a perfect fit for state Rep. Robert Wittke, who consulted the firm on both the substance of the parental rights bill and the procedural moves needed to shepherd it through the legislature, [the Wisconsin Examiner reported](#).



*"The defense of rights that parents already have rests."
(Photo by Chris Ryan/Getty Images)*

[The resulting legislation](#), approved 6-3 Thursday by a GOP-majority committee with no discussion, would establish 16 "fundamental rights" for parents, from deciding a child's religion to receiving "timely notice" whenever a school lesson might include a "controversial subject," including "instruction about gender identity, sexual orientation, racial identity; structural, systemic or institutional racism" and basically anything else that anyone anywhere might find disagreeable. Parents who feel those "rights" have been violated could sue for damages of up to \$10,000, according to the bill.

Several of those provisions came directly from WILL Associate Counsel Cory Brewer, who proposed a number of "possible additions" to make the legislation "even more robust," according to emails obtained via public records requests. Key among those was an expanded definition of "medical care," which now

covers a parent's right to be notified of — and to withhold consent for — “each health care service, including vaccinations and immunizations, offered at the child's school.” Per Brewer's suggestion, the bill also codifies “the right to timely notice” of any classroom surveys that might disclose the political affiliations or health conditions of a child or their family.

Brewer also assisted with a number of other matters, from securing a sponsor for the Senate version of the legislation (“Were you working on this or was I supposed to find someone?” wrote Terri Sue Griffiths, a research assistant for Wittke), scheduling a public hearing, and several technical legislative questions that would usually be fielded by the nonpartisan Wisconsin Legislative Council. (“I can certainly have [the council] help as well but wanted to reach out to you first,” Griffiths wrote.)



JUST LET US KNOW
(Photo by Natallia/Adobe Stock)

This isn't really surprising; it's just part of the larger pattern. Wittke's bill, just like the dozens that came before it, is designed to remold school curriculum and policies without overtly wresting control of individual schools, which might work better if it weren't so, you know, overt. In short, they're not following anyone, said Jill Underly, superintendent of the state Department of Public Instruction.

The bill is “designed to shut down discussion, and creates an environment of fear for our educators because it inserts them into a culture war that no one should be fighting in the first place,” Underly said.

Two Democrats and a Republican joined together for a culture war ceasefire in Florida, cosponsoring a bill that would bar public schools from teaching, or even implying, that enslaved people benefited in any way from being enslaved, [per the Florida Phoenix](#). (You wouldn’t think this would require legislation, but it’s Florida, so here we are.)

[The legislation](#), introduced this week, seeks to mitigate the idiocy of the Florida Board of Education, which drew national condemnation last summer after approving new African American history standards that included a section requiring [middle schoolers](#) to learn “how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.” Vice President Kamala Harris excoriated the revisions two days later, telling [a crowd in Jacksonville](#) that the updated standards were part of (ding ding!) a national right-wing agenda with no basis in fact or actual history.



Same.

(Photo by Danielle J. Brown/Florida Phoenix)

“Adults know what slavery really involved. It involved rape; it involved torture; it involved taking a baby from their mother; it involved some of the worst examples of depriving people of humanity in our world; it involved subjecting people to think

of themselves and be thought of as less than humans,” Harris said. “So, in the context of that, how is it that anyone could suggest that, in the midst of these atrocities, that there was any benefit to being subjected to this level of dehumanization?”

The bill would return to a saner version of history, permitting teachers to “address, in an age-appropriate manner, how the individual freedoms of persons have been infringed by slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation and racial discrimination, as well as to topics relating to the enactment and enforcement of laws resulting in racial oppression, racial segregation, and racial discrimination and how recognition of these freedoms has overturned these unjust laws.”

It is, said state Rep. Mike Beltran, a far more accurate lesson plan.

“Someone must have picked up some useful skills at some point but of all the things that we could be instructing on, I don’t think that needs to be in the [academic standards of Florida],” said Beltran, a Tampa-area Republican who cosponsored the bill. “I’m not someone who plays identity politics or likes to be preoccupied by something that happened over 200 years ago, but still I think that’s offensive. I can see how it would be even more offensive to other folks.”



(Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal)

The Ohio Board of Education had no time for policy discussions at its monthly meeting, which focused mostly on a massive funding shortage that could lead to payroll

problems at the Department of Education by July, [the Ohio Capital Journal reported](#).

“What we face, in terms of a budget deficit right now, is a clear and present danger for our ability to do the roles that we’ve been assigned to do,” Superintendent Paul Craft told the board at the meeting, convened just six days into his tenure. “As we get into that June timeframe, we’ll probably not be able to make payroll. That’s worrisome.”

The shortfall — about \$2 million, or 20% of the total operating budget — can’t be fixed by cutting corners or loosening licensing requirements, Craft said. There is only one cure: More money. And there is only one way to get more money: Make friends with state lawmakers.

“Pretty quickly,” he added.

The gap isn’t unprecedented, particularly in a red state like Ohio, where Republicans hold every statewide elected position as well as veto-proof majorities in both chambers of the legislature. The House version of the current state budget had allocated enough funding for the department, Craft said, but it was removed in the Senate version.

“That will happen from time to time,” he said.

Time after time: [Biden announces plan to cancel some student loan balances under \\$12,000](#) ... [Alabama state superintendent Eric Mackey wants ‘guardrails’ around voucher legislation](#) ... [Georgia governor aims to get down to business with school voucher legislation this year](#) ... [Louisiana Dept. of Education declined summer food assistance for children](#) ... [\(Louisiana\) LSU says it scrubbed diversity statement due to age](#) ... [In 2021, Maine mandated teaching of African American studies. New bill would ensure follow through.](#) ... [Report: Black children lag in key educational benchmarks in Michigan](#) ... [Nevada teachers union files initiative to ask legislature, voters to legalize strikes for educators](#) ... [New Hampshire Democrats consider new school funding approaches, with differing opinions](#) ... [Durham, N.C. school board candidate facing decade-old sexual harassment allegation](#) ... [Pennsylvania needs \\$5.4 billion to bring underfunded schools up to par, commission finds](#) ... [South Dakota plans to require ACT for high school juniors by 2025](#) ... [Utah lawmakers unveil flagship bill to restrict DEI statements, alter programs](#) ... [In challenging times, a Vermont school district works work to connect students and families with community services](#) ... [Washington officials turn to schools in fight against opioid epidemic](#)



State of Our Democracy

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson said Friday he would stick to [a spending deal](#) he struck Sunday with Democrats but offered no details on how he might persuade the far-right faction of his caucus to go along with it, leaving open (yet

again) the possibility of (yet another) partial government shutdown, [per our D.C. bureau](#).



*"Stay tuned, will be wild."
(Photo by Jennifer Shutt/States Newsroom)*

"Our top-line agreement remains," Johnson said in a statement to reporters just off the House floor. "We are getting our next steps together. And we are working toward a robust appropriations process, so stay tuned for all of that."

The drama puts Johnson in the same position that ultimately felled former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who spent weeks capitulating to a whiny group of MAGA hardliners before throwing his hands up and working with Democrats to honor the spending deal he'd previously negotiated with President Joe Biden. The move averted a government shutdown but [cost McCarthy the speakership](#). He said he had no regrets, but then [resigned from Congress](#) altogether, so probably he had at least a few regrets, probably mostly related to the existence of [Rep. Matt Gaetz](#) (R-Fla.).

The current holdouts, led by Reps. Bob Good (R-Va.) and Chip Roy (R-Texas), have already gummed up House proceedings this week by rejecting a routine rules package solely to get Johnson's attention. Probably it worked, though it didn't seem to move the needle on their demands, which [boil down to](#) rejecting

the spending deal in favor of a stopgap funding bill that includes a 1% blanket cut and hardline immigration policies. Most are also against additional funding for the war in Ukraine, which was projected to run out of money by the end of December.

Not our problem, according to Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.). Definitely Johnson's problem, though, as is Greene herself, who said she'd be willing to kick him out if he pushes the aid package.

"We don't have to trade \$60 billion for Ukraine for our own country's border security," Greene said. "That is a failing, losing strategy and I will never support it. I'll fight it as much as possible. Even if I have to go so far to vacate the chair, there's others that agree with me."

Congrats on the consensus: [Former Michigan Republican lawmaker acquitted on charges in federal corruption case ...](#) [Michigan redistricting commission sets mapping dates as Feb. 2 deadline looms ...](#) [Last Republican-appointed Minnesota Supreme Court justice to retire in May ...](#) [New Mexico governor has ignored calls to pull executive order that could hinder speech critical of Israel ...](#) [Oregon Supreme Court defers to U.S. Supreme Court in Trump ballot access case ...](#) [Biden's Pennsylvania visit will highlight Allentown-area community as an economic success story ...](#) [Biden returning to South Carolina for Democratic dinner ahead of primary ...](#) [From Donald Trump to Mike Johnson, Texas' Chip Roy is a thorn in the Republican Party ...](#) [Texas GOP chair Matt Rinaldi backed a group with white supremacist ties — while working for its billionaire funder ...](#) [West Virginia Legislature adjourns early for the weekend; Senate defends process for fast track bills ...](#) [Wisconsin Supreme Court rejects request to reconsider redistricting decision](#)



From The Newsrooms

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- [Transgender advocates, DeWine respond to Ohio House overriding governor's veto of House Bill 68](#)
- [Oklahoma Democrat hopes overturned convictions spur lawmakers to pay exonerees more](#)



One Last Thing

I'm so happy I'm finally in the part of my life where the [Super Bowl halftime performers](#) bring me joy while also confusing the youths. Peace up, A-town down, IYKYK.



To be clear I will not watch the Super Bowl. Still excited!
(via [Giphy](#))

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