

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

Do you have questions about government, politics, scandalous library books, and/or why we are the way that we are? Send them over to askkate@statesnewsroom.com, and I may answer them in an upcoming newsletter!

I feel like we have, perhaps, lost the plot.

What I mean is this: The likely GOP presidential nominee is the guy currently facing multiple felony charges for his attempt to overturn the last presidential election. The people we pay to run the government are [not running the government](#) because doing their jobs competently might hurt that guy's chances of winning. [Lawmakers in half](#) the country have restricted voting access based on conspiracy theories over an election in which many of them ascended to power.

This is a partial list that excludes a number of other existential threats, including but not limited to our [ever-warming climate](#), late-stage [capitalism](#) and the general existence of [Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas](#). There is no shortage of important things to focus on, and yet here I am, about to write a newsletter about the country's obsession with library books and the imagined political leanings of public school teachers.

Perhaps we have not lost the plot. Perhaps there *is* no plot.



The Big Takeaway

Last week, Oregon state Sen. Lew Frederick introduced a seemingly innocuous bill: [A proposal](#) to prevent school districts from banning textbooks or library materials solely because they depict people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, individuals with disabilities or any other group protected from discrimination. The bill does not change the procurement process for reading materials or restrict parents' ability to monitor what their children read; it also offers no punitive measures for violations, most of which are [already covered](#) under existing [state law](#). Mostly, it just acknowledges a host of books that already sit on library shelves in schools across the state, Frederick said.

“It’s not telling people that they have to read certain things,” he told [the Oregon Capital Chronicle](#). “There’s none of that. It’s just saying that these books that are in your libraries are books that are part of the whole library. They’re going to be there. It’s not forcing anybody to do anything.”



*A pile of books waiting patiently to inflict wokeness on the children.
(Photo by Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images)*

But the mere whiff of literary controversy was enough to attract the right-wing masses. Within three days, the bill had been flagged in a [glossy campaign-style video](#) posted by “Coco,” a pseudonymous “anti-leftist” Twitter account with 25,000 followers. (The main thrust of the ad, courtesy of a deep-voiced narrator: “Discrimination. It’s a word we hear a lot. We all agree that it’s wrong to discriminate. So why is it OK for the Democrats in the Oregon legislature to discriminate against the majority of Oregonian parents who do not agree with extremist gender ideology?”) The video doesn’t disclose its funders, but it still worked as intended. By Tuesday afternoon, more than 800 people had [submitted written testimony](#) on the bill. (For comparison: A \$500 million [housing proposal](#) backed by Gov. Tina Kotek drew around 400 comments.)

This isn’t particularly surprising. Book bans are all the rage among Republicans and right-wing parents, both [nationally](#) and in [Oregon](#). Virtually all of them target the same type of book (anything featuring a non-white, non-Christian and/or non-cisgender character), usually with the same argument (“sexually explicit material”). Most of the submitted testimony followed that playbook, either to the letter (“this bill ... furthers the intrusion of sexually explicit books into our schools”) or more blatantly (“schools are for education of reading, writing, and math. Not learning of gender identity or any other LGBTQ+ propaganda”). None cited specific titles, which is typical of this type of politically driven uproar, according to Tamara Quandt, an elementary school teacher and parent in the Canby School District, which pulled [36 books](#) last year in response to parent complaints but ultimately banned [just one](#) (Vladimir Nabokov’s “Lolita”).

“The people championing it were definitely driven by a political agenda and used a lot of religious rhetoric, but they were very careful,” Quandt said. “They had talking points that had come from outside organizations and knew they couldn’t say ‘We want these books removed because we don’t want LGBTQ characters.’ They would always use that there was just sexual content or inappropriate content for students.”



Students, content.
(Photo by Getty Images)

Lawmakers in Utah embraced a similar cause Monday, voting 6-4 to advance a bill that would bar teachers from “endorsing, promoting or disparaging” political views, religious beliefs or “viewpoints” on sexual orientation or gender identity, unless that information is somehow relevant to the curriculum. Even when permitted under the bill, those discussions could not “invite, suggest or encourage” a student to change their beliefs, [per the Utah News Dispatch](#).

[The legislation](#) is a slightly different version of a “Don’t Say Gay” bill that [failed to clear](#) the legislature last year amid [concerns from the LGBTQ+ community](#). Both were championed by state Rep. Jeff Stenquist, a Republican who said he drafted this year’s proposal after a constituent approached him with concerns over discussions in her daughter’s first grade classroom. Mostly, this is a “perception problem,” Stenquist said. Still, we’ve got to “get political and ideological fights ... out of the classroom,” he added.

“[My goal is] to reassure parents that students are not being exposed to some political or ideological ideal that they may not agree with,” he said.



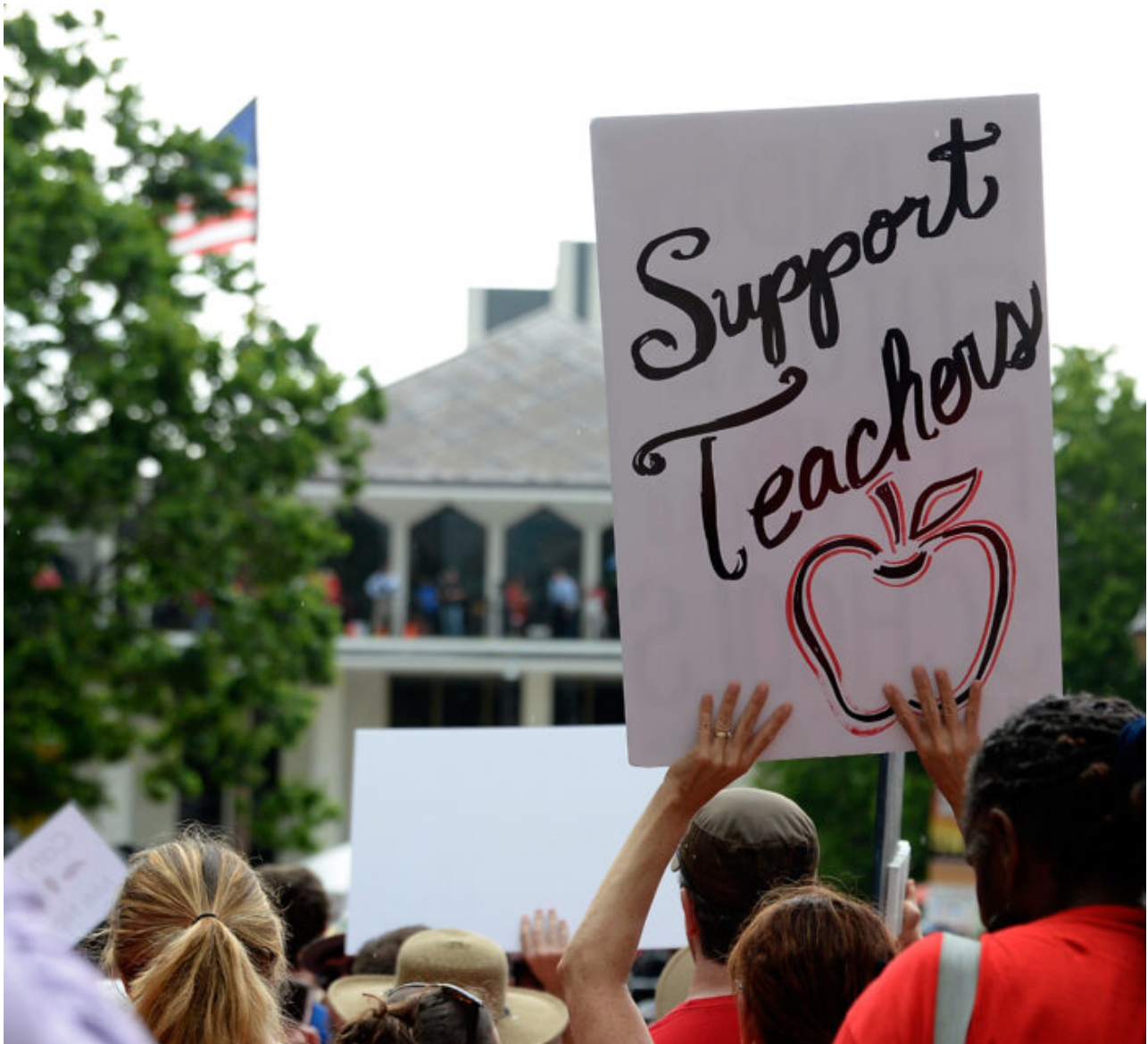
Ah yes, the hallmark of good education: Exposing students exclusively to things they already know and agree with!

(Photo by Pavel Bobrovskiy/Adobe Stock)

The problem is that it's hard to police speech or even determine what constitutes a "political" or "social" belief. For example, the bill's restrictions would apply to "symbols" like the Pride flag, which can be a symbol of advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights or a simple display of solidarity for a community increasingly under attack, particularly in schools. The bill offers no specifics on who would decide the intent of a given symbol or conversation, or how they might go about that, or really much of anything else. The language is generally broad and vague, which critics said could lead to a chilling effect among teachers who fear legal liability for (unspecified) violations. Even the general act of teaching might run afoul of the policy, said Sara Jones, director of government relations for the Utah Education Association.

"It implies classroom instruction, which includes careful analysis, discussion, deliberation of facts, should never include a student then considering how that information might change their viewpoint or their opinion," she said. "Ambiguous language is a hazard for educators who won't know how the statute applies to them, and may end up facing disciplinary or licensure actions."

Teachers in Louisiana are facing financial uncertainty thanks to [a budget proposal](#) from Gov. Jeff Landry that authorizes a second round of stipends, rather than permanent salary increases, for educators and school staff. The draft spending plan allocates \$198 million for across-the-board payments — \$2,000 for teachers and \$1,000 for support staff, the [same](#) as last year, [the Louisiana Illuminator reported](#).



*With a fixed salary, perhaps.
(Photo by Sara D. Davis/Getty Images)*

“Our worst fear came through,” said Cynthia Posey, legislative director for the Louisiana Federation of Teachers. “It’s really devastating to a profession where people are paid so much less than others with college degrees.”

The stipend can’t be factored into retirement benefits and is not guaranteed to repeat in the next budget cycle, when lawmakers will have to contend with a

[projected \\$560 million shortfall](#) thanks mostly to tax cuts. The dismal forecast all but doomed permanent pay raises, which enjoy legal protections once enacted and thus are difficult to scale back. But the uncertainty was still frustrating for educators, who said it would dampen recruiting efforts in a state that already lags behind in teacher pay.

“How are they going to plan to buy a home when they don’t know what their salary is going to be?” Posey said. “Why would anyone go into teaching?”

ABCs

- [Kentucky education measures aim to protect students, certify more substitute teachers, examine funding](#)
- [Audit: \\$12.3 million went unused due to lack of training by Maryland Department of Education](#)
- [House Bill 2 would give \\$397 million to Ohio colleges and universities for capital projects](#)
- [Lawmakers look for compromise on vacating Tennessee State University’s board](#)



Caught Our Eye

FYI: The U.S./Canada border is doing just fine, thank you very much.

“I think our border’s working very well,” Canadian Consul General for New England Bernadette Jordan [told the New Hampshire Bulletin](#).

This isn’t as snarky as it seems. The northern border has, actually, seen higher numbers of crossings, prompting state Republicans to call for stronger enforcement measures. But apprehensions have also increased, along with legal crossings, Jordan said.

“It just shows: If there are apprehensions, it’s working,” she said of the border enforcement. “People are being stopped.”



From The Newsrooms

Criminal Justice

- [New SPLC report highlights disparities in Alabama's juvenile justice system](#)
- [Kansas House debates bill elevating penalties for injuring, killing law enforcement dogs or horses](#)
- [Public defender's office urges New Jersey legislators to reform 'draconian' parole system](#)
- [Utah lawmakers looking to scrap lie detector tests for victims of sexual assault](#)

Health care

- [When will Alabamians get medical cannabis?](#)
- [Governments can erase your medical debt for pennies on the dollar — and some are](#)
- [Halfway through 'unwinding,' Medicaid enrollment is down about 10 million](#)
- [Traumatized by past abuse, these women say a Mississippi therapist added to their pain](#)

Gov & Politics

- [Backers of North Dakota property tax, election reform measures shooting for November ballot](#)
- [In Virginia's Democratic legislature, campaign finance reform bills languish without votes](#)
- [Alsobrooks hits the airwaves in a Maryland Senate race transformed by Hogan](#)
- [Group investing \\$40 million in electing Democrats, including in New Hampshire](#)



One Last Thing

Indian police cleared a [suspected Chinese spy pigeon](#) and released it into the wild after eight months in captivity. The pigeon was, it turns out, just a boring old standard-issue open-water racing bird.

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