

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

Thanks for being here and [supporting our work](#).



By [Kate Queram](#)

I'm burning daylight and I also keep thinking it's Thursday, so let's get right to the news, shall we?



The Big Takeaway

Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters on Thursday urged members of the public to refrain from “rushing to opinion” or “passing judgment” until police conclude an investigation into the death of a 16-year-old nonbinary student, [the Oklahoma Voice reported](#). Until then, just thoughts and prayers, please.

“Losing a student is extremely difficult,” Walters said during a board of education meeting. “We should be keeping the Owasso families, communities in our prayers. It’s a heartbreaking tragedy and it’s difficult to so many folks over there. We want to be there to comfort them as best we can.”



Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old nonbinary high school student who died one day after a physical fight in a school bathroom.

(Photo via the Oklahoma Voice)

Nex Benedict died of unspecified causes on Feb. 8, a day after they and a transgender student were allegedly involved in a fight at Owasso High School. Benedict suffered a medical emergency the next day and died in the emergency room. It's not clear how, or if, the fight contributed to their death, though police said Wednesday that preliminary autopsy findings indicated "that the decedent did not die as a result of trauma."

"Any further comments on the cause of death are currently pending until toxicology results and other ancillary testing results are received," the Owasso Police Department said in a statement.

But it did not appear to be an isolated incident. Benedict had been [bullied at school](#) since at least September, months after Gov. Kevin Stitt signed [a bill](#) requiring students to use bathrooms that align with the sex listed on their birth certificates. That proposal was one of at least 35 [anti-LGBTQ+ bills](#) introduced last year by Oklahoma Republicans, three of which became law. Another [55 bills](#) have been filed so far this year, the most in any state.

Most were supported by Walters, an [anti-woke MAGA crusader](#) who cares *deeply* about students' bathroom usage, the gender listed in [their school records](#), their [reading materials](#), and a bunch of other things that do not even remotely affect his life. At different times, Walters has described those issues as "transgender ideology," "an assault on truth" and/or part of a "radical gender theory" that somehow endangers (cisgender, one presumes) girls. When

lawmakers haven't acted quickly or drastically enough to combat those "threats," Walters has pushed his own policies through the board of education, including a rule approved last year that required school employees to inform parents if their child changes their pronouns or gender identity, effectively outing trans kids without their consent to people who may not be supportive or accepting.



*Brutalist architecture seems like an appropriate style for Ryan Walters' office building.
(Photo by Kyle Phillips for the Oklahoma Voice)*

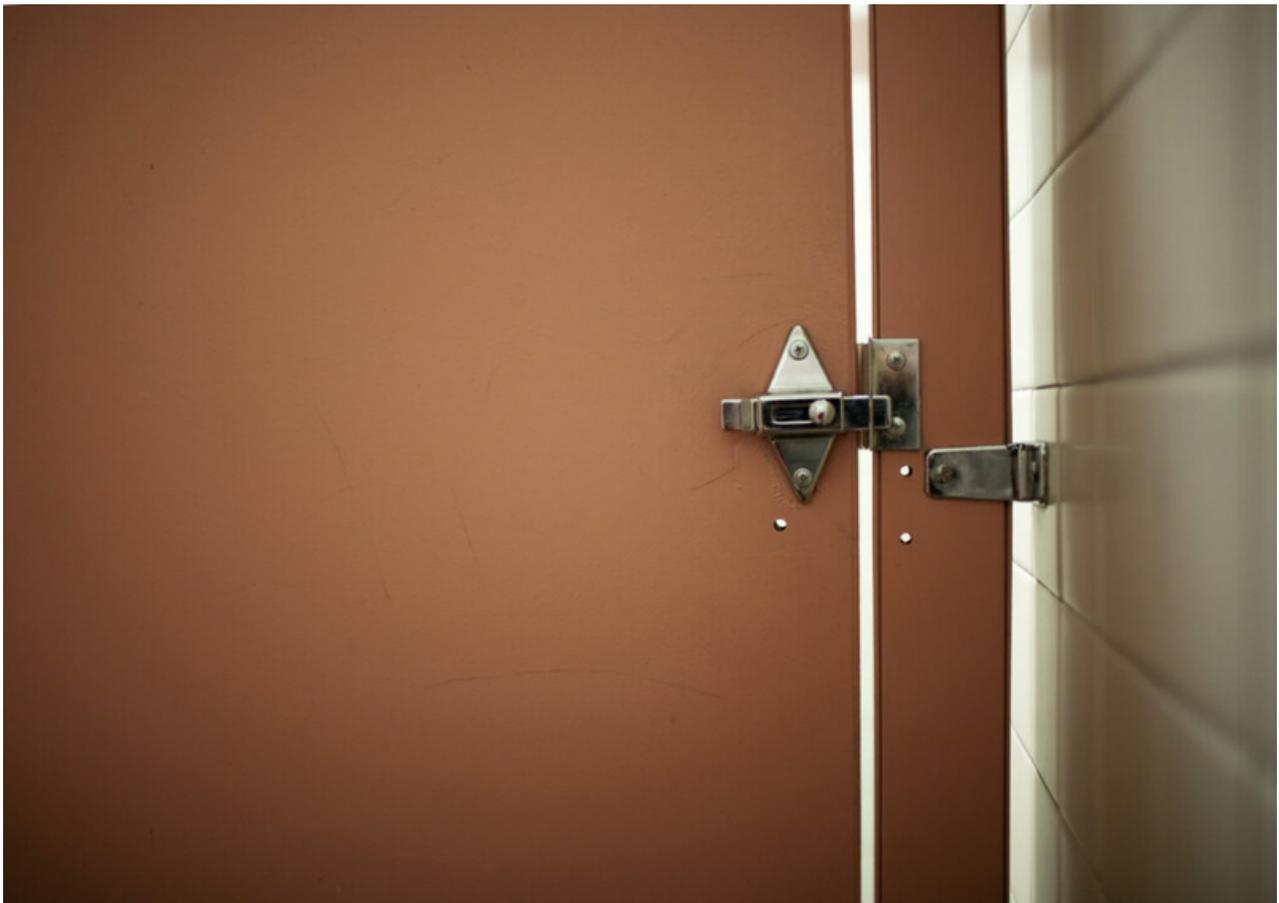
The endless, pointless posturing has turned education meetings into flashpoints, pitting Walters and his board members against frustrated parents and activists. Those tensions flared again on Thursday as members of the public tried in vain to explain that actions, and hateful rhetoric, have very real consequences. A former principal told the board that "these children who attacked Nex had to be taught to hate," while an LGBTQ+ advocate stressed the responsibility of policymakers to "make sure that we disrupt this harm going forward."

There was little response from board members beyond bland calls for prayers and condolences that misgendered Nix at least once. Walters, for his part, claimed to be focusing on "student safety" and vowed to "learn from" the

tragedy, “figure things out and make sure we’re doing all we can.” Of course, he added, it’s far too soon to do any of that *now*.

“Right now, until we know more details, I’m going to be praying for the family [and] for that community,” he said. “It is absolutely heartbreaking and a tragedy.”

This is an extreme version of a common red-state tableau, in which Republicans enact hateful policy while claiming it’s not meant to be hateful and then act surprised when it emboldens hateful people to be more hateful. Georgia Republicans followed the script to a T on Thursday, claiming that a bill to restrict transgender students’ bathroom usage had nothing to do with transgender students, [per the Georgia Recorder](#).



“We need final say over trans’ kids bathroom habits, but not in a way that, you know, targets trans kids, at all, for real.”

(Photo by Getty Images)

“The way it’s termed in the bill is that in the event that the school has to make a reasonable accommodation for students — so, again, it stipulates that biological males use the male facilities, biological females use the female facilities, and if there is a child that is struggling with identity or uncomfortable with any one of those options, then the school is actually required in this case to make a

reasonable accommodation for the student,” said state Rep. Josh Bonner, a Fayetteville Republican and the bill’s sponsor. “And again, that applies for the restrooms, for locker rooms, and for overnight field trips. So I do believe it’s a very common sense approach to this issue that does protect all children.”

It was a lengthy speech that explained nothing, including how anyone could claim with a straight fact that [a proposal](#) to dictate bathroom usage based on the production of eggs or sperm is somehow not targeting students who identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. Forcing trans students (who are definitely not the target of the bill!) to use a separate bathroom is not “common sense,” according to trans students who have been forced to use separate bathrooms at school. It also does not “protect” them, according to (not targeted) trans students, their parents, and LGBTQ+ advocates. It probably just makes them more susceptible to abuse, according to Danielle Bonanno, president emerita at the nonprofit Athens Pride and Queer Collective.

“This isn’t about protection, this bill is about exclusion, creating fear among those seeking to learn and live in peace,” she said. “Transgender children, more often victims than perpetrators, are put at risk, not protected ... This bill will harm our children, divide our communities, and move Georgia backwards.”

I was going to end this section by telling you about a bill to arm teachers [in Utah](#), but I am too tired to sustain my outrage, so instead I will send you off into the weekend by telling you that a proposal in New Jersey would allow kids as young as 14 to seek outpatient mental health care without parental consent. [The bill](#), which would change [a single word in state law](#), was advanced Thursday by the Senate Health Committee on a 3-1 vote, [the New Jersey Monitor reported](#).



“Seriously, it’s one word.”

(Photo by Hal Brown for the New Jersey Monitor)

“The only change that we’re making to the existing law is lowering the age of access from 16 years old to 14 years old,” said state Sen. Joe Vitale, a Democrat and the bill’s co-sponsor. “Everything else in current law continues to exist without any change at all.”

Proponents of the change said it simply provided options for kids whose parents might be abusive or disinterested at a time when increasing numbers of teens are [struggling with mental health](#). Critics of the bill were mostly concerned about things the bill would not do, like allow providers to dispense medication to kids without parental consent (no), or eliminate the entire Division of Child Protection and Permanency (also no), or make it easier for social workers to sex traffic children (no. Also, what?). At least one person — a former Republican lawmaker, natch — based his opposition on the fact that current law bars kids from doing other things, like voting, drinking or owning guns. (True, but again: What?)

“Anyone under the age of 18 cannot do or take part in, legally, in the state of New Jersey, vote in elections, purchase or consume alcohol, purchase or possess tobacco products,” said Ed Durr, a former state senator. “It doesn’t get

any simpler than this: The parents or guardians should always be involved in all decisions made about their children and their welfare.”

Yeah, about that, Vitale responded. *We’re changing a single word here.*

“If you boil it down to what the facts are and what it actually does, it’s none of those awful things that were suggested,” Vitale said. “It’s more of just an age issue. It wasn’t about pedophilia and transgenderism and other loony catchphrases that I just can’t tolerate. It’s not fair, and it’s ugly, ugly talk.”

Unfair and ugly, got it

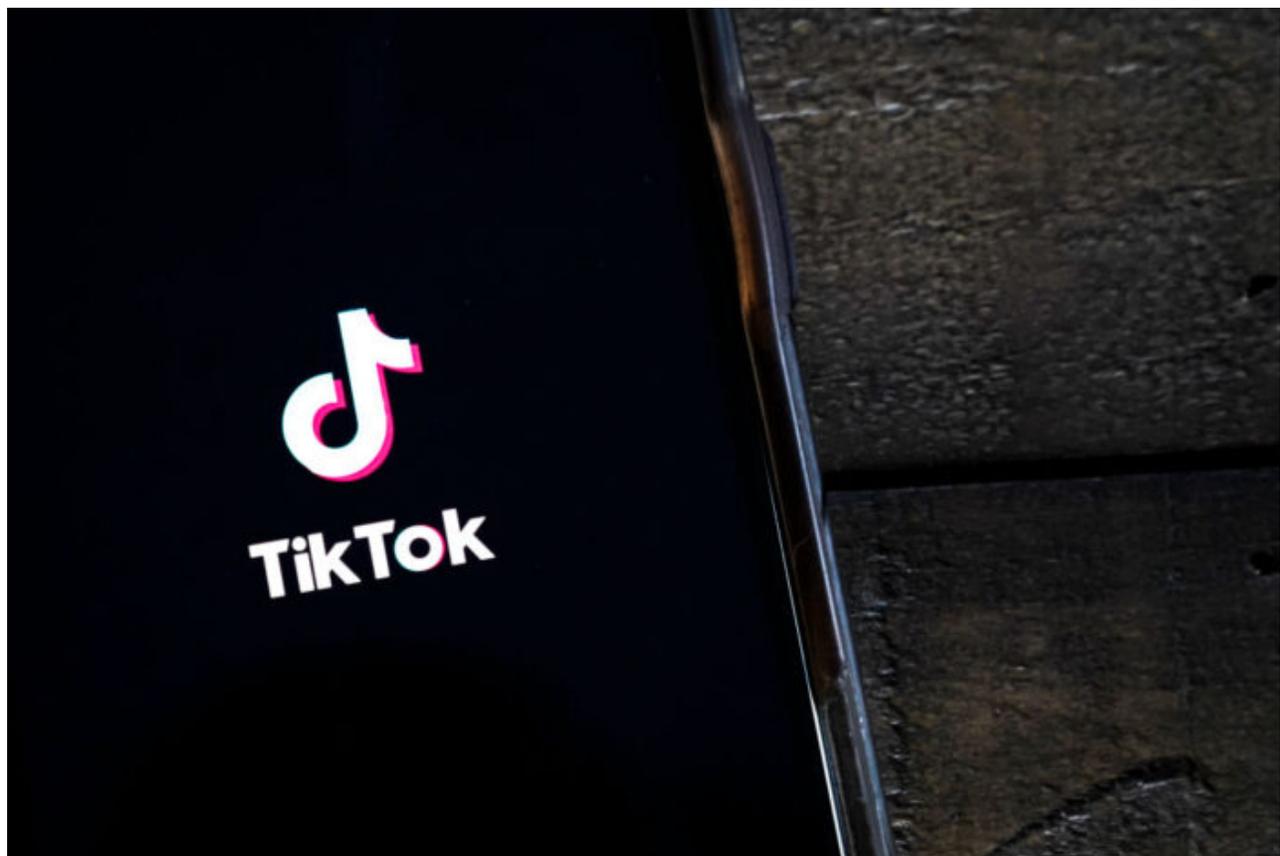
- [‘Divisive concepts,’ anti-DEI bill passes Alabama Senate](#)
- [Juvenile court records could go public in Louisiana despite privacy, revenge concerns](#)
- [Maine struggles with reunifying families in the child welfare system. Here’s why.](#)
- [Lawmaker makes final bid for cursive writing requirement in Missouri schools](#)



State of Our Democracy

A group of Republican senators wrote a letter, on paper, to chastise the Biden campaign for opening a TikTok account, a move they framed as a security risk based on the app’s ties to the Chinese government, [the Kansas Reflector reported](#).

“TikTok endangers national security, and this concern is aggravated by the platform’s appeal to young people in the United States,” read [the letter](#), signed by U.S. Sens. Jerry Moran (R-Kansas), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and a dozen or so others. “We therefore urge you to delete your account and set a better example for the American people by restating that TikTok is a national security threat.”



Nefarious, possibly!
(Photo by Getty Images)

Democrats and Republicans have repeatedly raised the alarm about TikTok, based in part on feedback from national security experts like FBI Director Christopher Wray and former National Security Agency Director Paul Nakasone. President Joe Biden at least tacitly acknowledged the risks in 2022, approving a limited TikTok ban for federal government devices as part of a much larger spending bill. The turnabout is “incredibly troubling,” the letter said.

“How can the federal government warn Americans about the risks of this app if the Commander in Chief uses it, too? Why should government employees be expected to honor a ban on official devices when the President rebuts the core justification for the law? And why should Americans believe you will protect them from foreign threats, when your use of the platform suggests disregard for well-known national security threats?” it continued. “The office of the presidency is about leadership. By downloading TikTok, you are setting a poor example for the American people, while making them less safe for the bargain.”

This is probably the most anyone has ever been scolded about TikTok, particularly for something as tame-slash-creaky as the debut video on the [@Bidenhq](#)* account, in which the president answered questions about the Super

Bowl during the Super Bowl. (I barely cared enough about that to explain it.) The account is (clearly, I thought) maintained not by Biden but by his campaign staff, which also oversees accounts on Facebook, Threads (Mark Zuckerberg's Twitter), X (...Twitter), and Truth Social (LOL).

Neither Biden nor his campaign had responded as of Friday afternoon. (Tick, tock!)

*Security risk maybe, IDK

Feeling like P. Diddy

- [Bills, bills, bills. What could still pass — and what might die — in Indiana's 2024 session](#)
- [One voting machine tampering cases moves to trial in Michigan, two others await consideration](#)
- [Oregon voters cynical about government, support campaign finance reform, survey finds](#)



From The Newsrooms

Criminal Justice

- [Family of Gregory Gunn, Montgomery legislators criticize Alabama AG's plea deal with ex-cop](#)
- [Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis says he'll sign bill opening Jeffrey Epstein's grand jury records](#)
- [Police shielded from more lawsuits in a 'bad, bad, bad bill' advancing in Louisiana Legislature](#)
- [Utah attorney general could no longer engage in outside legal work under widely supported bill](#)

Environment

- [California's polluted communities could miss out on billions under state's flawed system](#)
- [EPA directive renews debate over Minnesota's role in protecting](#)
- [They lost everything in New Mexico's biggest wildfire. Now they're sounding the alarm for others.](#)
- [Bills requiring identification of](#)

[drinking water from farm pollution](#)

[‘forever chemical’ sources
advancing through Virginia
legislature](#)

Gov & Politics

- [Biden calls on governors to press Congress on immigration overhaul, Ukraine aid](#)
- [Kansas Senate passes pair of public health bills tied to political fury about COVID-19](#)
- [Michigan lawmakers band together with newly formed coalition to ban political contributions from utilities](#)
- [Power of connections, incumbency on display in North Carolina Ag Commissioner race](#)



One Last Thing

An Oklahoma judge [agreed to resign](#) this month after she was caught sending hundreds of texts while overseeing a murder trial, including messages mocking prosecutors, praising the defense attorney and referring to a key witness as a liar. (She also made liberal use of emojis.) As part of a settlement agreement, District Judge Traci Soderstrom also agreed she would not seek judicial office again in Oklahoma.

“I promised to uphold the Constitution in a fair, even-handed and efficient manner,” Soderstrom said in a resignation letter given to local media. “I believe that I have done so. However, being human, I have also faltered.”

News From The States

A PROJECT OF STATES NEWSROOM

Did someone forward you this newsletter?

[SUBSCRIBE](#) | [LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR NEWSROOMS](#) | [FOLLOW](#)



©News From The States, all rights reserved.
www.newsfromthestates.com | info@newsfromthestates.com
Manage your donation and subscription preferences [here](#).

Add info@newsfromthestates.com to your [address book](#) to ensure delivery.
Did someone forward you this newsletter? [Click here](#) to get it delivered to your inbox.

States Newsroom – News From The States
1414 Raleigh Rd #127
Chapel Hill, NC 27517
United States

You are receiving this email because you opted in via our website or States Newsroom. If you believe you received this message in error or wish to change your subscription, please (Unsubscribing is not supported in previews).