



CENTER FOR
POLICY & ACTION

AN ATTACK ON BELONGING: Culture Wars in Classrooms

*The National Parents Union
Center for Policy and
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SOURCE: Rebecca Blackwell/AP Photo

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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, we are seeing radical right wing extremism bring culture wars into our classrooms by passing hateful legislation that limits student freedom to learn.

State lawmakers are advancing legislation that restricts how schools can support children's gender and racial identity development, academically and personally. Though bills vary from state to state, they echo common themes.

1. Prohibiting teaching of topics deemed 'divisive' such as race and gender.
2. Codifying so-called "parental rights" to certain information and decisions.
3. Creating legal avenues for parents to attack school districts.
4. Restricting gender non-conforming students from accessing educational services and facilities.

SAMPLE LAWS & BILLS

Florida HB 7 (law):

What it says: Commonly known as the "Stop WOKE Act," HB 7 prohibits schools from teaching students that some people are inherently privileged or prejudiced because of their race, color, national origin, or sex. Schools may only present these ideas in an "objective" manner and "without endorsement."

What it means: Because of its vague language, this law has allowed state bureaucrats to dictate how and what schools teach. For instance, in early 2023 Florida's Department of Education used HB 7 to force the College Board to water down its new AP African American Studies framework.

North Carolina HB 187 (passed House, referred to Senate committee on 3/23):

What it says: This bill prohibits school staff from "compelling" students to support 13 particular concepts. For instance, schools may not push students to feel that they bear responsibility for past actions committed by people of their same race or sex, or that certain races or sexes hold built-in privileges or traits. It also forces schools to notify their communities before providing instruction on any of the 13 concepts, unless planned instruction meets certain criteria.

What it means: HB 187 will make it difficult for teachers to handle tough concepts about race, sex, and American history. Cautious teachers will choose not to address controversial concepts at all for fear of accusations from students and parents. The bill also forces school officials to spend more time publicizing curricular decisions and less time supporting students' learning.

SAMPLE LAWS & BILLS

Texas SB 8 (passed Senate, referred to House committee 5/15):

What it says: This bill requires school districts to notify parents about their right to challenge instructional materials and lodge complaints about instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity. It forces school districts to create a “grievance” process through which parents can lodge multiple complaints against their school district or principal, and forces the state to create a process for reviewing classroom materials. It bans all instruction regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

What it means: SB 8 will make it easier for parents to challenge and restrict classroom content they do not like. It will force schools and districts to spend more time reviewing parent complaints, and less time improving children’s academic outcomes.

Missouri SB 134 (introduced, in Senate committee):

What it says: This bill forces school officials to disclose information about students’ gender identities to their parents, whether or not their parents are supportive of those identities. It forces school officials to obtain parental consent before encouraging students to wear certain types of clothing, or to use a name other than the one provided by the parents. Teachers who violate these mandates may lose their teaching licence. This bill also gives parents or even the attorney general clear power to sue schools or districts that violate these provisions.

What it means: This bill forces teachers and school officials to “out” students to their parents, potentially exposing students to unsupportive or unsafe home environments. It creates harsh punishments for teachers or schools who refuse to do so.

South Carolina H 3728 (passed House, in Senate, last amended 5/10):

What it says: Imitating FL’s HB 7, this bill prohibits schools from teaching that some people are inherently privileged or blameworthy because of their race, color, national origin, or sex. It requires schools to post and continually update lists of all instructional materials online, forces schools to create complaint processes for parents, and requires them to investigate those complaints and post the results publicly. H 3728 allows parents to file complaints against teachers directly, sue school districts privately, and allows the state to withhold funding from districts who do not comply.

What it means: This bill creates vague standards by which parents may complain about any instructional materials they dislike, forces schools to divert enormous amounts of time and energy to navigating those complaints, creates harsh financial penalties for failing to comply, and allows parents to sue school districts directly.

Arkansas HB 1156 (law):

What it says: This law mandates that male/female school bathrooms may only be used by students of the corresponding gender as assigned at birth, and applies the same rule to overnight housing on school trips. Schools who do not comply with the law may lose funding and are liable to lawsuits from parents.

What it means: HB 1156 will outlaw trans students from accessing bathrooms and housing that correspond to their gender identity, and will open up schools to legal battles.

**The National
Parents Union**

An Attack
on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms

¹ “The Year in Hate & Extremism 2022,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.splcenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2022>.

WHAT PARENTS WANT

NPU's grassroots network includes parents around the country who work tirelessly to advocate for their children's educational opportunities. Here is what several of them had to say about legislation in their state.

Tammie Lang Campbell is a nationally recognized civil rights leader and founder of the Honey Brown Hope Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides resources and support for civil rights, diversity appreciation, and environmental stewardship. She is also an author and sought-after speaker who has received numerous national, state and local awards for her work. She lives in Texas.



Bills like Texas's SB 8 are detrimental to all students. They degrade and destroy our educational system and compromise our ability as a nation to compete on a global scale. Like others around our nation, SB 8 is a political ploy that does nothing to address our real educational issues. This is the diversion: We see what's happening with student safety, mass killings in schools, but lawmakers don't want to address that. Sending your child to school not knowing whether they will make it back home, push outs and drop outs, policing and excessive punishment of Black and brown students, learning loss due to COVID-19, students' social and emotional well-being, suicides – these are the major issues that are causing parents to cry out for help. Bills like SB 8 are a diversion from addressing these issues. And allowing a few parents to outlaw critical thinking by banning books in school? How ridiculous. No parent should have the right to dictate what another child should or shouldn't read. — *Tammie Lang Campbell*

Jillian RainingBird-Minme is a resident of Kansas City, MO, where she is often on the ground advocating for student success. She is a wife and mother of three girls (19, 10, & 4).



Unfortunately, I live in a state that is clearly more focused on gender identity than the educational success of our children, particularly our Black and brown children. In Missouri, only 41% of third graders are reading proficiently. In my city, Kansas City, only 20% of them are reading proficiently. And bills like SB 134 are what our state legislators decide to vote on? I also do not take kindly to the consistent bullying of our LGBTQIA+ children. This is why I consistently show up at our state capitol, and at our nation's capitol. Because lawmakers are going to have to understand that real parents who are on the ground dealing with issues, we're not worried about gender identity. We're worried about what education looks like for our children. We're worried about the fact that too many of our special education kids are not receiving a quality free and public education.

I also know firsthand how devastating it can be to an entire community when one person commits suicide. What's happening to LGBTQIA+ children reminds me of what happened to Native Americans: Policymakers are stripping their art, their language, their culture, their identity. And having grown up on a reservation, I've seen the effects. I've seen how devastating it is when a young person takes their life – not only for their grandparents and friends, but for the whole community. — *Jillian RainingBird-Minme*

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Culture Wars
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Parents Union**

An Attack
on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms

WHAT PARENTS WANT

According to recent surveys of American parents by NPU and other organizations, Tammie and Jillian's beliefs are the rule, not the exception.

The majority of parents across the country...

- Agree that parents' personal beliefs should not prevent other students from accessing curricular materials (72%) (NPU)
- Support the teaching of topics like women's history (73%), Black history (69%), Native American history (72%), and Latino/a and Hispanic history (66%) (NPU)
- Rank curricular transparency requirements as the least important of Congress's priorities (NPU)
- Want public schools to teach concepts like kindness, empathy, cooperation, and collaboration (81%) (NPU)
- Want students to encounter educational materials that reflect the US's diversity (80%) (NPU)
- Believe students should be protected from any form of discrimination (90%) (NPU)
- Believe state laws banning books or conversations about LGBTQIA+ or racial issues are about politics, not children (69%) (IPSOS)²
- Believe teachers should be able to talk about race, gender, and sexual orientation at school (82%) (IPSOS)
- Rank bullying and mental health as the top concern (IPSOS)

²IPSOS. (2022, September 21). Public Poll Findings and Methodology: Most parents want classrooms to be places of learning, not political battlegrounds.

NPU'S STANCE

The National Parents Union stands with the majority of American parents who believe that schools should be places where children can learn about, express, and celebrate their identities.

In doing so, NPU affirms the following principles.

First and foremost, children are healthier and happier when they can understand, express, and celebrate their unique identities. The presence of a gay-straight alliance club in school, for instance, has been associated with greater senses of school belonging for LGBT students³ and with lower rates of victimization⁴, which is associated with decreased self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2012).⁵ Other elements of supportive school environments, like curriculums that include positive representations of LGBTQIA+ people and histories, or the presence of antibullying policies, have also been correlated with lower rates of victimization or higher senses of self-esteem.⁶

Supportive, affirming school environments also lead to better academic and health outcomes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), safe and supportive environments can reduce young people's risk of contracting HIV and STDs, lower their risk of unintended pregnancies, and reduce high-risk substance use.⁷ Children in safe, supportive school environments are less likely to miss school for safety reasons,⁸ tend to have higher GPAs,⁹ and are more likely to attend and graduate from college.¹⁰ For LGBTQIA+ youth, who experience higher rates of bullying and may not have supportive family environments at home, having school environments in which they can understand, express, and celebrate their identities provides a critical foundation for their health, happiness, and success.

By contrast, hostile political and school climates exacerbate challenges LGBTQIA+ youth already face. According to a 2022 survey by The Trevor Project, 45% of LGBTQIA+ young people seriously considered suicide in 2021, including more than 50% of transgender and nonbinary youth and 1 in 3 cisgender youth.¹¹ The survey also found that 9 in 10 LGBTQIA+ young people reported negative impacts on their mental health stemming from recent political battles over issues related to gender and sexuality.

By prohibiting schools from affirming students' identities, bills/laws like TX SB 8, MO SB 134, and AR HB 1156 will make children less happy and less successful.

Schools that are unsupportive for some children are unhealthy for all children. Though LGBTQIA+ youth are most directly impacted by identity-restrictive laws, such policies indirectly impact other young people in their school communities. When a student commits or attempts suicide, for instance, research shows that the entire community around that student moves to a higher level of suicide risk.¹² Suicide contagion, the process by which a single act of suicide increases others' suicidal behavior, is a well-documented phenomenon that can occur in mass clusters (nationwide spikes in suicide rates associated with high-visibility suicides of celebrities or even fictional characters) or point clusters (community-based spikes that occur in close proximity).¹³ Such risk increases do not vanish immediately, but can last for up to two years.¹⁴ Even when suicide contagion does not occur, research has found that the suicide of a single student can impact around 135 people, leading to a severe life disruption for around one third of them.¹⁵ In short, policies that create dangerous environments for the most at-risk students have ripple effects on their communities as a whole, putting all children in greater danger of self-destructive thinking and behavior.

By victimizing our most at-risk children, bills/laws like TX SB 8, MO SB 134, and AR HB 1156 endanger the lives and learning of all of our children.

**The National
Parents Union**

An Attack
on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms

Curricular restrictions deprive children of opportunities to achieve. Research shows that ethnic studies courses, like the AP African American Studies course challenged in Florida under HB 7, have positive effects on student achievement – particularly for at-risk students. A 2017 study by researchers from Stanford and UC Irvine estimated that taking an ethnic studies course increased ninth-grade attendance by 21 percentage points, boosted GPA by 1.4 grade points, and raised credits earned by 23.¹⁶ A 2021 study showed that these positive effects persist for years to come, particularly for low-income students and students of color. Taking an ethnic studies course in grade 9 increased students' likelihood of graduating high school and enrolling in college.¹⁷

In some cases, curricular restrictions also deprive children of basic cultural literacy. Florida's new laws, for instance, have created a climate in which parents can complain that showing sixth-grade students a picture of Michelangelo's "David," one of the most famous sculptures in Western art, constitutes "pornography." Within school climates like Florida's, even absurd complaints like this one can force principals to resign.¹⁸

By giving politicians and extremist parents the power to dictate curriculum, bills/laws like FL HB 7, NC HB 187, TX SB 8, SC H 3728 rob all children of valuable educational experiences.

Limiting children's identity exploration limits their college and career potential. Many colleges actively recruit students who demonstrate that their values reflect the ones they cultivate on their campuses. As institutions of higher learning whose job it is to prepare young people to participate in a diverse, global economy, the best colleges expect their students to be compassionate, open-minded individuals. Here are statements of purpose from several of the top schools of U.S. News & World Report's 2023 list of "Best Value Schools" – schools who offer the most number of academic opportunities and the most need-based financial aid.

*Through a **diverse** living environment, where students live with people who are studying **different** topics, who come from **different** walks of life and have **evolving identities**, intellectual transformation is deepened and conditions for social transformation are created. (Harvard College) ¹⁹*

*At Stanford, we strive to ensure that a **diversity of cultures, races and ethnicities, genders, political and religious beliefs, physical and learning differences, sexual orientations and identities** is thriving on our campus. Such diversity will inspire new angles of inquiry, new modes of analysis, new discoveries and new solutions. (Stanford University) ²⁰*

*Vision: To make Vanderbilt University an environment where **equity, diversity, and inclusion** are inseparable from institutional excellence and to model intentional practices that respect the humanity of all. (Vanderbilt University) ²¹*

Many colleges even require applicants to write statements that assess students' awareness of their various identities. The University of Michigan, for instance, requires applicants to respond to the following prompt:

*Everyone belongs to many **different** communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, **ethnicity**, income, cuisine, interest, **race**, **ideology**, or **intellectual heritage**. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. ²²*

**The National
Parents Union**

An Attack
on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms



Other colleges give applicants the opportunity to enhance their applications by responding to prompts like these, from Duke University:

*We seek a **diverse** student body that embodies the wide range of human experience. In that context, we are interested in what you'd like to share about your lived experiences and how they've influenced how you think of yourself.*

*Duke's commitment to **diversity** and **inclusion** includes **sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression**. If you'd like to share with us more about your identity in this context, feel free to do so here.* ²³

By limiting young people's ability understand, express, and celebrate their identities, bills/laws like FL HB 7, NC HB 187, TX SB 8, and SC H 3728 make it harder for students to present themselves compellingly to universities, and makes it harder for them to engage in the diverse opportunities they afford. Higher education is a key driver of socioeconomic mobility: By preventing schools from preparing students for college environments, such legislation does children a critical disservice.

School culture wars pull resources away from the real challenges facing American families.

With our children still playing catch-up from the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and other school staff must be able to focus on strategies that enrich and accelerate student learning. Instead, laws like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law or HB 1467 force educators to spend time checking their bookshelves for titles that might expose them to a lawsuit (a task that can involve vetting hundreds of books).²⁴ In some cases, laws like these have even resulted in schools emptying their bookshelves until media specialists have time to complete such a lengthy process.²⁵ In other cases, these kinds of laws impose massive bureaucratic obligations on school officials, forcing them to spend time updating lists of curricular materials online rather than focusing on children's learning.

These legal obligations add enormous strains on school leaders who are already operating at maximum capacity. According to a nationally representative survey of 682 principals, laws that create combative environments between schools and parents have led to "substantial political conflict" that shifts administrators' attention toward fielding complaints instead of supporting teaching and learning in their schools.²⁶

School officials face daunting threats to children's long-term achievement. By diverting their attention from responding to those threats and into legal conflicts with extremist parents, bills/laws like TX SB 8, MO SB 134, SC H 3728, and AR HB 1156 sanction culture wars that handicap education professionals at a time when we need their expertise the most.

THE CHALLENGE

The National Parents Union is committed, alongside many partner organizations across the United States, to challenge and fight back against attempts to threaten any student's freedom to learn.

The Need for Federal Leadership

With bills restricting freedom of education being introduced across the country, it is critical that federal agencies with the ability to enforce acts of discrimination and 1st amendment violations are prepared to enforce current protections under the law. The Department of Education has issued guidance protecting discrimination based on Gender Identity through Title IV. The Department of Education has yet to release Title VI guidance that would expand enforcement to protect newly vulnerable student groups whose ability to learn about, express or celebrate identity has just been threatened under these new laws.

The Need for Brave Elected Officials to Push Back

There are brave leaders on both sides of the aisle who continue to push back against radical extremism agendas like book bans, threats to identity and curriculum bans. The National Parents Union celebrates those who are willing to stand up to bullies who are threatening our kids' right to belong.

The Need for Litigation

The recently passed laws above are clear violations of students' rights in their schools. Students have a 1st amendment right to information and banning books is a violation of that right. The National Parents Union will continue to be a resource for parents who are ready to challenge these laws in courts across the country and will stand with partners as they do the same.

Conclusion

The National Parents Union believes that every child has the right to learn about, express, and celebrate their identities in their school. As lawmakers continue advancing legislation that restricts children's rights, NPU will keep supporting its affiliate groups and activists on the ground as they testify in hearings, lobby elected officials, and protest at capitol buildings in Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, and more.

In March 2023, NPU convened parents from around the country in Washington, D.C. to fight HR 5 (the so-called "Parents' Bill of Rights"). NPU's parent activists met with every congressional office to express their outrage at HR 5, which does not reflect the priorities of diverse American families.

In addition, NPU is working with lawmakers to advance legislation that more accurately reflects parents' priorities, and that fosters healthy learning environments for all children. NPU backed an alternative resolution by Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), which better articulates concerns like access to a well-rounded education, authentic parental involvement, responsive and inclusive public schools, non-discriminatory learning environments, and historically/politically inclusive education.

The National Parents Union stands committed to these principles, and will continue empowering parents to fight for education systems that are inclusive for all of our children.

**The National
Parents Union**

An Attack
on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms

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on Belonging:
Culture Wars
in Classrooms



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