Gov. Brian Kemp unveils Parents' Bill of Rights

ATLANTA - Legislation guaranteeing parents' involvement in their children's education was introduced into the General Assembly Wednesday on behalf of Gov. Brian Kemp.

Dubbed the Parents' Bill of Rights, the legislation will be steered through the state House and Senate through separate versions sponsored by Sen. Clint Dixon, R-Buford, and Rep. Josh Bonner, R-Fayetteville, two of Kemp's floor leaders.

The bills would add transparency provisions to state law guaranteeing parents the right to access instructional material.

Principals or superintendents who receive a request for information from a parent would have three working days to provide it. If the principal or superintendent is unable to share the information within that timeframe, they must provide the parent a written description of the material and a timeline for its delivery, not to exceed 30 days.

"At a time when our nation is more divided than ever, we're leading the fight to ensure parents do not have any barriers which prevent them from playing an active role in their child's education," Kemp said.

"Students do best when their parents have a seat at the table and their voices are heard and respected. ... At its core, [the bill] is about transparency, access, and promoting an engaged partnership between the parent and educators to the ultimate benefit of the student."

The right of parents to be involved in their children's education become a hot political issue last fall when Virginia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Terry McAuliffe said in a debate, "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach."

The gaffe helped propel Republican Glenn Youngkin to victory over McAuliffe, who had previously served a term as governor and was favored to win in what has become a Democratic state in recent years.

Kemp is backing separate legislation prohibiting Georgia schools from teaching "critical race theory," which emphasizes the existence of systemic racism in America.

This story is available through a news partnership with Capitol Beat News Service, a project of the Georgia Press Educational Foundation.

Critical race theory poised to rank among hottest debates in 2022 General Assembly

ATLANTA – While Republicans and Democrats in the General Assembly tangle over guns, noncitizen voting and Medicaid expansion, education could become the most highly charged issue of the election-year session that began last month.

GOP Gov. Brian Kemp set the tone during his State of the State address, promising to wade into an aspect of education Democrats and educators want the state to stay out of – what teachers can teach.

"I look forward to working with members of the General Assembly this legislative session to protect our students from divisive ideologies – like critical race theory – that pit kids against each other," he told a joint session of the state House and Senate.

The Georgia Board of Education adopted a resolution last June essentially endorsing Kemp's position opposing the teaching of critical race theory, which emphasizes the existence of systemic racism in America. But the resolution doesn't carry the weight of law.

Republican lawmakers are looking to codify the GOP's stance against critical race theory into state law with four bills – two in the state House of Representatives and two in the Georgia Senate.

All four of the bills would apply to elementary and secondary schools across the state. While only one – Senate Bill 377 – specifically targets Georgia's public colleges and universities and the state's technical colleges, all four mention "state agencies," a term that includes the University System of Georgia and the technical college system.

"We must stop divisive concepts from being taught in Georgia colleges and universities and seeping down into our K-12 schools – concepts that an overwhelming majority of Georgians outright reject," said Sen. Bo Hatchett, R-Cornelia, chief sponsor of Senate Bill 377 and one of Kemp's Senate floor leaders.

"We must ensure that no student is taught to feel guilty or 'less than' because of how they were born."
Educators bristle at what they see as interference in their ability to teach.

Matthew Boedy, president of the Georgia Association of University Professors, called the bills “educational gag orders.”

Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, which represents elementary and secondary teachers, said Republicans are launching an “attack on public education” by injecting themselves into an aspect of education where they don’t belong.

“Educators are experts on curriculum and instruction,” she said. “Educators should be in charge of curriculum and instruction, not elected officials.”

Besides the resentment educators feel toward politicians encroaching on teachers’ roles, dictating what can be taught in Georgia schools is also stifling to students, Morgan said.

“Children are curious,” she said. “When we have this legislation attempting to censor how we are teaching history … the teacher in many cases will not answer a question. What message is that giving the child? … Children should be allowed to ask difficult questions.”

“[Senate Bill 377] says certain concepts can be taught but only in an ‘objective’ way and without ‘endorsement,’ ” Boedy added. “To somehow divide education into divisive concepts that one can’t opine on and non-divisive ones that merit opinion is malpractice for an educator.”

One key aspect to the debate over critical race theory is whether it is even being taught in Georgia schools. Democrats say it is not and that Republicans are stirring up fear among GOP base voters to gin up support at the polls this fall.

But state Sen. Burt Jones, R-Jackson, who is running for lieutenant governor, sent a letter to the state Board of Education last month asserting that the Gwinnett County School District may have begun teaching critical race theory.

“The syllabus appears to have been since removed from the district’s website,” Jones wrote. “But the notion that the largest school district in our state would surreptitiously injecting such divisive curriculum into our children’s classrooms – and then attempting to cover it up – is both egregious and completely unacceptable.”

Lawmakers will kick off the debate over critical race theory on Monday when the Senate Education and Youth Committee holds a hearing on Hatchett’s bill.

**Georgia Senate committee holds hearing on legalizing recreational use of marijuana**

Feb 3, 2022

ATLANTA – A state Senate committee held a hearing Thursday on three legislative proposals related to marijuana ranging from expanding Georgia’s medical marijuana program to legalizing recreational use of the drug.

But in the conservative General Assembly, the odds of the Senate Regulated Industries and Utilities Committee voting on any of the measures are long at best.

Sen. Sheikh Rahman, D-Lawrenceville, has introduced a constitutional amendment calling for a statewide referendum asking voters to decide whether to legalize the production and sale of marijuana in Georgia for the recreational use of adults ages 21 and older.

Tax revenue from marijuana sales would be dedicated to education and transportation infrastructure.

An accompanying bill would spell out how the production and sale of marijuana would be regulated in Georgia, including the licensing process that would govern the industry.

“This would be highly regulated, not just selling out of convenience stores,” Rahman said.

A third bill pertains only to the existing medical marijuana program the General Assembly authorized in 2019. It would broaden the current program by authorizing more dispensaries to sell low-THC cannabis oil and for the first time allow qualifying adult patients in Georgia to receive up to 2 ounces of leafy marijuana along with low-THC oil.

Studies in the 18 states that have legalized recreational use of marijuana have found it has not led to increased use of other drugs, including opioids, Rahman told committee members.

But several opponents of Rahman’s bills who addressed the committee disagreed.

Jeff Breedlove, chief of communications and policy with the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse, cited a report from the Colorado Health Institute showing opioid abuse rose in that state after recreational use of marijuana was legalized.

“Any notion that marijuana is not a gateway drug is absurd,” said Breedlove. “This bill is dangerous to the people of Georgia.”

Sen. Frank Ginn, R-Danielsville, said legalizing marijuana also would wreak havoc with commercial trucking in Georgia because of the length of time marijuana stays in a person’s system after using the drug.

“There’s no field sobriety test like there is for alcohol,” he said.

Representatives of a couple of faith-based groups also testified in opposition to legalizing marijuana for recreational use.

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Georgia Senate committee approves permit-less gun bill

Feb 2, 2022

ATLANTA – Legislation that would let Georgians carry firearms without a permit cleared a state Senate committee Tuesday 6-3 on a party-line vote.

Majority Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee supported the bill as striking a blow for protection of Georgians’ Second Amendment right to bear arms. Democrats opposed it, arguing that loosening the state’s already lax gun laws would increase violent crime.

So-called “constitutional carry” bills introduced in the Republican-controlled General Assembly going back to the middle of the last decade have failed to gain traction. But with Democrats making headway in the last couple of election cycles, Gov. Brian Kemp and GOP legislative leaders are backing a permit-less gun bill in this election year as part of a conservative agenda aimed at Republican base voters.

Adding a government-imposed barrier to the free possession of firearms only punishes law-abiding citizens without affecting those who break the law, Sen. Jason Anavitarte, R-Dallas, the bill’s chief sponsor, told committee members Tuesday.

“The requirement to have a permit does not deter the criminal. They’re going to carry one anyway,” he said. “This bill puts law-abiding gun owners on an even playing field with criminals.”

But Sen. Elena Parent, D-Atlanta, said more guns in the hands of more people does not equate to less gun violence.

“Guns intensify violent encounters, upping the stakes and worsening the outcomes,” she said.

Twenty-one states have adopted constitutional carry laws, said Bethany Young of the National Association for Gun Rights. Tennessee and Texas passed the law last year, and Florida and Alabama are considering it, she said.

“Constitutional carry states consistently rank among the safest in the country,” she said.

But Fallon McClure, organizing and elections director at the Working Families Party, cited polls showing most Georgians oppose constitutional carry.

“Georgians want investments in their community that promote public safety,” she said.

The bill now heads to the Senate Rules Committee to schedule a floor vote.

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Georgia State Senate passes tax incentives for living organ donors

Feb 1, 2022

ATLANTA - The Georgia Senate passed legislation Tuesday aimed at encouraging more Georgians to become living organ donors.

Senate Bill 330 is sponsored by Sen. John Albers, R-Roswell, who donated one of his kidneys last July to his son, who suffered renal failure and was forced to go on dialysis at the age of 24.

“This bill is going to save lives,” Albers told his Senate colleagues shortly before Tuesday’s unanimous vote. “My goal is to get the transplant [waiting] list down to zero.”

The legislation would expand an existing state income tax exemption for living organ donors from $10,000 to $25,000. Businesses would receive a state tax credit to help them cover the cost of up to six weeks paid time off for employees recovering from transplant surgery, whether they are donors or recipients.

The bill also would prohibit life insurance companies from canceling or denying coverage to living organ donors.

The tax breaks would cost the state an estimated $1.7 million a year. Albers said that pales in comparison to the tax dollars the state spends to maintain patients on dialysis.

Sen. Jen Jordan, D-Atlanta, spoke in support of the legislation but suggested it be expanded to apply to health insurance as well as life insurance when it moves to the state House of Representatives.
While the bill is currently limited to kidney and liver donors, Jordan said it also should include living donors of other organs including lungs, intestines and bone marrow.

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