

## NEWS

# Georgia Legislature drops effort to regulate USG teaching race, but K-12 proposals ongoing



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Regulating how University System of Georgia professors address questions of race and history likely won't be moving forward in the Georgia General Assembly this session.

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Two bills regulating the teaching of "divisive concepts," one in the House and one in the Senate, passed their respective chambers ahead of crossover day, the day by which legislation has to be approved by at least one chamber to move forward that session.

The two bills contained similar lists of divisive concepts:

- the idea that the United States is fundamentally racist
- that morality is determined by race
- that people bear responsibility for past actions by people of their race.

Both bills prevent curriculum or training programs that promote these concepts in K-12 education, but the Senate bill, SB 377 initially had extensive requirements for University System of Georgia professors and Georgia Technical Colleges as well. These requirements for higher education were dropped in the version of the bill to pass the Senate. The House bill, HB 1084 also exempts advanced placement courses, which SB 377 does not.

"There were constitutional issues that were brought up in committee hearings," said Sen. Bo Hatchett, R-Cornelia, who introduced SB 377. "It would be unconstitutional for us to apply that to higher education because of protections that professors have, so it would be very difficult to enforce with professors. So we're potentially looking at doing an urging resolution, just urging the University System to have some type of policies to prevent that."

Georgia American Association of University Professors President Matthew Boedy, an associate professor of rhetoric and composition at the University of North Georgia, had decried the original SB 377 as an attack on academic freedom.

"It looks like the state legislative sponsors of these divisive concept bills came to their senses," he told the Chronicle on Thursday.

## K-12 history, sports, sex ed bills move forward

The Georgia Association of Educators expressed concern in January about the proposed legislation around divisive concepts for K-12.

"GAE will aggressively fight attempts to criminalize the actions of educators who are following State Board of Education guidelines in teaching an unvarnished, honest, and truthful history of our country and the world around us, unattached to current political winds," Lisa Morgan, kindergarten teacher and president of the Georgia Association of Educators, was quoted as saying in a press release. "Students have a right to discuss difficult, age-appropriate topics, and teachers are trained to guide them."

Gov. Brian Kemp made education a priority this year in his State of the State address, highlighting several priorities that later lead to bills being introduced.

"I believe, by working together, this legislative session will be a historic one for education in our state," he said. "Because building a safer, stronger Georgia starts with putting students and parents first."

A late arriving bill, SB 613, was introduced March 8 and included a similar divisive concept list for private schools. It also took language from Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill to prevent discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity with elementary school students. It died quietly without making it to committee.

"We take any legislation that could have a discriminatory or damaging effect on members of the LGBTQ community very, very seriously," said Jeff Graham, executive director of Georgia Equality, an advocacy organization for LGBTQ Georgians. "While Senate Bill 613 failed to get a hearing, failed to make it through crossover day, it is important to recognize that the language could resurface at any point between now and when the legislative session ends."

One proposal that has passed the Senate is SB 435, which would mean students could only participate in high school sports that match the sex listed on their birth certificate. Rep. Jodi Lott, R-Evans, had introduced a similar bill, which died in the House, and said she supported the Senate proposal. Kemp also highlighted the subject in his State of the State address.

Graham, however, described the legislation a "solution in search of a problem," contrasting it with the legislative push around mental health care this session.

"It's very concerning that through some legislation we're taking important steps to look at our mental health system here in Georgia, and specifically mental health issues and how they impact young people, and with another piece of legislation we're specifically targeting a group of vulnerable students for harassment, adding stress to their already stressful lives over an issue that, like I said, has never been an issue here in Georgia," Graham said.

A Senate bill, SB 601, to create \$6,000 school vouchers for private school was voted down on Tuesday. Because it failed on crossover day, it cannot be re-introduced until the next legislative session.

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Kemp pushed also for a "Parent's Bill of Rights," SB 449 and HB 1178, both of which passed their respective chambers. These bills include the right for parents to review their children's curriculum, access their records and obtain other information from the school, as well as allowing parents to object to specific materials and withdraw their children from sex education.