



ELECTION 2023

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POLITICS

SCHOOLS

With New Jersey Legislature on ballot, candidates debate parents' rights

BY: **DANA DIFILIPPO** - OCTOBER 3, 2023 7:08 AM



 About 60 parents, educators, and advocates rallied at the Statehouse in Trenton on May 15, 2023, for parental rights and against governmental interference. (Dana DiFilippo | New Jersey Monitor)

It's been six years since a Republican governor signed New Jersey's law allowing transgender students to use school bathrooms aligned with their gender identity. But often, the transgender students mentored by teacher Kate Okeson choose to use no bathroom at all.

"Kids will skip breakfast, they won't eat or drink anything all day, just so they don't have to go to the bathroom," said Okeson, who teaches high school studio art in Monmouth County.

So Okeson can't help but feel irked when she hears "parental rights" in the slogans and soundbites bandied about by so many political candidates hoping to win at the ballot box in November, when all 120 legislative seats are on the ballot.

Parental rights is not a new buzzphrase for politicians seeking office. Candidates have deployed it for decades to agitate on educational issues from desegregation to homeschooling to vaccinations. But as the culture wars have increasingly turned to gender politics, it's a campaign approach that has put transgender youth under attack, critics say.



📷 Kate Okeson is co-founder of Make It Better for Youth, a nonprofit that supports LGBTQ students in Monmouth County. She's pictured, second from right, with other teachers who chaperoned the group's alternative prom, Gayla. (Photo courtesy of Kate Okeson)

"There are not hundreds of trans kids in any school building, so this political rhetoric and panic ends up spotlighting one or two kids," Okeson said. "You have like one trans kid who's on the hot seat and getting blowback because everybody's up in arms about the one visibly slightly different kid. Folks that are running for office are not thinking about the actual impact this is having on children."

Politicians who preach parental rights reject criticisms that they target transgender kids.

"This isn't just about a trans issue, or one issue over another. This is about parents having a say," said Sen. Ed Durr (R-Gloucester), who is seeking his second term

representing the 3rd Legislative District.

And while this is a pet cause for Republicans, Democrats have embraced it too. Durr's Democratic opponent, former Assemblyman John Burzichelli, sent a mailer declaring: "Parents should have a major role in deciding what's best for our kids' schooling – not bureaucrats in Trenton or Washington."


"Weird how he talks like a Republican," Durr said.

Political observers say parental rights persists as a political catchphrase because it can inflame voters enough to drive them to

the polls – something candidates, regardless of party, are desperate to do this year, an off-year election when voter turnout is expected to be abysmal.

“When you’re talking about people’s children, it becomes a personal issue. And anger is a big motivator,” said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.



 Gregory Quinlan of the Garden State Center for Families speaks out against a bill that supporting gender-affirming care for youth at a rally at the Statehouse in Trenton on May 15, 2023, for parental rights and against governmental interference. (Dana DiFilippo | New Jersey Monitor)

From pandemic to sex ed

The most recent wave of parental rights activism started early in the pandemic, when parents upset over school closures, virtual classes, and mandatory masking and vaccines flooded phone lines and besieged school board meetings in protest.

But after state education officials [updated standards](#) on health and sex education in 2020, parents, activists, and politicians had a new focus.

Many said they worried about sex education in the early grades. A [political ad](#) for Republicans aiming to unseat incumbents in Bergen County’s 38th District blasts

3rd Legislative District candidates:

State Senate:

“Democrats’ extreme agenda,” with the narrator complaining: “Sex-ed for 7-year-olds?? Seriously?!”

But the loudest critics zeroed in on a requirement that students learn about gender identity and expression. They have demanded that schools **cancel** books deemed age-inappropriate and adopt “**parental notification**” policies requiring districts to tell families of any changes in a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Those on the fringes have voiced their objections in blatantly transphobic ways. Self-described “ex-gay” Gregory Quinlan, who heads the ultra-right Garden State Center for Families, blasted “alphabet soup identities” as a “dangerous and extreme contagion” in testimony last month during a state Board of Education meeting.

Some politicians, though, have more carefully worded their warnings. After state education officials adopted a policy allowing students to play on the sports team aligning with their gender identity rather than their sex assigned at birth, Sen. Michael Testa Jr. (R-Cumberland) accused them of “infusing progressive identity politics into the classroom.”

In a recent interview, Testa told the New Jersey Monitor he regards the current hubbub about sex education as rooted in the same concern about government intrusion on child-rearing that he saw in 2019 when the Legislature tried to pass a bill that would have ended a religious exemption for immunization and barred unvaccinated students from school.

Testa said he especially objects to state **guidance** ensuring the confidentiality of transgender students.

John Burzichelli (D)

Sen. Ed Durr* (R)

Assembly:

Dave Bailey Jr. (D)

Heather Simmons (D)

Bethanne McCarthy Patrick* (R)

Thomas Tedesco Jr. (R)

*Incumbent

1st Legislative District candidates:

State Senate:

“If you’re under 18, you can’t be questioned by police without parental consent, you can’t go to the doctor without parental consent, you can’t go on a field trip without parental consent. But you can have discussions about a mental health issue like gender dysphoria and gender transitioning with teachers and you’re able to keep that away from parents,” he said.

Charles Laspata (D)
Sen. Michael Testa Jr.* (R)
Assembly:
Eddie Bonner (D)
Damita White-Morris (D)
Antwan McClellan* (R)
Erik Simonsen* (R)

*Incumbent

Assemblywoman Vicky Flynn (R-Monmouth) said parental rights became a campaign priority for her because of the “extraordinary action” state Attorney General Matt Platkin took in the spring to sue school districts that adopted parental notification policies.

Before she joined the Legislature, Flynn was the school board president in Holmdel. There, schools helped struggling students in an individualized way – as they should, Flynn said.

“My approach is much more nuanced by my experience, but it comes down to this: I have a problem with the state using its money and its power to sue school districts in my state. If everyone’s concerned about kids, I’m not sure why litigation was the state’s first response,” she said.



📷 Assemblyman Raj Mukherji (D-Hudson) said we all have a responsibility to protect young people whose mental health issues may be "brought about by their family environment."
(Dana DiFilippo | New Jersey Monitor)

Concerns about misinformation and hate incidents

Parental rights polls well in New Jersey.

Two-thirds of 600 adults Stockton University [polled](#) in March said parents should be more involved in local decisions about the curriculum schools teach, according to Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

The issue also taps into a national zeitgeist, with former President Donald Trump in his comeback campaign calling for parental notification policies at schools, a prohibition on gender identity curricula, and yanked funding for hospitals that provide gender-affirming care to trans youth.

"We used to say all politics is local, and now really all politics is national," said Ashley Konig, director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at Rutgers University. "We've seen that seeping into New Jersey increasingly in the past several years now, where issues that are at the forefront on the national stage are now coming into New Jersey politics."

But politicians who push the parental rights message "paint with too broad a brush," one Democratic legislator said.

"The far right love to homogenize a lot of issues and throw them into the bucket of parental rights, because they suspect that that will appeal to parents who don't want to cede any say over their own children. It feels so personal. And I can understand that view as a parent," said Assemblyman Raj Mukherji (D-Hudson). "But every issue when it relates to our youth has to be evaluated objectively and dispassionately and should be informed by data."

32nd Legislative District candidates:

State Senate:

Ilyas Mohammed (R)

Assemblyman Raj Mukherji (D)

Assembly:

John Allen (D)

Jessica Ramirez (D)

Robert Ramos (R)

*Incumbent

Polling should not dictate policy, he added.

“Not every household, not every family environment, is going to accept everything or be ready to be informed about everything, and sometimes with these children, particularly when we’re dealing with transgender youth and gender non-conforming and non-binary youth, the mental health issues that they’re dealing with are brought about by their family environment,” said Mukherji, who is seeking a Senate seat in the 32nd District. “We all have a responsibility to protect those youth.”

Those concerned about the parental rights movement, both nationally and in New Jersey, have several other qualms.

Some say it’s rooted in a nostalgia for a bygone era, with the parental rights crusaders often embracing other politics of exclusion, like objecting to books featuring protagonists of color or lessons on the history of slavery and institutional racism.

“It hasn’t been that long since there was basically just pure discrimination against gay people. It was ugly, but it was more straightforward. Today, it’s: ‘We don’t want you teaching our kids about gay people or transgender people.’ And that seems part of a bigger pattern of ‘we don’t want the way this pluralistic society has developed,’” Froonjian said. “To me, this parental rights thing would not have any legs at all if it weren’t on issues that go to that wistfulness of wanting things to be the way they were, when they were more comfortable for the majority.”

Critics worry the parental rights rhetoric could lead to real harm. Hate incidents in New Jersey [hit a record high](#) last year, with nearly 1,900 reported – the most since the state started tracking them in 1994. LGBTQ people were among the most frequent targets, and bias incidents also rose in schools, data showed.

“Very often, rhetoric leads to action. And villainizing the LGBTQ community can lead

16th Legislative District candidates:

State Senate:

Richard Byrne (Libertarian)

Michael Pappas (R)

Sen. Andrew Zwicker* (D)

Assembly:

Mitchelle Drulis (D)

to physical-harm attacks on them, because it can fuel people who have hatred and possibly spur them to action,” Froomjian said. “Sure, parents ought to have a say in what’s taught at schools, but when we are directing our fire on a certain group, real mental and physical harm could result.”

Assemblyman Roy Freiman* (D)

Ross Traphagen (R)

Grace Zhang (R)

*Incumbent

That’s a sentiment seconded by Sen. Andrew Zwicker (D-Somerset), who faces an aggressive challenger as he defends his seat in the 16th District.

“Teachers, librarians, and support personnel are being harassed online and threatened in emails, and I am deeply worried that someone is going to get hurt. It needs to stop,” said Zwicker, whose wife is an educator.

Mike Pappas, Zwicker’s Republican opponent, is running on a campaign that blasts schools’ “philosophical indoctrination of value systems that parents may not support.” Pappas couldn’t be reached for comment.

“This is anti-LGBTQ, anti-trans youth,” Zwicker said. “We have a mental health crisis in our country, and the youth mental health problem is continuing to rise. The [statistics](#) are alarming on transgender youth when it comes to not just thoughts of suicide but acting on suicide. And here we are, a bunch of adults, marginalizing a group of children for political purposes.”

Zwicker called parental rights messaging a “distraction” from issues like taxes, affordability, and the environment that he says voters tell him are their concerns.

“Reverting to these highly emotional issues to get parents inflamed is a narrow-minded way to approach a campaign,” Zwicker said.

‘Students as political pawns’

Parental rights has been a consistent “lightning rod issue” at voter forums organized by the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, said Jesse Burns, the group’s executive director.

Burns agreed the focus on parental rights draws away from what she believes are more widely impactful issues like inadequate school funding. But more, Burns fears much of the parental rights rhetoric is “dangerous” because it targets public education broadly and turns students into “political pawns.”

“Behind all this are students being subjected not to the best of civil discourse in our country but to angry folks screaming at each other in a way that’s just not connected to the reality of what a transgender student actually needs to feel supported and safe in their class,” she said.

New Jersey is at least officially supportive of the transgender community, with Gov. Phil Murphy declaring the state “a safe haven” for those seeking gender-affirming care, transgender people specifically protected under the state anti-discrimination law, and transgender public officials serving at the [state](#) and [local](#) levels.

With a more progressive populace than other states, New Jersey might not be the best place to rely on parental rights at the ballot box, Froonjian said. Still, GOP messaging on this issue could be effective in some districts, he added.

“Here’s where I think the Democrats need to worry: Democrats under the Donald Trump years made significant inroads into the suburban vote, and especially college-educated women suburban voters,” Froonjian said. “This issue gives the Republicans a crack at breaking that hold that we’ve seen in recent years.”

13th Legislative District candidates:

State Senate:

Lucille Losapio (D)

Sen. Declan O’Scanlon* (R)

Assembly:

Paul Eschelbach (D)

Danielle Mastropiero (D)

Assemblywoman Vicky Flynn* (R)

Assemblyman Gerry Scharfenberger* (R)

*Incumbent



📷 Assemblywoman Vicky Flynn said she questions why the state sued school districts over their policies regarding transgender students. (Hal Brown for New Jersey Monitor)

'They've got it figured out'

In Okeson's classroom, she said her students watch the parental rights debate with the impatience kids of any era have had for the generations that preceded them.

"They're like: 'You guys are old. And tired. You're dinosaurs.' They just want us to get out of their way," Okeson said.

So little data exists about gay and transgender youth because of privacy protections that parental rights as a political message becomes "a values conversation that's not based in outcomes," Okeson said. The political soundbites reduce kids to "a cardboard cutout," she said.

The hubbub comes at a time when youth have found themselves under the legislative microscope on other issues too, like [underage drinking](#), their beach and [boardwalk behavior](#), and punishment for certain [juvenile offenses](#).

Okeson hopes it all spurs more young people to vote.

But she also hopes politicians do a reality check – and devote their energies to other causes.

"When I work with high school kids in their own space and I'm just a fly on the wall, it's like they've got it figured out. Pronouns are no big deal. Bathrooms is: 'whatever!' How you dress is no thing at all,"

Okeson said. “It’s only when the adults are involving themselves that it gets crazy.”

Election Day is Nov. 7. Early in-person voting starts Oct. 28. [Find out how to register to vote.](#)



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