

February 6, 2024



Southern Education Policy Update

IDRA
— Southern Education Equity Network

IDRA's Southern Policy Update covers policy, research and current events that have an impact on education equity in the U.S. South. This edition previews prominent issues for this year's legislative sessions in the South.

Learn more about our [policy work here](#) and join IDRA's [Southern Education Equity Network](#). For more information about IDRA's regional work please contact Terrence Wilson, J.D., IDRA's regional policy and community engagement director at terrence.wilson@idra.org.

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What We've Been Working on at IDRA...

IDRA's 2024 Legislative Priorities in Georgia

The Georgia General Assembly began the second half of its biennial session on Monday, January 8, 2024. Several education bills from 2023 are still alive, and new education bills have already been filed. IDRA continues to engage with students, families and coalition partners to advance a policy agenda that envisions excellent and equitable schools for all Georgia students.

This session, IDRA's policy advocacy work in Georgia will focus on three main policy priority areas.

Ensure fair funding for all students by urging the Georgia General Assembly to fully fund the Quality Basic Education Formula, add formula funding for educating students living in poverty, and oppose all efforts to divert public funding to private education institutions, especially through vouchers.

End harmful school discipline by urging the Assembly to commission a school discipline study committee, expand alternatives to suspension and expulsion through the use of multi-tiered systems of supports before exclusionary discipline, and prohibit corporal punishment in schools.

Promote culturally-sustaining schools that welcome and serve all students by urging the Assembly to pass legislation that ensures students maintain access to diverse curricula and programming that emphasize the contributions and perspectives of all communities.

IDRA works to accomplish these priorities alongside students, families and organizations by convening the [Georgia Coalition for Education Justice](#). This coalition is dedicated to

advancing education justice for all children across Georgia and intentionally works to bring together diverse organizations and people who are directly impacted by education inequity.

To find out more about the Georgia Coalition for Education Justice, see its [LinkTree](#). Get more information about IDRA's [policy priorities in Georgia online](#). For more information about our Georgia work, contact Mikayla Arciaga (mikayla.arciaga@idra.org).



Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed.
Georgia Advocacy Director
Fulton County
mikayla.arciaga@idra.org



Terrence Wilson, J.D.
Regional Policy and Community
Engagement Director
Troup County
terrence.wilson@idra.org



Jordan Madden
Regional Policy Intern
Clayton County
jordan.madden@idra.org

Top Education Issues in Southern State Legislatures

Across the South, state legislatures have already begun their legislative sessions, including in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Other state legislatures will be starting soon in Alabama (February 6), Arkansas (Fiscal Session beginning April 10), Louisiana (March 11) and North Carolina (April 24).

Leaders in these states are pursuing education legislation that will impact education equity across the region. The following are some education legislation and policy proposals filed so far.

More Attempts to Divert Public Funds for School Vouchers

One persistent threat to fair school funding comes in the form of school vouchers. Public education advocates have [shown](#) the many negative impacts of voucher schemes, yet several states are continuing the Southern trend of diverting public money to private schools.

Alabama expanded its support of a program that allows students in low performing schools to qualify for private school scholarships last session. This year, Governor Kay Ivey has made it a [stated priority](#) to get an education savings account passed.

Governor Bill Lee in **Tennessee** [proposed](#) a statewide school voucher program that would allow up to 20,000 students initially, and eventually any student regardless of income, to receive a \$7,075 voucher to attend private schools. Tennessee also has proposed legislation that would require the state to give money back to school districts if one of their students receives a school voucher (SB1924/HB2049).

Virginia legislators have proposed the creation of a new education savings account that would allow parents to spend public dollars on private educational expenses (SB558).

[See IDRA's eBook](#)

School Dollars Diverted in 2023 – A Scan of Private School Voucher Legislation in the U.S. South

By Terrence Wilson, J.D.



Potential Funding Formula Reform in Mississippi

In **Mississippi**, House Speaker Jason White, in his first public speech after being elected, [announced](#) a desire to reform Mississippi's public school funding formula. While the full extent of his plan is yet unknown, he indicated his desire to revisit the balance between

wealthy and economically disadvantaged school districts. The Mississippi Adequate Education Program funding formula is used to allocate money to public schools. The program was established by the Legislature in 1997 and has been consistently underfunded every year since 2008.

Decreasing School Standards in Florida

Three education bills [introduced](#) in **Florida** would deregulate several aspects of teacher recruitment, school innovation, testing and retention (SB 7000, SB 7002, SB 7004). These bills would decrease the minimum required standard for teacher qualification and student performance for graduation.

Public education advocates have expressed concerns that students will be less prepared for college and academic standards will be lowered as a result of these proposals. After passing the Senate unanimously, Florida House members expressed reservation with removing some of the accountability for schools as proposed in these bills. These bills are currently eligible to be heard by the Florida House of Representatives.

Legislation Harmful for LGBTQ+ Students

Several states are considering bills that will have a negative impact on the educational experience of LGBTQ+ students in schools.

South Carolina legislators introduced a bathroom bill seeking to control how students access bathrooms and locker rooms (HB 4538). **Georgia** legislators are seeking to pass a similar bill (HB 936).

In **Georgia**, proposed legislation also would require notice and written consent from parents before students can receive information about sexual orientation or gender identity (HB 1045). This could lead to forced “outing” of LGBTQ+ students.

A **Tennessee** bill would prohibit gender-affirming surgeries for students under 18 (HB 4624). Another bill would remove discrimination protections based on family, social or cultural background as well as sexual orientation (HB 1634). And legislators are seeking to ban schools from being able to display Pride or trans supporting flags (SB1722/HB1605). A similar bill has also been filed in **Florida** (HB 901).

South Carolina legislators are seeking to regulate pronoun usage for students so that pronouns must match biological sex (HB 4707).

Measures to Expand Hurtful Classroom Censorship

In **Tennessee**, legislators introduced a measure that would give parents standing to sue to enforce Tennessee’s version of classroom censorship legislation (HB 1632/SB1858).

Several states have introduced the “READER” act which could limit the availability of a wide range of learning materials in school classrooms and libraries. While some legislators assert that these bills are aimed at sexually-explicit content; in reality these bills will likely impact the availability of non-sexual materials related to sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression (SC HB 4701, GA SB 394). Legislators are promoting this legislation despite a U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit [ruling](#) out of Texas that says that these kinds of bills likely violate the U.S. Constitution.

Legislators in **Virginia** introduced a bill that requires parent notification when schools plan to use instructional materials deemed “sexually-explicit” (HB 571).

In **Georgia**, legislators introduced a bill that requires parent notification when a student checks out any materials from the library. The bill would also broaden the materials for which parents can complain are “harmful to minors” (SB 365).

Arming School Personnel and Privatizing School Security

Several state legislators have proposed bills that would allow school personnel to be armed.

In **South Carolina**, a bill would allow school personnel to be designated as school protection officers or school guardians and let them carry firearms (HB 4708 and SB 0237). Similar legislation was also introduced in **Tennessee** (SB 1325/HB 1202).

A **Virginia** proposed law would allow certain school board employees to possess firearms on school property (HB 1230).

South Carolina legislators want to allow private security companies to operate security for public schools (HB 4649).

Tennessee legislators have proposed legislation to allow private schools to adopt their own handgun carry policies (SB1708/HB1631).

These are just a few highlights from the many bills that have already been proposed this year from the legislatures already in session. To keep up with further legislative developments in the South, join the Southern Education Equity Network.

IDRA Southern Education Equity Network

A community forum and resource hub for advocates of strong inclusive public education

- ✓ Get advocacy how-to tools
- ✓ Share policy & action updates
- ✓ Plan actions with your group

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Intercultural Development Research Association

For more information about our work in the U.S. South, join the [Southern Education Equity Network](#).

Free Lesson Plans for Teachers!

- ★ Lessons for elementary, middle and high school
- ★ Over 120 lesson plans, best practices and historical resources to support teachers in delivering culturally-sustaining classroom lessons.
- ★ Informed by students, families & educators
- ★ Lessons for bilingual classrooms



<https://idraseen/hub>

Also check out IDRA's award-winning [We All Belong – School Resource Hub](#) with classroom lessons and tools for educators, families and policy advocates, particularly in the U.S. South, who want to make sure students receive a strong, truthful education in our public schools.



Southern Research Corner

Ending School Policing

Even as legislators are increasingly focusing on expanding school policing, the research is clear that school-based law enforcement has numerous negative impacts on students. In a [recent policy paper](#) published in the American Journal of Community Psychology, the Society for Community Research (a division of the American Psychological Association) outlines the numerous negative effects of school-based law enforcement (SBLE) on student mental health.

Their statement highlights several findings that are informative for education equity advocates. Specifically, the paper shows how youth attending schools with school-based law enforcement experience more negative outcomes, including increased use of exclusionary discipline and arrests.

They also found that these effects are disproportionately experienced by Black and Latino youth. Students of color are particularly punished under vague and subjective policies like “disorderly conduct” or “disturbing the peace.”

The paper also emphasizes how school-based law enforcement presence negatively affects school climate. Particularly, studies have examined its impact on feelings of safety, finding that for Black and Latino students the presence of school-based law enforcement can lead to them feeling less safe. The researchers also assert that high levels of school-based law enforcement may lead to students feeling less connected to their schools.

The paper concludes by advocating the removal of school-based law enforcement in schools and urging state leaders to “re-focus efforts on implementing nonpunitive interventions and processes that promote staff and student well-being and safety.”

IDRA [supports similar policy recommendations](#) and urges a holistic approach to school safety that emphasizes having the right school staff, policies and evidence-based programs in place to support students and teachers, rather than relying on harmful, punitive and ineffective approaches to classroom safety.



South Got Somethin’ to Say – Education Headlines

In **Arkansas**, a group called “For AR Kids” hopes to put an educational rights constitutional amendment on the 2024 ballot that would require private schools that receive vouchers to meet the same standards of public schools. ([Arkansas Times](#))

The **Florida** State Board of Education voted to end diversity efforts at state colleges and will no longer require sociology as a graduation requirement in Florida colleges, claiming social studies courses may “radicalize” students. ([Tampa Bay Times](#))

Tennessee legislators in the House of Representatives have decided against rejecting all federal education funding after hosting hearings on this issue in the fall of 2023. They cited the current financial climate as a main reason for the decision. ([WKRN](#))

An overhaul of **Virginia's** education funding formula is underway, which could lead to additional funding. Experts note that the formula underestimates the number of staff needed to meet Virginia standards of quality. ([VPM News](#))



IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

[Reach Out To Us](#)

IDRA
5815 Callaghan Road, #101
San Antonio, TX 78228
United States

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