A so-called parental bill of rights passed a state Senate committee Monday, while another controversial bill banning the promotion of “divisive concepts” in public school or university classrooms is set for another hearing.

Senate Bill 449, sponsored by Buford Republican Sen. Clint Dixon, a floor leader to Gov. Brian Kemp, spells out rights for Georgia parents of public school children, including the right to review all instructional materials used in a child’s classroom.

“It’s a parent’s Bill of Rights. It’s simply a transparency bill, which gives parents the fundamental right under state law, which currently doesn’t exist, to review the material that their kids and students are being taught before each nine-week period.”

Sen. Greg Dolezal, a Cumming Republican, said the bill standardizes a process that can vary from district to district, leaving parents frustrated and unable to weigh in on what their children are learning.

“I think that if we would agree, which I think maybe we all would agree, that this is a good process, to have parents be able to see what curriculum is being taught to their children, then we would want that to be part of state law,” he said. “And we wouldn’t want it to be something that could arbitrarily be changed by a board without the
American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia Executive Director Andrea Young said the bill is unnecessary and promotes political bickering in classrooms. Young said a parent with a grudge could upend a teacher’s entire carefully planned lesson plan with one complaint.

“We need to help our kids catch up after a year of school disrupted by the pandemic, not turn our schools into battlegrounds,” she said. “Allowing parents to object en masse to classroom content will contribute to a climate of classroom censorship. The review period burdens teachers, the bills employ vague language and they’re unnecessary because parents are already involved in setting educational standards and goals.”

Georgia Association of Educators President Lisa Morgan said the bill would hamper teachers’ ability to change lesson plans on the fly if one approach is not working for a particular classroom.

Teachers welcome parental involvement through means such as emails, conferences, classroom volunteer opportunities and PTA meetings, but the proposed legislation would only strain the parent-teacher relationship, she said.

“Teachers feel attacked,” she said. “And more than that, this bill seems to drive a wedge between the most important partnership in education, and that is between the parents and the teachers. This bill makes that relationship adversarial, rather than the partnership it should be.”

The bill and others like it come as parents around the country rally against so-called critical race theory. Once a niche academic term defining racism as a problem stemming from the structure of society rather than individual vice, the term has come to be used for lessons that critics say cause white students to feel judged or blamed for sins of America’s racial history.

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A bill targeting the teaching of “divisive concepts” in K-12 and college classrooms got a hearing in the same committee Monday, though it was not scheduled for a vote.

The bill states that schools and colleges “may not teach, act upon, promote, or encourage divisive concepts,” including the superiority of any race, racial determinism of guilt or moral character, that “the United States of America and the State of Georgia are fundamentally or systemically racist,” or that “Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or were created by individuals of a particular race to oppress individuals of another race.”

Educators are permitted to answer specific questions about divisive topics without endorsement.

Sen. Bo Hatchett, a Republican from Cornelia, said the bill does not prevent teachers from teaching the least savory parts of American
"I vividly remember learning about slavery, about segregation, about the KKK," he said. "Those are some of the most memorable days of learning a student experiences, among other eye-opening historical moments like the Holocaust. Those are the days when students learn just how deeply flawed people can be, and how deeply flawed even our government can be. I am among those who will tell you that those lessons are not just valuable. They are imperative."

"Our incredible teachers all across this state teach those lessons so eloquently, so memorably, while intertwining those hard-hitting truths, with the progress triumphs and sacrifices made along the way that gives us hope for our country, and allows us to still believe that we collectively should be proud of being American and proud to be Georgians," he added. "I believe that every single one of us in this room today understands our history and the ways it has shaped our present without having been taught that we inherit those burdens."

Georgia Association of Educational Leaders President Robert Costley said his organization is not taking a position on the merits of the bill, but teachers are concerned that, while students are more curious than ever about critical race theory and the history of race in the U.S. because of the current national discussion, the bill could open them up to increased scrutiny for answering their questions.

"They get asked their opinion so often as it is about concepts, about, 'Hey, did you deal with this when you were my age?'' he said.
What we don't want is the workforce of Georgia's teachers to say to that, 'Look, I'm not really supposed to talk about that because I might expose myself to a complaint.' And that is what, even though our members may feel different ways, individually, that is what they're most afraid of."

Costley said the language for redressing parental complaints could be too vague. For example, if a principal addresses a concern by having a discussion with the teacher, but the parent wants the teacher fired, it is not clear if the parent could escalate the situation to the school board, he said.

"Once a bill like this is passed, there are going to be more complaints, formalized complaints," he said. "We want to make sure that teachers don't have to worry about baseless concerns or misunderstandings about what CRT perhaps is or is not. And they will be getting complaints on them, and if you know the average teacher, if they just have a momma that's mad at them, that's going to cause them to fear, that's going to cause them to think all night."

Monday's meeting ended with multiple names still on the list for public comment on the bill. The committee's chair, Dalton Republican Sen. Chuck Payne, said the meeting needed to end for the sake of time, but the discussion will continue.

"We're going to take our time with this, and if you were not called today, I encourage you to come back to the next one, we're going to have opportunity, I'm sure, going forward, to have continued public input," he said.
ROSS WILLIAMS
Before joining the Georgia Recorder, Ross Williams covered local and state government for the Marietta Daily Journal. Williams’ reporting took him from City Hall to homeless camps, from the offices of business executives to the living rooms of grieving parents. His work earned recognition from the Georgia Associated Press Media Editors and the Georgia Press Association, including beat reporting, business writing and non-deadline reporting. A native of Cobb County, Williams holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Atlanta’s Oglethorpe University and a master’s in journalism from Northwestern University.