

## ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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## Transgender

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lated surgery for people under 18 and ban transgender girls from participating on women's athletic teams at public or private schools, including at the collegiate level.

Republican lawmakers said the intent of the bills are to protect children and women's sports.

But both bills were vilified by LGBTQ groups and individuals as purely political creations that could cause severe harm to the mental health of transgender children.

Major medical organizations including the American Medical Association say that gender-affirming surgery can improve the mental health of a patient experiencing gender dysphoria, a medical term for the feeling of "discomfort or distress" in some people when their gender does not match their biological sex.

Although the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's "best practice" guidance is for patients to wait until they're 18 to make irreversible surgical decisions, Rep. Melody Hernandez, D-Tempe, has told other lawmakers repeatedly that the organization may revise its standards to include underage surgery, which she said is rare.

Dr. Marci Bowers, a surgeon and president-elect of WPATH, would not comment to The Arizona Republic on the possible guidance change.

## Lawmakers debate bills

The surgery bill, which was sponsored by Sen. Warren Petersen, R-Gilbert, would ban minors from obtaining genital reassignment surgery as well as so-called "top" surgery to masculinize or feminize a transgender person's chest. Democratic lawmakers noted that teens can obtain breast enhancement or reduction surgery at a whim, as long as they get their parents' permission — which transgender-related surgery require as well.

Hernandez spoke emotionally about the issue on the House floor before the vote, saying she couldn't stop thinking about 13-year-old Skyler Morrison, who had testified about both transgender bills before legislative committees and met with Rep. Walt Blackman, R-Snowflake, chair of the House Judiciary Committee.

"I am sad to see members voting for that legislation after meeting her," Hernandez said, adding that she was voting against the "horrible, offensive" bill in Morrison's honor.

**Kathy Hoffman, the state's Democratic superintendent of public instruction, posted on social media that the two bills "are nothing more than bigoted government overreach directed at trans kids and their families."**

Blackman retorted that he wasn't ashamed to have met Morrison to "get to know the person I was going to make a decision over," adding that "she did show courage" with her testimony. He said he would vote his conscience but didn't explain his vote, other than to say he saw the "fear in their parents' eyes" at the talk of suicide risk.

The Trevor Project, a national pro-LGBTQ group, pointed to statistics from a youth survey showing that 52% of transgender children "seriously considered suicide in the past year, and 1 in 5 attempted suicide."

Morrison, reached by phone after the vote, said she feels "lucky to have someone like Rep. Hernandez" in the House. After she and her parents met Blackman, the family agreed "we feel like he really did listen to us," Morrison said. "It's just unfortunate he voted with his party instead of his conscience."

**'Stirring up fear' vs. fair playing field**

LGBTQ activist organizations and politicians sent out statements condemning the bills' passage and urging Ducey to veto them.

"We call on Gov. Doug Ducey to veto these toxic, detestable and outright evil measures," said a harshly worded statement by Phoenix Pride, which organized Phoenix's first gay-pride march in 1981. "There is no place in American democracy for vicious attempts to marginalize and dehumanize anyone, especially innocent children."

"Today, the Arizona House brought the number of anti-trans bills advanced across the country in a single day to five," said Sam Ames, the Trevor Project's director of advocacy and government affairs in a written statement.

Phoenix Pride released a statement saying the organization was "shocked and absolutely appalled at the actions passed today by the Arizona Legislature in an ongoing effort to further marginalize our state's transgender population."

The group said Ducey should "veto these toxic, detestable and outright evil measures, and to do so in a manner that both condemns these particular proposals, and discourages future attempts to curtail the rights of transgender Arizonans who are our family and friends, neighbors and teammates, fellow students and fellow human beings."

The Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Campaign said that politicians who pass bills like these "are culpable for the harm" they cause to the wellbeing of LGBTQ people.

The group's Arizona director, Bridget Sharpe, said transgender children and their families "are confused, hurt and scared as to why their legislators have decided to single them out when their lives are already extremely difficult."

The passage of the bills was celebrated by conservatives, including Cathi Herrod of the Center for Arizona Policy, who praised the Legislature for passing them as well as Senate Bill 1164, which would prohibit abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy depending on how the U.S. Supreme Court rules on Mississippi's 15-week ban in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* case.

Herrod said the surgery bill "responds to the growing trend of regret and depression" of transitioning people, who she said are "left scarred, infertile and more likely to commit suicide."

She touted the sports bill as "a fair way, based solely on biology, to ensure girls and women the Title IX protections they fought long and hard to achieve."

That bill's sponsor, Sen. Nancy Barto, R-Phoenix — who also sponsored the abortion bill — had dubbed it the "Save Women's Sports Act," which is the title of similar legislation pending approval in other states, including South Carolina and Oklahoma.

The issue is of national concern for conservatives and some athletes who contend that transgender women should not compete against cisgender women in sports because of innate physical differences.

"Biological males have significant advantages over females in nearly every single sport," said Rep. Shawanna Bolick, R-Phoenix, before voting yes on the bill. "I stand with my biological females and girls sports."

Rep. Mitzi Epstein, D-Tempe, said that "science shows" that boys and girls in their teens don't actually have many physical differences that could affect competitions.

"This bill is about stirring up fear, fear

that a trans girl might be unfair competition," she said. "The real fear that trans students face is that they're bullied and made to feel like outsiders. That's a very real fear and this bill makes it much worse for them."

Countering Democrats' arguments about physical differences, Rep. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, pointed to the example of University of Pennsylvania swimmer Lia Thomas, a transgender woman who previously competed on a men's swimming team and last week won an NCAA Division I title after a first-place finish in the women's 500-yard freestyle.

"There's physical fitness, there's health, but competition is one of the major things about school sports and anybody who doubts that might ask themselves, why are they keeping score?" he said.

In a statement, Barto called the passage of the abortion and transgender sports bills a "victory for Arizona values."

The Arizona House "took a step to keep the playing field even," she said.

Kathy Hoffman, the state's Democratic superintendent of public instruction, posted on social media after the votes that the two bills "are nothing more than bigoted government overreach directed at trans kids and their families."

She called on Ducey to veto "this type of hateful legislation."

A third bill opposed by the LGBTQ community, Senate Bill 2161, cleared the House and last week passed in the Senate Education Committee on a 5-3 vote. In its original form, if a student told an educator about being gay or transgender, the educator would have been required to alert the student's parents. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Steve Kaiser, R-Phoenix, agreed to amendments that removed references to LGBTQ students; the bill now specifies the kind of access parents have to a student's school data.

About a dozen other LGBTQ-related bills submitted by Republican lawmakers at the beginning of the year were never seriously considered.

A bipartisan, pro-LGBTQ bill that was proposed by House Speaker Rusty Bowers, R-Mesa, and Amish Shah, D-Phoenix, would have added gay and transgender people to the state's anti-discrimination protections. It received a 4.5-hour, information-only hearing on March 17 that supporters called historic and beneficial in itself. They hope to bring it back next year.

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## AZ Legislature passes 2 bills targeting transgender youth

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Arizona is now the latest state to pass bills targeting transgender youth. It is up to Republican Gov. Doug Ducey to decide whether they become law.

Republican lawmakers on Thursday voted along party lines to OK measures restricting surgery for transgender youth and barring their participation in sports.

The votes come as lawmakers in other states contend with similar bills. The governors of Indiana and Utah vetoed transgender sports-ban proposals this

week, while Oklahoma's governor signed such a bill.

Transgender rights activists worried earlier this year as lawmakers in 34 states introduced bills that restrict the freedoms of transgender people in some way.

Democratic lawmakers made impassioned pleas against the measures, but were unable sway any Republicans, who hold a one-vote majority in the House of Representatives, which gave them the final approval.

The measures, Senate Bills 1138 and 1165, would place a ban on gender-re-

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