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Culture wars take center stage in Tudor Dixon's education proposals

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Republican gubernatorial candidate Tudor Dixon speaks during the Michigan Republican Party's Red Wave Party at the State Capitol Building in Lansing on Saturday, Aug. 27, 2022. (Cory Morse | MLive.com) Cory Morse | MLive.com

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By [Simon Schuster | sschuster@mlive.com](#)

Republican gubernatorial candidate Tudor Dixon seized on national culture wars in a pair of press conferences this week, with education policy priorities aimed at transgender children in sports and discussion of sexual orientation and gender in classrooms.

In Grand Rapids Wednesday, Dixon was flanked by signs emblazoned with the slogan “protect girls sports.”

This, Dixon said, entails banning transgender girls from participating on teams of the gender they identify with.

“The glass ceiling has been laid back into place by elitist liberals who are sacrificing our girls at the altar of trans ideology,” she said.

In front of the Capitol in Lansing the day before, Dixon pitched a policy modeled after the Florida [law](#) critics labeled “Don’t Say Gay” — banning any discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity for children from kindergarten through third grade.

“Parents deserve to know that their tax dollars aren’t being used to indoctrinate their children with radical sex and gender ideas before they’re even old enough to know what sex is,” Dixon said. “This is not anti-LGBTQ.”

These are of-the-moment issues, touchstones for social conservatives that have become inflection points in the states where they’ve been enacted.

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Since 2020, 18 states have placed bans of some form on transgender students participating in school sports, according to the advocacy group Movement Advancement Project. The proposals have faced legal challenges, some have been blocked by courts, and others have been vetoed by governors even in deeply conservative states.

The latter policy, championed by Florida's Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, drew international attention and ire before being signed into law in March.

Dixon said allowing transgender girls to compete with other girls is a "trans-supremacist ideology," one that she alleged her opponent, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, embraces.

Advocates of this policy argue being born male offers transgender girls an unfair advantage over cisgender girls due to biological factors. Dixon said her policy would extend through all levels of education, including university sports.

She has repeatedly called the transgender rights movement, the push for institutions to recognize transgender people as the gender they identify with, as a "war on women," an implicit rejection of that recognition.

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The federal government's Title IX law, first passed in 1972, prohibits sex-based discrimination in any federally-funded school. In practice, extending this requirement to athletics has meant high schools girls could play on boy's football teams and their counterparts could join a girl's volleyball, provided teams of their own gender aren't offered.

In 2020, the Betsy DeVos-led U.S. Department of Education issued an interpretation of the law that said the gender identity of transgender students was not protected by Title IX. That same year, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in *Comstock v. Clayton County*, determining sex-based

protections encompassed sexual orientation and gender identity in a different law, and the administration of President Joe Biden is moving to formalize those protections in Title IX.

Much remains in limbo. Court battles over that move are ongoing and it's not yet known how the department may revamp sports eligibility rules.

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At the press conference, Dixon twice said she wanted to ban “cross-sex” competition altogether, but a campaign press release later clarified this would be a one-way restriction.

“This is specifically focused on protecting women’s sports and female competitors who biological men hold a distinct biological advantage over,” the release said, using “biological men” as parlance for transgender girls.

The ban would be at odds with Michigan High School Athletics Association’s 2012 policy on the issue, which reviews transgender girls’ eligibility on a “case-by-case basis,” requiring a bevy of documentation before giving the green light. The organization has no restrictions on girls or transgender boys playing in boys sports.

Last year a spokesperson for MHSAA told Bridge Michigan, “This policy has worked for us, and it’s worked for schools ... We haven’t had any issues.” The organization didn’t reply to a request for comment from MLive as of publication time.

Whitmer campaign spokesperson Maeve Coyle said in a statement Dixon’s proposal was “the latest example of Tudor Dixon politicizing kids to try to divide communities and pit people against each other,” and claimed it’d remove control from parents and schools.

“Gov. Whitmer believes sports should unite communities as they come together on a Friday night for a football game or a Saturday afternoon for a swim meet, and politicians shouldn’t be telling schools how to play sports,” Coyle said.

Dixon’s proposal to ban sex and gender-based discussions was light on details — no repercussions for violating the proposed ban were offered — but would require educators to post their full curriculum online for parents to scrutinize.

Jon Pataki heard about the Wednesday press conference in a neighborhood Facebook group and walked over to the park where it was being held. He heckled Dixon at the onset of the event and debated with attendees afterward. He called her proposal “transphobic.”

“She’s taking a much more complicated, larger, nuanced issue and cramming it down into something that will rile people up and make people angry,” Pataki said in an interview. He said he intends to support Whitmer in the general election Nov. 8.

At the press conference Tuesday, Dixon couldn’t point to a specific instance of “radical sex and gender theory” being taught to young schoolchildren in Michigan, but emphasized the ban would extend to all sexual orientations and genders. When a reporter asked about the [lopsided fundraising](#) in the race thus far, Dixon said her content makes up for it.

“I feel confident that we don’t need as much money as Gretchen Whitmer needs because our message is better,” she said.

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