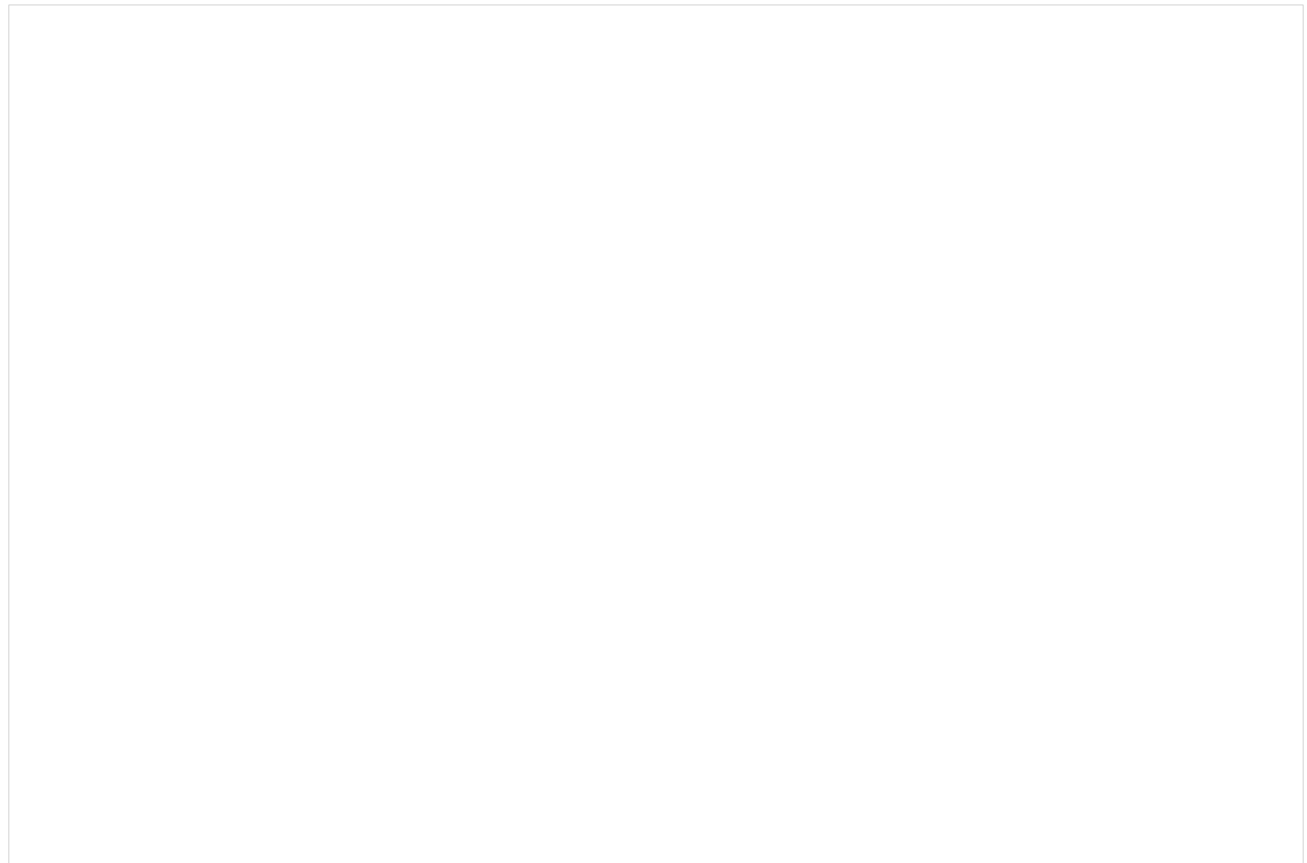


# Missouri GOP renews push to limit transgender athlete participation in school sports

Efforts to ban transgender girls from competing in women's sports are expected to pick up momentum when lawmakers return to the Capitol in January



There have been more bills prefiled for Missouri's 2023 legislative session regarding transgender athletes than there are transgender athletes currently competing according to their identity in public

schools.

Republican lawmakers in both the House and Senate have combined to file 10 bills seeking to restrict the ability of transgender minors to play in youth sports.

In the 2021-2022 school year, only five transgender students applied to the Missouri State High School Athletics Association, or MSHSAA, to compete according to their gender identity.

Democrats and LGBTQ advocates say the flurry of bills is a discriminatory attack on an already marginalized community, motivated by partisan politics. GOP lawmakers pushing the bills, many of which are titled "Protect Women's Sports Act," say they are inspired by real concerns in their communities about fairness.

It's a debate that played out repeatedly during the 2022 session, as Republicans pushed — and Democrats stalled — numerous bills targeting transgender youth. Ultimately, [dysfunction in the Senate](#) doomed their chances.

Sen. Mike Moon, R-Ash Grove and among the legislation's most outspoken proponents, says he's optimistic things will be different in 2023.

He points to [Gov. Mike Parson's support for his bill](#) after the legislature adjourned in May.

"After the session ended, the governor's office voiced support for the bill," Moon said. "And whether that was the catalyst or not, I don't know. But this year, now several [makers] have filed it, and perhaps that will create enough support so that it will pass."

Meanwhile, opponents are gearing up for the fight.

“High school is hard enough. And it’s hard enough to fit in for students who already feel some kind of uniqueness or reason that they have to try a little bit harder to fit in with their peers,” said Shira Berkowitz, senior director of public policy and advocacy for PROMO, the state’s largest LGBTQ advocacy organization.

“They face higher rates of bullying. They face harassment and mistreatment sometimes, and the fact that they could be excluded from sports has a devastating effect, already in a vulnerable population,” Berkowitz said.


Patrick Sasser testified in front of a House committee in March in hopes his 11-year-old daughter could compete in sports according to her gender identity.

She has been denied access to some all-girls teams as she competes in multiple sports, he told The Independent in an interview. But her current teammates welcome her as just another athlete, there to kick the soccer ball and hopefully score a few points, he said.

But his daughter’s transition has not been without tears.

“The things that my 11 year old has experienced in life, no kid should have to experience a lot of those things and be uncomfortable in their own body and have doubts or fears or anything like that. No kid should have to go through that,” he said. “That notion that someone would do that to dominate a sport, it’s just like, it’s crazy to me.”

**‘A good start’**



*Republican Sen. Mike Moon speaks on the Senate floor on Feb. 22, 2022 (Madeline Carter/Missouri Independent).*

MSHSAA's application process for transgender athletes has been in place since 2012 and is more restrictive for transgender females who wish to compete on girls' teams.

They can only compete according to their gender identity once they have been taking hormone-suppression medication for one year and must prove they are staying on their treatment to remain eligible. Since MSHSAA began this process in 2012, there have been 12 students who have applied and approved, said Jason West, MSHSAA's communications director.

State Sen. Denny Hoskins, R-Warrensburg and a sponsor of one of the versions of the "Save Women's Sports Act" bills, said he was not aware

of MSHSAA's regulations.

After being told the current rules for Missouri's high school athletes, he called the process a "good start," but said to have a real impact any policy needs to be in state law.

"We can do more and put something in state statute," Hoskins said.

Eighteen states have banned transgender students from competing according to their gender identity since March 2020.

According to a [Pew Research survey](#), 58% of Americans said they "favored" or "strongly favored" policies that limit transgender athletes' participation to the sex they were assigned at birth.

"I have been contacted by parents who have daughters... They worked hard to develop the skills that they've attained and also to win over the scholarships they want. And they believe that having a [biological] male compete against them in competitive sport is unfair," Moon said.

He said none of those families recounted a time their daughter competed against a transgender athlete.

Sasser believes GOP bills are "tapping into people's fears and biases." "That's why the legislators feel forced to take a stand on something that I don't believe to be an issue," he said.

Rep. Ian Mackey, D-Richmond Heights, believes opponents will be able to defeat the bill this year.

"There's always going to be something more pressing... something that actually requires our attention that I hope will get in the way and that will cause us to do the jobs that we were sent there to do," Mackey

said, "which is bring resources back to our districts, improve the livelihood of our families and our communities, provide health care and education for Missourians."

He believes most people that get involved in anti-trans legislation "don't understand what it means to be transgender."

## **Emotionally draining**

Berkowitz said anti-trans legislation is emotionally damaging.

"The damage that these types of messages and bills perpetuates in our schools and in our classrooms and the physical activities that our kids participate in, does cause significant harm," Berkowitz said.

The mental toll causes transgender athletes to opt out of sports they'd otherwise enjoy, Berkowitz said.

For Sasser and his family, who have repeatedly testified against this legislation, it is emotionally draining.

"It's a really tough fight and a really tough thing to feel like I'm continually defending the identity of my own child – and the identity of other trans people in the state and around the nation."

Hoskins and Moon acknowledged their legislation could have negative mental health effects on trans athletes.

"We want to be cognizant of all mental health concerns of any youth," Hoskins said, "whether they are transgender or not transgender."

The 10 bills filed by mid-December have various financial penalties for schools that allow transgender athletes to compete on the team

opposite of their sex assigned at birth. Both Hoskins' and Moon's bills take away all legislative-directed funding until a school complies with their rules.

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