# South Carolina lawmakers push contentious bills on education, LGBTQ rights, and criminal justice ahead of May 8 adjournment



With only two weeks remaining before the South Carolina General Assembly adjourns on May 8 for a recess until January 2026, lawmakers are pressing forward with several contentious bills covering education, LGBTQ issues, and criminal justice.

One significant proposal under Senate consideration is Senate Bill 62, a private school voucher programme that would channel public funds into private K-12 institutions, including religious schools. Senate Majority Leader Shane Massey indicated his intention to push for the bill’s passage on April 29, following a delay due to insufficient legislative quorum. This bill comes despite a recent South Carolina Supreme Court ruling striking down a similar voucher system as unconstitutional.

The current compromise version of S. 62 notably permits schools receiving vouchers to opt out of adhering to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which by law require schools to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. Approximately 15% of public school students have an IEP. The bill caps voucher funding at 15,000 recipients annually, with vouchers worth $7,500 each. Funding is projected to come from either diverting dollars from the state’s general fund or reallocating money from the South Carolina Education Lottery, which currently finances in-state college scholarships. Lawmakers have expressed a goal to later remove caps on voucher numbers and eligibility restrictions based on income, opening the programme to wealthier families.

In a separate matter concerning LGBTQ rights, the city of Columbia’s 2021 ordinance banning licensed professionals from providing conversion therapy to minors is facing state pushback. On April 23, South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson sent Columbia officials a letter urging repeal of the ban, citing concerns about religious freedom, despite the ordinance applying only to licensed counsellors and not restricting religious speech within faith organisations.

The same day, State Senator Josh Kimbrell successfully proposed a budget amendment in the South Carolina Senate that threatens to withhold state funding from Columbia should the city refuse to rescind the ordinance. The state budget has yet to be finalised and the amendment is not yet in effect. Both Wilson and Kimbrell have shown political ambitions ahead of the 2026 gubernatorial race, engaging in rhetoric critical of LGBTQ protections. U.S. Representative Nancy Mace is also active in this political discourse. Supporters of Columbia’s ordinance plan to attend a City Council meeting scheduled for May 6 at 4 p.m. to advocate for its retention.

Meanwhile, the House Education and Public Works Committee reported favourably on House Bill 3758, legislation that would authorise students to deliver religious messages at official school events such as graduation ceremonies, assemblies, and the beginnings of athletic competitions. While current law permits students to pray during free time and participate in religious clubs before or after school hours, this bill seeks to extend religious expression into formal school functions. Opponents argue this risks violating constitutional church-state separation.

In education administration news, State Superintendent Ellen Weaver issued a memorandum on March 14 that imposed a state-defined concept of sex and prohibited staff from engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which her office has labelled “Discriminatory Equity Ideology.” The memo enumerated forbidden terms including “antiracism,” “cisgender,” and “social-emotional learning,” drawing on directives from the Trump administration as justification. However, a federal judge ruled on April 24 to block enforcement of a February 14 federal “Dear Colleague” letter underpinning these restrictions, marking a setback for efforts to control educational content at the state level. Sarah Hinger, deputy director of the ACLU’s Racial Justice Program, commented, “The federal government has no authority to dictate what schools can and cannot teach to serve its own agenda, and this ruling is an important step in reaffirming that.”

On the criminal justice front, Senate Bill 76 was advanced by the Senate Judiciary Committee and is pending Senate floor debate. This legislation proposes a broad definition of criminal gangs encompassing markers such as common names, symbols, tattoos, graffiti, attire, behaviours, customs, and activities. Critics have raised concerns that such a definition could lead to discriminatory enforcement and overly harsh sentencing practices. Observations of similar broad applications of gang classification in other jurisdictions have made headlines, including controversial gang designations based on tattoo imagery and misuse of gang statutes in protests.

As the South Carolina legislature approaches its sine die adjournment on May 8, these bills reflect the ongoing debates over educational policy, civil rights protections, and criminal justice reform within the state. Any legislation not passed by this deadline may be reconsidered when the General Assembly reconvenes in January 2026.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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