# Federal ruling on school gender transition case deepens Wyoming GOP divides on parental rights and judicial reform



A recent federal court ruling dismissing a lawsuit brought by a Rock Springs couple against their local school district has reignited longstanding divisions among Republican leaders in Wyoming, particularly over parental rights and judicial reform.

U.S. District Court Judge Scott Skavdahl ruled on Monday in favour of Sweetwater County School District No. 1, rejecting the claims of Sean and Ashley Willey. The couple had alleged that the school district assisted their high school daughter in socially transitioning her gender without their knowledge or consent, which they argued violated their parental rights. According to the judge’s findings, school staff did refer to the student by a male name and pronouns without informing the parents for several months. However, the judge concluded that the school did not take deliberate or official steps to conceal this from them. Skavdahl further noted that mandating notification to parents each time a student changes pronouns could place an excessive administrative burden on schools. The Willeys have announced plans to appeal the decision.

The lawsuit has become a flashpoint in Wyoming’s political landscape, influencing ongoing discussions around parental rights legislation and social policies in public schools. In early 2023, prior to the lawsuit’s filing, Senator Dan Dockstader, a Republican from Afton, proposed Senate File 117, which would have prohibited instruction about gender transition to children in kindergarten through third grade and required schools to inform parents of significant changes affecting their children. The bill ultimately died after House Speaker Albert Sommers chose not to bring it to the House Floor, citing constitutional concerns over the bill containing multiple topics.

The Wyoming Freedom Caucus (WFC), a group of socially conservative Republican legislators, strongly criticised Sommers for blocking the bill. In a social media post on Tuesday, the WFC blamed Sommers’ actions for the court ruling and claimed the Willeys might have been able to seek recourse in state court had SF 117 passed. Accompanying the post was a video of WFC Chair Representative Rachel Rodriguez-Williams expressing disappointment at the decision and calling for prayers for the Willey family. Sommers, in an interview, rejected these assertions, stating the refusal stemmed from the bill’s constitutional issues related to bill-topic restrictions rather than the substance of the parental notification measures. He also dismissed the WFC's criticisms as "smoke and mirrors." Rebekah Fitzgerald, a lead organizer of a competing Republican faction, also criticised the WFC for politicising the issue instead of focusing on effective legislation.

The timing of the bill’s provisions relative to the school district’s actions has been debated. Sommers pointed out that even if SF 117 had passed, it would not have taken effect early enough in 2023 to address most of the alleged incidents from 2022. Sean Willey’s attorney, Ernie Trakas, acknowledged that the bill could have provided an additional remedy had it been enacted earlier, especially if the school’s conduct continued into 2023.

In 2024, the Wyoming Legislature passed two laws strengthening parental rights in education. One bill reaffirmed existing parental rights in the context of school communications, while another mandated parental notification for significant changes in students’ lives. However, by that time, the Willeys’ daughter was no longer enrolled at Black Butte High School in Sweetwater County.

Clark Stith, a former Republican representative from Rock Springs who sponsored the 2024 parental notification bill, criticised lawmakers for focusing solely on Dockstader's 2023 bill while disregarding his earlier legislative efforts. Stith believes his House Bill 78 could have aided the Willeys had it passed. Though the House Judiciary Committee declined to advance Stith’s bill, it was due to concerns over an unrelated provision expanding parental rights in child neglect and termination cases, which was later removed.

The ruling has also spurred the Wyoming Freedom Caucus to call for reforms in the state’s judiciary system. Jessie Rubino, Wyoming director for the State Freedom Caucus Network, expressed concerns about public trust in the judicial system, pointing to the federal nature of the case but suggesting it highlights broader issues needing attention. Wyoming's judges are currently selected through a commission-based nomination process involving the Wyoming Bar Association, the governor, and a judicial nominating commission, with judges subject to retention votes every few years. Rubino indicated interest in introducing a state Senate confirmation step to increase transparency and public participation in judicial appointments. Past efforts to require judges to run for election failed to gain traction and were not officially supported by the WFC.

Efforts this year to have the House and Senate Judiciary Committees consider judicial reform as an interim study topic were unsuccessful. Committee chairpersons did not respond to requests for comment.

The federal court ruling and the subsequent political debate reflect ongoing tensions in Wyoming over parental rights, education policy, and the processes governing judicial authority. The case remains an active point of contention within the state’s Republican Party and among various advocacy groups.

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - This article discusses the Sweetwater County parents' lawsuit against the school district for allegedly concealing their child's gender identity and contributing to their child's 'social transitioning.'
2. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - The article details the parents' claims that the school district violated their parental rights by following their child's requests to use a male name and pronouns at Black Butte High School without notifying them.
3. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - The article mentions that the student later reverted to using their given name and pronouns, according to the school district’s legal filings.
4. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - The article reports that the Willeys' initial complaint included claims that the school district infringed on the family's privacy rights.
5. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - The article notes that in their updated lawsuit, the Willeys and their lawyers narrowed the scope of the lawsuit, concentrating on their case that the district prevented them from acting as parents and violated their religious beliefs by treating the student as a different gender without parental knowledge or consent.
6. <https://www.gillettenewsrecord.com/news/wyoming/article_a2d047f9-f7fe-5add-9f0c-578ad38bb6b4.html> - The article mentions that Ashley Willey, a district math teacher, is also arguing Sweetwater County School District No. 1 ignored her freedom of speech rights by requiring her to use preferred names and pronouns for her students.
7. <https://cowboystatedaily.com/2025/04/30/freedom-caucus-wants-judicial-reform-after-judge-rejects-gender-transition-suit/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data