

OUT POLITICS AND POLICY

Biden administration sends trans students a back-to-school message

"We stand behind you," officials from the departments of Justice, Health and Education said in a joint message to transgender students.

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By Dan Avery

As young people across America prepare to return to class – some in person, some remotely – the Biden administration issued a message for transgender students.

In a joint video Thursday, Suzanne Goldberg, the acting assistant secretary of education for civil rights; Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke; and Dr. Rachel Levine, the assistant secretary of health and human services for health, outlined the federal government's support for transgender students even as their community is under siege on the state level, where more than 130 anti-trans bills in 36 states have been introduced this year alone, according [to the Human Rights Campaign](#).

Back-to-School Message for Transgender Students from the U.S. Depts of Ju...



In the video, Goldberg, a lesbian, discussed the concerns many students have about returning to class, from making friends to keeping up with academic demands.

“If you’re a transgender student, perhaps you’re worried about simply being accepted and safe and being treated with respect as you head into the new school year,” she said.

Clarke, [the first woman](#) to lead the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, praised the work by many teachers and administrators nationwide to create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ students.

But, she added, “we also know that’s not the reality for all transgender students, including perhaps some of you.”

“In some places, people in places of authority are putting up obstacles that would keep you from playing on the sports field, accessing the bathroom and receiving the supportive and lifesaving care you may need,” Clarke said. “We’re here to say, ‘That’s wrong – and it’s against the law.’”

In the 2020-21 legislative session, [more than 75 bills](#) were introduced that would bar trans students from playing school sports. Such measures have become law in [nine states](#), according to the Movement Advancement Project.

“We know you are resilient,” Goldberg said, “and we hope you will find support where and when you need it. But we also want you to know the Department of Education and the entire federal government stand behind you. Your rights at school matter. You matter.”

Goldberg said trans students who faced discrimination should file complaints with the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights, and Clarke confirmed that the Justice Department would investigate such allegations.

“We want you to know that we are looking out for you,” Clarke said. “And we’re looking out for your civil rights.”

The past, present and future of trans rights

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Levine, the [first openly transgender official in a presidential administration](#), said learning environments free of bullying and harassment are crucial for all students to flourish.

“It is critical to support trans youth and their parents and families to help them achieve the good health and well-being that everyone deserves,” she said.

The three shared resources that LGBTQ students could find online, including the Education Department’s [resources page for LGBTQ students](#), the Justice Department [Civil Rights Division’s website](#) and the federal government’s [Stop Bullying](#) site.

It isn't the first time the White House has reached out to trans youths: In [an executive order](#) released on his first day in office, President Joe Biden extended [federal nondiscrimination protections to LGBTQ Americans](#), writing, in part, "Children should be able to learn without worrying about whether they will be denied access to the restroom, the locker room, or school sports."

In [his first address to Congress](#) in April, Biden said, "To all the transgender people at home, especially the young people, I want you to know the president has your back."

Referring to that "unequivocal message," Levine said she wanted transgender students to know "that I've got your back, too – and I'll do everything I can to support and advocate for our community."

Clarke cited the [Justice Department's challenges](#) to bans on transgender girls' competing in female sports in West Virginia and on gender-confirming treatment for minors in Arkansas, saying, "We stand behind you and are ready to act to defend your rights."

Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, praised the video for "sending a strong and meaningful message to transgender students across the country – and especially in places where they have come under attack by politicians."

"It's so important for transgender kids to know that they are not alone and that the president of the United States has their back," Heng-Lehtinen said. "President Biden and his administration are working to make sure transgender youth have an opportunity to be safe, to learn and to be healthy. They are incredible allies."

Melanie Willingham-Jaggers, interim executive director of GLSEN, a LGBTQ student advocacy nonprofit group, said that she also welcomed such a "bold, affirming message" and that she wanted "further policy action to back up this commitment."

"The administration must set a clear precedent, not only for federal agencies, but for state and local leaders, and ensure that transgender youth are safe, supported and empowered in our school communities," Willingham-Jaggers said. "Individual educators and school leaders can step up in the meantime and make thoughtful connections with the transgender students in their schools to show them that they are valued and that they belong."

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