

## Diversity debate dominates House action on Missouri state budget

**Democrats say amendment banning ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ initiatives in every state agency and contract endangers schools, Medicaid and other services**

By: [Rudi Keller](#) - March 30, 2023 4:34 pm



House Speaker Dean Plocher, R-Des Peres, center, speaks with, from left, Speaker Pro tem Mike Henderson, R-Bonne Terre, Budget Committee Chairman Cody Smith, R-Carthage, and Majority Leader Jonathan Patterson, R-Lees Summit, during Thursday's debate on the state budget. (Tim Bommel/Missouri House Communications)

Missouri Democrats argued Thursday that restrictive language barring the state from spending tax dollars on diversity and inclusion initiatives threatens to close charter schools, interrupt delivery of medical services and could even force the Capitol Building to go dark.

Each of the 13 bills spending \$45.6 billion to run state government in the year beginning July 1 includes the language, as does the supplemental budget bill spending \$2 billion to maintain state operations through the end of the current fiscal year.

Sponsored by Rep. Doug Richey, R-Excelsior Springs, as [floor amendments during initial debate Tuesday](#), the sweeping language became the focus of hours of debate Thursday as the House sent the budget to the Senate.

In a speech defending the language, Richey said it was intended to prevent preferential treatment in state agencies. The goal, he said, is to root out any attempt to implement concepts of critical race theory in state government programs.

In Richey's view, the history of European-based cultures has been expanding protections for individual rights and that is what he is doing.

"This is a noble fight," Richey said. "This is a necessary fight for the very framework of our western civilization that we as Republicans believe in."

Not everyone agreed that the spread of European influence around the world was benign.

"Western ideology was to colonize as many countries as possible," said Rep. LaKeySha Bosley, D-St. Louis.

The debate was angry and emotional. Rep. Raychel Proudie, D-Ferguson, said she personally has seen examples of why the initiatives Richey wants to block are needed.

“I have been called everything in my email inbox except a child of god,” she said, adding that she has also been the target of racial slurs in the Capitol Building.

“If you are offended by the use of the word n\*\*\*\*r imagine what it is like to be called that over and over,” Proudie said.

Richey’s amendment is a target as the budget reaches the Senate.

“I think probably where the Senate is going to start is taking that completely out,” said Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Lincoln Hough, R-Springfield. “The language they have attached to those budget bills is problematic for a number of reasons. I don’t know if there is a middle ground that can be found there or not.”

Before the House adjourned for the day, it had sent all 14 spending bills to the Senate on votes that generally split along party lines. The House version of the budget spends \$2.1 billion less than proposed by Parson in January, including \$1.5 billion less in general revenue.

To achieve that saving, House Budget Committee Chairman Cody Smith cut \$859 million Parson sought for widening portions of Interstate 70, \$250 million set aside for future education costs and some of the funding requested for anticipated increases in Medicaid costs.

Those cuts mean that not only does the spending plan leave the state’s massive general revenue surplus of about \$5 billion untapped, the budget would spend about \$600 million less than the state anticipates in tax revenue during the fiscal year.

Several of Parson’s big initiatives did survive the cuts, including \$78 million to increase payments to child care providers and \$56 million to support pre-kindergarten programs in public schools.

No big Democratic initiatives made it into the budget. The closest vote Tuesday was on \$308 million to provide 8.7% raises to direct service providers who care for people with disabilities. In the Democratic news conference Thursday, Minority Leader Crystal Quade of Springfield said many Republicans who opposed that amendment did so in fear of becoming outcasts.

“They cry in our offices and say, ‘I’m so tired of voting against this stuff, or doing what I’m told or and if I don’t, I’m gonna get primaried and lose my job,’” Quade said. “They cry as they say that to us. And we’re done letting that go by without calling it out.”

The budget will likely look much different when it emerges from the Senate. Unlike the House, there are no rules restricting members from offering amendments that spend available funds, whether from current revenue or surplus money.

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Lincoln Hough, R-Springfield, has indicated he is willing to tap that surplus. He wants to craft a plan that widens I-70 across the state and he hinted Thursday he will make many other changes.

The differences will be worked out in a conference committee after Senate action. The budget must be passed by May 5.

“There are going to be quite a bit of conference-able items between what the House is doing and what we intend on doing,” Hough said.

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Quade said Democrats and Republicans in the House have visited with Hough to ask for items that Smith would not allow in the budget.

“The list goes on and on the things that the Republicans refuse to do while leaving \$5.5 billion, sometimes up to \$8 billion unspent in our state,” Quade said. “But we didn’t get to talk about that.”

Instead, she said, members wanted to focus on Richey’s amendment. It is extremely dangerous, she said.

“If this language remains intact, it will completely jeopardize every dollar that the state of Missouri operates with,” she said.

Under Richey’s amendment, the state could not spend any money on “staffing, vendors, consultants, or programs associated with ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ or ‘Diversity, Equity and Belonging’ or programs that promote “preferential treatment of any individual or group of individuals based upon race, color, religion, sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, or ancestry; 2) the concept that disparities are necessarily tied to oppression; 3) collective guilt ideologies; 4) intersectional or divisive identity activism; or, 5) the limiting of freedom of conscience, thought, or speech.”

The only Black member of the Republican caucus, Rep. Justin Hicks of Lake St. Louis, said he didn't see the terrible results that Democrats saw in the language.

"We are not in the business in state government of giving preferential treatment," Hicks said.

But Republican Gov. Mike Parson's department heads are lobbying lawmakers to strip the language out, citing the obstacles created by the amendment, said Rep. Peter Merideth of St. Louis, ranking Democrat on the Budget Committee.

There are charter schools [focused on diversity and inclusion](#) that could be cut off from tax funding, Merideth said. Almost every large company that sells to the state has diversity and inclusion initiatives, including Ameren, the electric supplier to the capitol.

"I wouldn't know what we wouldn't be able to have our lights on because Ameren has diversity, equity inclusion in their mission and staff associated with it," Merideth said. "It's absolutely bonkers."

The Department of Social Services, Merideth said, worries it could impair Medicaid funding because the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services want states to address inequities in health outcomes that fall along racial and economic lines.

During floor debate, Rep. Deb Lavender, D-Manchester, said one example is deaths among new mothers.

"Black women die at three times the rate of white women in maternal mortality," she said. "Why does a Black woman have to be three times the risk of losing her life than white women?"

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