

## **Frequently Asked Questions About the National School Boards Association's Letter to the President**

On September 29, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) sent a letter to the President asking for federal assistance to stop threats and acts of violence against public schoolchildren, public school board members, and other public school district officials. In the days since, there has been some misinformation about what is—and what is not—in the letter, as well as questions about why NSBA sent the letter. NSBA is providing this Frequently Asked Questions document to help state association members address members' concerns, correct misconceptions, and more fully explain NSBA's position.

### **Why did NSBA send the letter to the President?**

NSBA is a nonpartisan organization. This letter is addressed to the President to address a critical safety issue to public schools and school boards—it is not a partisan issue. The pandemic and our heightened political environment have created a lot of tension in our society that is playing out on social media and in everyday interactions, but especially at school board meetings. School board members have been in the spotlight since the start of the pandemic, but the level of vitriol has increased over the last few weeks, especially regarding mask mandates. NSBA also has policy that calls for the safety and health of students, employees, and visitors.

Additionally, violent acts, threats, and acts of intimidation are occurring throughout the nation at school board meetings, inhibiting the right of all viewpoints to be heard in a safe environment. These disruptions particularly impact parents who are attempting to speak or hear about all sides of an issue in a civil and peaceful environment.

NSBA felt compelled to raise the issue to the federal level because we've noted a concerning increase in the number and severity of incidents, more than 20 of which are cited in the letter. For example, during a recent school board meeting in Minnesota, a man was assaulted and had his shirt ripped off after addressing the board. That event occurred just two days prior to the letter being sent. It is just one of many examples of violence occurring.

More concerning, the problems are not just happening during board meetings. In an incident in Arizona, three men showed up at an elementary school threatening the principal. One of the men was carrying zip ties, which can be used to restrain hands, suggesting they were considering an assault. In Washington state, three schools were locked down because a crowd of demonstrators—including members of a known extremist group—attempted to enter school grounds to escort a maskless student into the building. This group has a history of committing acts of violence. These are just a few examples of the immediate threat our schools and school board members are facing.

In addition to these acts, we've heard concerns from several of our member associations and from many individual school board members who wanted action. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, the leading organization for middle level principals, high school principals, and other school leaders called for federal intervention more than two weeks ago.

These disruptions are interfering with the real issues facing school boards, such as solving teacher shortages, serving students with disabilities, and ensuring all kids have internet access in their homes. We need to get back to the work of meeting all students' needs, making sure that each student is prepared for a successful future. That's what school board members and parents care about.

### **Why did NSBA speak on behalf of members?**

Threats and acts of violence against elected officials and district staff are a major safety concern and also impact safe school and district operations. These are not isolated issues, and, in many cases, there is strong evidence of organized planning for some of the most egregious behavior. This does not refer to grassroots efforts on recalls, recruiting school board candidates to run for office, or applying peaceful pressure on issues. Instead, the concern is over escalating threats and violence that go beyond free speech and, where appropriate, require attention from the federal government and their law enforcement agencies to supplement and support state and local law enforcement.

In some areas, disruptions are affecting educational services and school board governance. Some have even led to school lockdowns. These incidents are beyond random acts. NSBA has seen a coordinated pattern of threats and violence occurring across state lines and via online platforms. Because this is such a large problem affecting many different parts of the country, NSBA sought a greater federal focus on these incidents and a greater coordination between the federal government, state and local law enforcement, and school districts, especially when it comes to monitoring for threats.

### **Is it appropriate for the federal government to be involved with this issue?**

Yes. While the primary jurisdiction for the safety of school board members and public schools lies with local and state law enforcement, there is an appropriate role for the federal government, including enforcement of federal laws involving threats through the U.S. mail and other similar federal laws. Local school board members are elected officials and, as such, protecting them is not only for the collective public good, but a protection for our democracy. Further, the federal government can provide resources and information to local and state authorities as well as public schools on these very important issues. The involvement of potential hate groups offers further evidence of a required federal role. NSBA supports local governance, but federal law enforcement regularly works to assist state and local police when there are national trends emerging around certain threats.

### **What does NSBA want to accomplish by writing the letter?**

Awareness, safety, and deterrence are the main goals for the letter. In some areas, disruptions are affecting educational services and school board governance. Some have even led to school lockdowns. These incidents are beyond random acts. NSBA has seen a coordinated pattern of threats and violence occurring across state lines and via online platforms. Because this is such a large problem affecting many different parts of the country, NSBA sought a greater federal focus on these incidents and a greater coordination between the federal government, state and local law enforcement, and school districts, especially when it comes to monitoring for threats.

The reactions to the letter and the incidents cited in it have led to national media reporting on the issue and showing some of the violence that was recorded. The outcry from most of the public has been one of horror that these incidents are occurring. By calling more attention to the problem, we hope the tone and rhetoric by some will cool down and that the focus by law enforcement will help prevent further acts of violence from occurring.

### **Have you heard back from the White House or other federal agencies about the letter?**

Yes. Even prior to writing the letter, NSBA had been in regular communication with the White House and U.S. Department of Education. They were aware of the issues impacting school boards. Since sending the letter, we've had positive responses from several other federal agencies. They share our concerns and want to work with us on this issue. We have also heard from other education organizations who share similar concerns regarding the current climate. While some with certain political viewpoints are using the letter to further their attacks on public schools, the response has largely been positive and supportive.

Additionally, on October 4, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland announced that the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation will be working with state and local law enforcement to address the threats and acts of intimidation that school board members and other education leaders are facing. This response indicates the seriousness of the issue. There is a problem of growing threats and violence that must be addressed.

### **Why did NSBA send a press release on the letter to the media?**

The safety and security of school board members and public schools is an issue of major concern. NSBA and other education organizations have been receiving numerous inquiries from national media for months. This issue is not going away without a coordinated response. Much of the nation was not aware of the severity of these incidents and ongoing threats. Exposing them is one of the most important reasons for the letter. We also wanted to be transparent of the action we were requesting.

By alerting the media, we helped to create a national conversation and raise the issue among parents and policymakers. For example, the NSBA letter and threats to school board members were raised during a White House press briefing on September 30.

## **Did NSBA ask the President to label parents who protest school board policies or school board meetings as domestic terrorists?**

Absolutely not. NSBA does not want to silence parents. **NSBA did not call parents domestic terrorists, nor did we ask the Administration to classify parents as terrorists. Our letter to the President does not even mention parents because parents are not the problem. Parents are a critical part of our schools and communities and their voices must be heard when it comes to decisions about their children's education and safety.** Currently, however, many parents' voices are being drowned out by individuals—many of whom are not even connected to local schools—who are intent on causing chaos and disrupting our schools and our students' learning.

Local school board members WANT to hear from parents and community members on important issues. That kind of feedback is at the heart of good school board governance and the promotion of free speech.

NSBA and school board members don't want to stop parents from expressing their First Amendment rights. We want to stop the death threats, threats to family members, and other harassment and acts of intimidation that school board members are facing.

One main purpose of the letter is to help parents have a safe environment to share opinions with school board members regardless of their viewpoints. NSBA wants to give all parents the same opportunity to be heard. Some individuals are attempting to take further advantage of this situation by falsely claiming that NSBA labeled parents utilizing their first amendment rights as terrorists which is a lie.

In some cases, the individuals creating problems do not have children in the district or live within the district boundaries.

Currently, many parents' voices are being drowned out by individuals who are intent on causing chaos and disrupting our schools and our students' learning. NSBA wants to help parents express their First Amendment rights, not hinder them. What we want to stop are the death threats, threats to family members, and other harassment and acts of intimidation that school board members, school administrators, and other school personnel are facing.

Parents also need to know the vast majority of school board members are unpaid public officials who are elected by members of their community, and many are parents, guardians, and grandparents. They are our neighbors and live in our communities. They go to our churches and shop in our grocery stores. Their main goal is to help every child succeed and thrive. Everyone in a community is not expected to agree on every issue. However, opinions and concerns should be presented and delivered in a civil, respectful manner.

We all need to remember that children are watching and listening. In our interactions and in our disagreements, we need to be civil and respectful so that we can set a positive example for them.

### **What should someone do if they receive a threat or want to report a potential crime?**

Local police should be contacted immediately if you or someone you know receives a threat, or you want to report suspicious activity. Threats of violence against school board members, officials, and workers in our nation's public schools can also be reported by the public to the FBI's National Threat Operations Center (NTOC) via its national tip line (1-800-CALL-FBI) and online through the FBI website (<http://fbi.gov/tips>).

**NSBA's letter to the President is available at** <https://nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/nsba-letter-to-president-biden-concerning-threats-to-public-schools-and-school-board-members-92921.pdf>.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a federation of state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands that represent locally elected school board officials serving approximately 51 million public school students regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or citizenship. Working with and through our state association members, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential. For more information, visit [nsba.org](http://nsba.org).