



FACT CHECK

Fact check: FBI is not using threat tags on parents who protest at school board meetings

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The claim: FBI's counterterrorism division adds threat tags to parents who protest school boards

Attorney General Merrick Garland issued a memorandum Oct. 4 directing the FBI to address "threats of violence against school administrators, board members, teachers, and staff" after some groups aired concerns regarding the safety of public schools.

The nature of the FBI's work in that sphere came into question Nov. 16, when Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, wrote a letter to Garland saying House Republicans received information from a whistleblower that the FBI was using a specific "threat tag" to track potential investigations.

An array of false claims about those tags are now circulating on social media.

"BREAKING: House Republicans have obtained whistleblower documents showing that the FBI is using its counterterrorism division to investigate and add 'threat tags' to parents who are protesting school boards," reads text of a Facebook post shared Nov. 16 that was subsequently corrected by the user.

The post generated close to 2,000 likes and more than 600 shares in about a week. Several social media users shared similar versions of this post as well.

But the claim is false.

The proof attached to Jordan's letter, which is an email exchange between FBI personnel, only has evidence the tags will be applied to investigate and assess threats

directed against school officials, as other independent fact-checking organizations have noted.

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The FBI told USA TODAY it does not investigate parents who simply speak out at school board meetings.

USA TODAY reached out to social media users who shared the post for comment.

Tags used to track threats against school officials

The FBI's counterterrorism and criminal investigative division created an "EDUOFFICIALS" tag to track cases that involve threats against "school board administrators, board members, teachers, and staff," according to an email exchange between FBI officials, attached to Jordan's letter.

Nothing in the letter states that the tag will be used against parents who protest at school board meetings.

A tag is a statistical tool used to track information for review, according to the FBI, which uses a wide array of tags to track cases of different types, such as human trafficking or drug trafficking.

The FBI said in an emailed statement to USA TODAY that it must have information "indicating the potential use of force or violence and a potential violation of federal law," for a division to open an investigation.

The FBI statement said the agency has "never been in the business of investigating parents who speak out or policing speech at school board meetings."

"We are fully committed to preserving and protecting First Amendment rights, including freedom of speech," the statement said. "The FBI's focus is on violence and threats of violence that potentially violate federal law."

Garland's memo was written four days after the National School Boards Association sent a letter to President Joe Biden seeking the federal government's assistance due to ongoing threats against school board officials related to critical race theory and COVID-19 policies.

Fact check: False claim the FBI deemed critical race theory protesters a terror threat

After the memo was issued, claims that the FBI deemed those protesting critical race theory to be a terror threat circulated on social media, which USA TODAY debunked.

Garland testified Oct. 21 to the House Judiciary Committee that "there is nothing in his memo that suggests FBI agents will be attending school board meetings," according to Politico.

USA TODAY reached out to Jordan and Garland for comment.

Our rating: False

Based on our research, we rate FALSE the claim that the FBI's counterterrorism division adds threat tags to parents who protest school boards. An email exchange between FBI personnel attached to Jordan's letter only has evidence the tags will be applied to investigate and assess threats directed against school officials. The FBI told USA TODAY it does not investigate parents who simply speak out at school board meetings.

Our fact-check sources:

PolitiFact, Nov. 19, No, the FBI isn't adding 'threat tags' for parents who protest school boards

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Nov. 23, Email exchange with USA TODAY

USA TODAY, Oct. 14, Fact check: False claim the FBI deemed critical race theory protesters a terror threat

Office of the Attorney General, Oct. 4, Memo on addressing threats against school administrators, board members, teachers, and staff Memo

National School Boards Association via WayBack Machine, Sept. 29, Letter to President Biden

Department of Justice, Oct. 4, Justice Department Addresses Violent Threats Against School Officials and Teachers

Rep. Jim Jordan, Nov. 16, Letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland

New York Times, Nov. 16, F.B.I. Set Plan to Track Threats Against School Boards and Teachers

Politico, Oct. 25, School board group backtracks on letter for security help from DOJ

The Washington Post, Oct. 21, Faced with Republican criticism, Attorney General Garland defends school board memo

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