

'I Don't Want to Die for It': School Board Members Face Rising Threats

Across the country, parents have threatened board members and vandalized their homes. One board member scans his driveway before walking to his car.

By Alan Feuer

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It was only days after Sami Al-Abdrabbuh was re-elected to the school board in Corvallis, Ore., that the text messages arrived.

The first, he said, was a photograph taken at a shooting range. It showed one of his campaign's lawn signs — “Re-Elect Sami” — riddled with bullet holes.

The second was a warning from a friend. This one said that one of their neighbors was looking for Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh. The neighbor was threatening to kill him.

Like many school board races this year, the one in May in Corvallis, a left-leaning college town in the northwest corner of the state, was especially contentious, swirling around concerns not only about the coronavirus pandemic but also the teaching of what Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh called the “dark history” of America's struggle with race. Even months later, Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh, the chairman of the school board, is still taking precautions. He regularly speaks to the police and scans his driveway in the morning before walking to his car. He often mixes up his daily route to work.

“I love serving on the school board,” he said. “But I don't want to die for it.”

Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh is not alone. Since the spring, a steady tide of school board members across the country have nervously come forward with accounts of threats they have received from enraged local parents. At first, the grievances

mainly centered on concerns about the way their children were being taught about race and racism. Now, parents are more often infuriated by Covid-19 restrictions like mask mandates in classrooms.

It is an echo of what happened when those faithful to the Tea Party stormed Obamacare town halls across the country more than a decade ago. In recent months, there have been Nazi salutes at school board meetings and emails threatening rape. Obscenities have been hurled — or burned into people's lawns with weed spray.

In one extreme case, in suburban San Diego, a group of people protesting mask mandates disrupted a school board meeting in September. After taking an unauthorized vote, they summarily installed themselves as the district's new board.

While there has not been serious violence yet, there have been a handful of arrests for charges such as assault and disorderly conduct. The National School Boards Association has likened some of these incidents to domestic terrorism, though the group eventually walked back that claim after it triggered a backlash from its state member organizations.

Sitting at the intersection of parenting and policy, local school boards have always been a place where passions run high and politics get personal. Especially since the nationwide protests over the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, many boards have struggled with the question of how to include the subject of race in their curriculums.

Some protesters who have caused a stir at school board meetings in recent months have defended themselves by saying that they were merely exercising their First Amendment rights and that schools are better when parents are involved, arguments echoed by Republicans in Congress and in statehouse races.

Parents who have been vocal in their opposition to the Corvallis school board said they were unaware of any threats against Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh or other board members.

They said it would be counterproductive to their cause to threaten violence because it would allow school officials to paint dissenting parents as hateful bigots. They said their frustrations, however, were legitimate and stemmed from the board's lack of transparency.

"I would definitely say there is brewing tension, but I'm not at that place, that's not in line with my character," Alisha Carlson, 36, a life coach with two children in the local schools, said of the threats. "I'm not going to personally attack or assault somebody, whether that's verbally or physically. I don't think that's going to create long-term lasting change."

Becky Dubrasich, 41, an emergency-room nurse with three children in the district, said she was so concerned about the board requiring vaccinations that she has been sending a daily email to school officials voicing her opposition.

"I don't think they are taking it in or really listening to us," Ms. Dubrasich, who joined an informal parents group called Stand Together Corvallis Parents, said of the board. "They're nonresponsive and nontransparent." But, she added, "Our group of 50 of us are very reasonable."

While acknowledging that parents have a right to be heard, Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh and other school board members have argued that the recent rash of menacing disruptions is different from the occasionally heated conversations that have long marked the relationship between school board officials seeking to set rules and people looking out for their children.

"What's happening now, and what has been happening," Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh said, "is much more serious than simply listening to excited parents who want what's best for their kids."

The federal government apparently agrees.



Attorney General Merrick B. Garland called for the Justice Department to investigate threats of violence against officials in public school districts. Al Drago for The New York Times

In early October, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland issued a memo announcing that the Justice Department would respond to what he called “a disturbing spike of harassment, intimidation and threats of violence” against school board members and administrators. In the memo, Mr. Garland ordered the F.B.I. and federal prosecutors to work with local law enforcement officers to monitor threats against people working in the nation’s 14,000 public school districts.

The memo suggested that federal officials saw the issue as the latest example of a troubling trend: ordinary people using threats of violence to express their politics. This summer, seeking to counter a similar problem, the Justice Department established a task force to curb attacks against election workers.

But far from calming the situation, the school board initiative by the Justice Department was seized upon by Republican officials as a political issue.

Republican attorneys general in 17 states published a memo of their own, describing the proposal to monitor threats against school officials as a threat itself. Whatever problems were taking place at school board meetings were best handled by local law enforcement, they said, and bringing in federal authorities could result in “intimidating parents away from raising concerns about the education of their children.”

Republicans in both houses of Congress have also attacked Mr. Garland’s plans, accusing him of treating parents like terrorists, though his memo mentioned neither terrorism nor parents.

Yet those who have been the targets of harassment and vandalism have applauded the move by the Justice Department. Jennifer Jenkins, a school board official in Brevard County, Fla., said she had suffered months of threats, beginning last year when she unseated an incumbent member of her school board.

At first, Ms. Jenkins said, parents angered by the district’s transgender bathroom policy began to appear at board meetings, waving Trump flags and calling members “pedophiles.” But that soon escalated, she said, to angry groups of people shouting on the street outside her home.



Florida parents opposed to mask mandates in schools protested at a school board meeting in Brevard County, Fla., in August. Paul Hennessy / SOPA Images, Sipa via AP Images

Then in July, after the district put in place a mask mandate for students, a Republican state lawmaker posted Ms. Jenkins's cellphone number on his Facebook page, and her voice mail filled with hateful messages. Not long after, she said, someone burned the letters "FU" into her lawn with weed killer and chopped down the bushes in front of her house.

"It's gotten really, really crazy here," she said. "There's just been a whole other level of rage and anger ignited in our community."

In California, school board members have received so many threats that Vernon M. Billy, the executive director of the state School Boards Association, wrote a letter to Gov. Gavin Newsom asking for help. Near Sacramento, he wrote, one entire school board had to flee its chamber after protesters accosted the members.

Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh's school board race in Corvallis this spring came almost exactly a year after the pandemic and the nationwide reckoning on race roiled American politics. In online forums and debates, he said, he found himself defending the effectiveness of vaccines, a curriculum that focused on racial equity and a policy of allowing transgender students to participate in school sports.

His opponent, Bryce Cleary, a local doctor, often complained that conservative voices were not being heard by board members, some of whom, he said, were "pushing political agendas." At one candidate forum, Mr. Cleary argued that the board under Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh's leadership had spent more time on inclusion and diversity than on math and science.

"The problem is our schools are not doing what they're supposed to do," Mr. Cleary said.

As far as Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh was concerned, Mr. Cleary's arguments were politics as usual. Once the text messages arrived after the election, however, he said he realized something much more serious was going on. Even now, he keeps hearing stories from colleagues who are devising personal safety plans or installing security cameras at their homes.

“I tell myself that none of this is actually about me,” Mr. Al-Abdrabbuh said. “It’s about what’s best for the kids.”

Matthew Cullen contributed reporting.

Alan Feuer covers courts and criminal justice for the Metro desk. He has written about mobsters, jails, police misconduct, wrongful convictions, government corruption and El Chapo, the jailed chief of the Sinaloa drug cartel. He joined The Times in 1999. [More about Alan Feuer](#)

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