

School boards get death threats over race, gender, mask policies

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A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

School boards get death threats amid rage over race, gender, mask policies

The Loudoun County school board in Virginia is one of many targeted by threats of violence over its handling of hot-button issues that provoke fury from the political right.

REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

Local school officials across the United States are being inundated with threats of violence and other hostile messages from anonymous harassers nationwide, fueled by anger over culture-war issues. Reuters found 220 examples of such intimidation in a sampling of districts.

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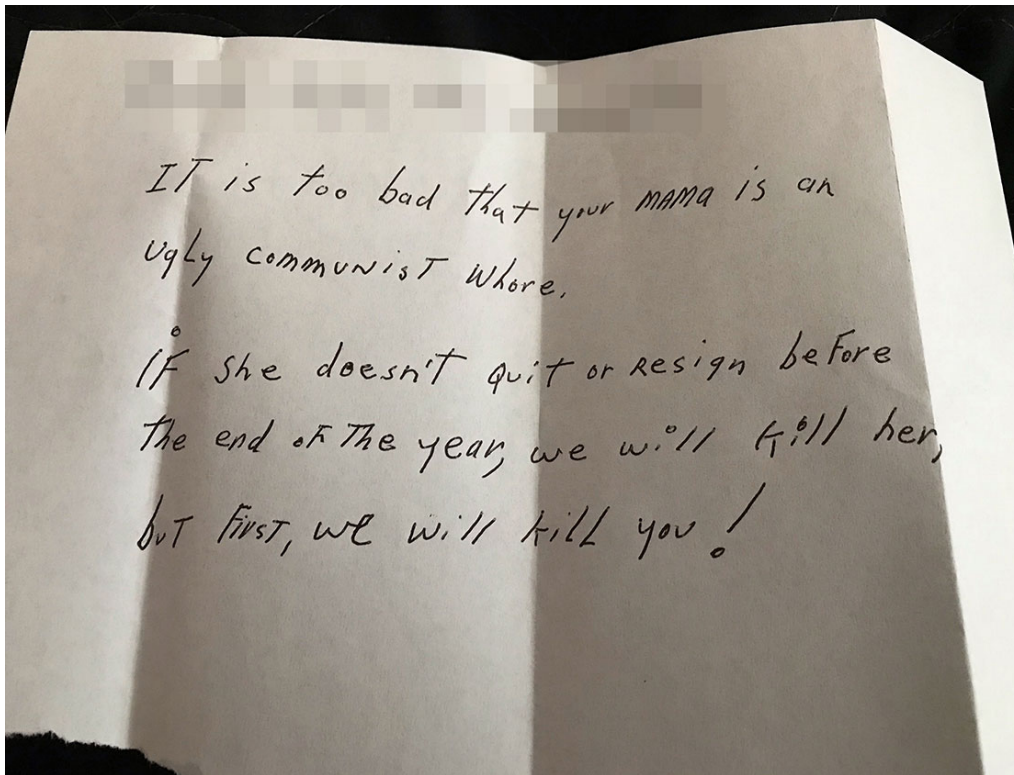
This story contains text, images and audio clips with offensive language.

The letter came to the home of Brenda Sheridan, a Loudoun County, Virginia school board member, addressed to one of her adult children. It threatened to kill them both unless she left the board.

“It is too bad that your mother is an ugly communist whore,” said the hand-scrawled note, which the family read just after Christmas. “If she doesn’t quit or resign before the end of the year, we will kill her, but first, we will kill you!”

School board members across the United States have endured a rash of terroristic threats and hostile messages ignited by roiling controversies over policies on curtailing the coronavirus, bathroom access for transgender students and the teaching of America’s racial history.

Reuters documented the intimidation through contacts and interviews with 33 board members across 15 states and a review of threatening and harassing messages obtained from the officials or through public records requests. The news organization found more than 220 such messages in this sampling of districts. School officials or parents in 15 different counties received or witnessed threats they considered serious enough to report to police.



Threatening letter sent to the home of Loudoun County, Virginia, school board member Brenda Sheridan

While school controversies are traditionally local, these threats often come from people out of state with no connection to the districts involved. They are part of a rising national wave of threats to public officials – including election officials and members of Congress – citing an array of grievances, often underpinned by apocalyptic conspiracy theories alleging “treason” or “tyranny.”

About half the hostile messages documented by Reuters were sent to Sheridan, former chair of the Loudoun County, Virginia, school board, amid controversies over coronavirus protections, anti-racism efforts and bathroom policy. Twenty-two messages sent to Sheridan or the entire board included death threats or said members should be or would be killed.

In June, she received a threat saying: “Brenda, I am going to gut you like the fat f---ing pig you are when I find you.”

The message, like the letter to her home, also threatened her children. Reuters agreed not to publish any personal details about Sheridan’s family members, at her request, because of her continuing safety concerns.

Board members in Pennsylvania’s Pennsbury school district received racist and anti-Semitic emails from around the country from people angry over the district’s diversity efforts. One said: “This why hitler threw you c--ts in a gas chamber.”

In Dublin, Ohio, an anonymous letter sent to the board president vowed that officials would “pay dearly” for supporting education programs on race and mask mandates to stop the coronavirus. “You have become our enemies and you will be removed one way or the other,” it said.

School officials reported the messages to law enforcement in those three cases, as in many others documented by Reuters. No one has been arrested for sending these threatening messages, though a few people have been arrested for unruly or threatening behavior at board meetings.

“This why hitler threw you c--ts in a gas chamber.”

Attorney General Merrick Garland vowed last year to devote federal resources to combating threats to school officials after the National School Boards Association in September sent the White House a request for federal enforcement to stop the “growing number of threats of violence and acts of intimidation occurring across the nation.” But the association’s plea for help only added to the controversy as Republican politicians argued the administration of President Joe Biden, a Democrat, sought to censor free speech and label dissenting parents as terrorists. Nineteen state school boards withdrew their membership or withheld dues from the national association in protest of its Sept. 29 letter.

The school boards association apologized to its state members for the letter on Oct. 22, saying there was “no justification” for some of its language, without specifying what it regretted. The organization did not respond to requests for comment.

The hostility faced by school officials mirrors the campaign of fear documented by Reuters against U.S. election workers in response to former President Donald Trump’s false claims of voting fraud. A federal election-threats task force was announced in June, after a Reuters investigation that month revealed the widespread threats. In January, the task force reported the arrests of two people who had threatened election officials.

Biden’s Justice Department has also convened a task force on threats to school officials. The department, however, declined to say who serves on it, whether the task force has met or whether it was investigating any threats. In a statement, the department said it had “taken action” to prevent violence and intimidation of “those who are threatened because of the jobs they hold,” including school board members, election workers and other public officials.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, in a statement, characterized Attorney General Garland’s commitment to protect school officials as simply highlighting the FBI’s “ongoing efforts” to address threats of violence “regardless of the motivation.” The agency emphasized it was not “investigating parents who speak out or policing speech at school board meetings.”

Nearly half of the 31 school boards contacted by Reuters said they had added extra security at meetings, limited public comment or held virtual meetings when in-person gatherings became too chaotic.

In Luray, Virginia, a woman furious about mask mandates was charged by local police with making a threat after she told school board members at a January meeting that she would “bring every single gun loaded and ready” to school. The woman, Amelia King, emailed an apology to board members before the meeting was over, saying she was speaking figuratively and “in no way” meant to imply she would bring firearms to a school.

King’s lawyer declined to comment on the pending charge.

Some board members have quit their posts or decided not to seek reelection. A board member in Gwinnett County, Georgia, said she bought a gun for self-defense after prolonged online harassment. The board chair in Union County, North Carolina, said she installed cameras outside her house at “every angle.” Sheridan – the Loudoun County board member – said she rarely goes out in public alone anymore.

Jean Marvin, the board chair in Rochester, Minnesota, said a barrage of threats there last year deeply unsettled her fellow board members and her own children: “They said, ‘Mom, they’re going to kill you. They know where you live.’”



Jon Tigges is detained following a controversial Loudoun County school board meeting in Ashburn, Virginia that included discussion of critical race theory.

REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

Living in fear

The wave of mostly anonymous threats has emerged against a backdrop of public protests by a new constellation of local and national activist groups, such as Moms for Liberty, No Left Turn in Education and Parents Defending Education. Parents started some groups. Others have ties to veterans of the conservative movement or Republican political operatives.

Many Republican elected officials have sought to harness the anger over education policy in advance of this November's midterm congressional elections, releasing strident statements or passing laws addressing the issues igniting the school protests.

Much of the anger focuses on critical race theory, a once-obscure academic school of thought frequently targeted by Trump. Rarely taught outside law schools, the theory holds that racial bias – intentional or not – is baked into many U.S. laws and institutions because of the nation's history of slavery and segregation. Many conservative parents and politicians now use the term as an epithet for a wide range of anti-racism efforts and teaching on race relations that they say attempts to indoctrinate students with an anti-white and anti-American worldview.

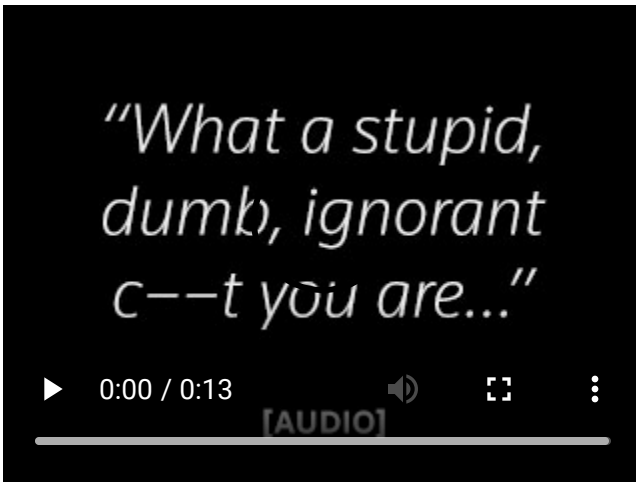
One group, Fight for Schools, is led by Ian Prior, a former deputy director of public affairs in Trump's Department of Justice. The group took in \$10,000 in donations in the past year from 1776 Action, a national group opposing critical race theory that is run by veteran Republican operatives. The organization also accepted \$5,000 from the Presidential Coalition, which is overseen by former Trump deputy campaign manager David Bossie.

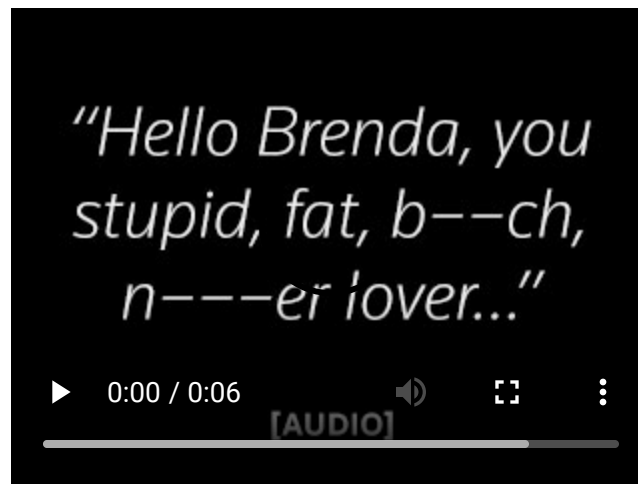
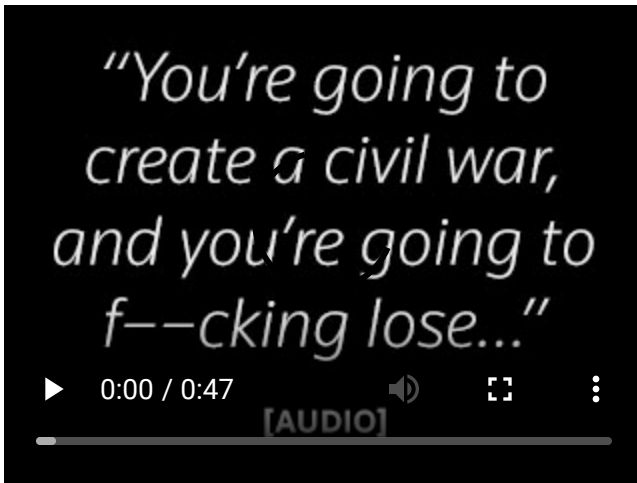
Neither 1776 Action nor Bossie responded to requests for comment.

Fight for Schools has staged protests at board meetings since early 2021 over pandemic-related closures and teaching on race. The organization is also leading a recall campaign seeking to oust Sheridan from the Loudoun County board before the next school board elections.



Brenda Sheridan, former chair of the Loudoun County school board, stands outside the board's headquarters in Ashburn, Virginia. REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein





Click to hear hostile voicemails to Loudoun County, Virginia school board member Brenda Sheridan

Reuters found no evidence that any of the new advocacy groups are involved in threatening board members with violence. Fight for Schools, in a statement, condemned threats of physical harm, personal attacks and harassment.

The board in Loudoun County, a Washington suburb, first came under fire in 2020 over pandemic school closures. Anger built as the district implemented anti-racism efforts in August of that year, including teacher training.

By June 2021, many parents were also incensed by a proposed policy to allow transgender students to use bathrooms matching their preferred gender identity. The anger grew after the parents of a female student who was sexually assaulted in a school bathroom in May told reporters that her attacker was a "gender fluid" student. Authorities said the student was a male who wore a skirt the day of the attack. Loudoun County's juvenile court declined to comment or release records on the case, citing legal privacy protections for juvenile suspects.

Conservatives seized on the case as evidence of the danger of bathroom policies seeking to accommodate transgender students. But the district's policy did not take effect until August, well after the attack.

Sheridan, the board chair in 2021 and still a member, became a primary target for intimidation. She reported the June threat to "gut" her to authorities. But police investigators failed to identify a suspect, highlighting difficulties in investigating anonymous threats.

The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office submitted a search warrant to Google to collect information on the sender, who had used a Google email address, police reports show. But the warrant turned up multiple IP addresses, leaving investigators with "no viable investigative leads" to find the perpetrator, according to a police report.

"There's no way to know: Did that come from someone from another state, or is it my neighbor down the street who knows my routine?" Sheridan said.

Reports from the county sheriff's office, obtained through a public records request, show law enforcement was notified of more than 50 menacing messages directed toward the school board between April and November. Investigators did not pursue about half the cases after determining the messages did not constitute a criminal threat.

Police did make inquiries in at least 26 cases, including one email saying: "You people need to be arrested, tried and then hung by the neck until you're dead." But investigators either could not identify a suspect in those cases or determined they did not have enough evidence to seek prosecution, a police spokesperson said.

Reuters wrote to dozens of the email addresses used to send hostile or threatening messages to Sheridan and the Loudoun County school board. Six people responded. One self-described "patriot" spoke of rage over "leftist scum" and "Antifa." Another said "LGBTQ is an abomination." A third blasted the district's anti-racism program, saying that telling children "that race will determine their outcomes in life is truly sick."

One had written to Loudoun superintendent Scott Ziegler in June. "Your life is being laid bare on the open and dark web. I don't condone what's gonna be sent to those close to you or the danger they may be in," the email said, "but you personally do deserve it."

Contacted by Reuters, the person who sent the message, who did not give a name, said it was prompted by rage over the student sexual-assault incident. "I was warning him, not threatening him," the sender said in an email. "I'm not looking to be labeled as anti trans. I'm just anti rape in schools."

Ziegler declined to comment.



Elicia Brand leads a crowd of angry parents and community members in the singing of the Star Spangled Banner after a Loudoun County school board meeting was halted by the school board because the crowd refused to quiet down, in Ashburn, Virginia. REUTERS/Evelyn Hockstein

'Treason' and 'tyranny'

The people who threaten school board members often cast coronavirus and race-education policies not merely as misguided or offensive, but as part of a larger conspiracy to commit "treason" or impose "tyranny."

The message threatening to remove Dublin, Ohio, board members "one way or the other" came from a man who identified himself as "James Baker" of "Citizens to Remove CRT from America," referring to critical race theory. Reuters was unable to confirm the identity of the sender.

"All Americans know the schools have become Indoctrination Centers for Marxism," read the message, which was also sent to other districts. "WE ARE COMING AFTER ALL OF YOU STINKING TRAITORS OF AMERICA!"

Chris Valentine, the board president at the time, said the threat was the worst example of the hostile messages district officials have endured since the start of the pandemic. Valentine said he started worrying whenever he noticed an unfamiliar car parked outside his home.

"It's easily been the most difficult year-and-a-half of my life," Valentine said.

Dublin police reviewed the letter and "found no safety concerns or credible threats," a police spokesperson said. Still, the department added officers to ensure security at the next school board meeting.

| "WE ARE COMING AFTER ALL OF YOU STINKING TRAITORS OF AMERICA!"

In Rochester, Minnesota, members faced months of threats and outbursts at meetings over mask mandates, critical race theory and other hot-button issues. Marvin, the board president, said her son grew so concerned that he insisted on driving her to board meetings and waiting in the parking lot to ensure her safety.

Northwest Allen County school board meetings in Indiana became so heated last fall that police officers assigned to the district refused to continue providing security unless the board took action to rein in its increasingly unruly meetings, according to an email sent by a school resource officer to the board president.

"I truly am concerned for the safety of everyone at those meetings as are the other officers who have worked them," Sergeant Kevin Neher wrote to the board president at the time, Kent Somers, on Sept. 17, in an email reviewed by Reuters.

In response, the board eliminated public comment for its next meeting. Several board members as well as the schools superintendent, Christopher Himsel, had to be escorted by half a dozen police officers to their cars, Himsel said in an interview.

Neither Neher nor Somers responded to requests for comment.

At least two parents from the district reported a local resident to the FBI, after the man posted menacing messages about school officials on Facebook, according to one of the parents. One threat to Somers warned that someone might "bag and tag your ass in a parking lot." The same man posted a message urging others to get "firearms, ammunition and extensive training" to fight the "tyranny before us," according to a police report documenting the messages. Another parent who helps oversee a Facebook group opposing the district's mask policies posted a video of himself firing a rifle to show he was not merely a "digital soldier," according to a screenshot of the message provided by a parent to Reuters.

A spokesperson for the Indianapolis FBI office declined to confirm or deny any investigations into these threats. Allen County police documented several of the messages but did not take any further action, according to a police report.



The Board of School Directors of the Pennsbury school district listen to members of the public at a meeting at Fallsington Elementary School in Falls Township, Pennsylvania. REUTERS/Hannah Beier

Calls for enforcement

Christine Toy-Dragoni, the then-board president in Pennsylvania's Pennsbury school district, requested FBI involvement after her board received a slew of hateful messages.

As Pennsbury's conflicts gained national attention, board members were deluged with racist, anti-Semitic and threatening messages, nearly two dozen of which Reuters viewed.

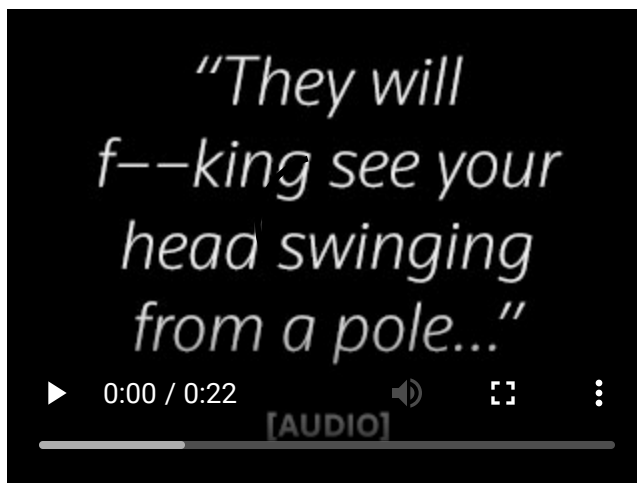
"You better grow eyes in the back of your head motherf---er," said a message to board members in July.



Christine Toy-Dragoni, former president of the Board of School Directors of the Pennsbury school district, at Fallsington Elementary School in Falls Township, Pennsylvania. REUTERS/Hannah Beier

The board's Toy-Dragoni responded in October with a public statement calling on the FBI to act. "These threats of violence and sexual assault and these expressions of transphobic, anti-immigrant and anti-Jewish hatred are certainly not protected by the Constitution, and must be investigated by the FBI," she said.

The school district reported the threats to local police and the FBI. Falls Township Police Chief Nelson Whitney said in an interview that his detectives spent several months working with the FBI to investigate threatening emails and other communications received by Pennsbury board members. He said state and federal prosecutors ultimately decided that the messages, "although offensive, did not rise to the level where a charge would be filed."



Click to hear a voicemail threat left at a school in Pennsylvania's North Penn school district on Feb. 6

In the nearby North Penn district, a report that spread on conservative media about a classroom diversity exercise prompted one man to call an elementary school on Feb. 6 and leave a voicemail that threatened the teacher with sexual violence and death.

"Mass of people who know who you are," the man said. "They will fucking see your head swinging from a pole."

Jonathan Kassa, a North Penn board member, said the threat was reported to local police and the FBI. Kassa said the threat is one of many the district has received.

"This isn't some one-off, random event," Kassa said in an interview. "I certainly hope law enforcement and our legislators are paying much closer attention to what seems to be an increasingly serious threat."

Local police in Hatfield Township said they have opened an investigation. Spokespeople for the FBI declined to comment on whether the bureau was investigating the threats in the Pennsbury and North Penn districts.

In Brevard County, Florida, school board member Jennifer Jenkins faced threats and intimidation after supporting a district mask mandate. Then someone filed a false claim against her with the Florida Department of Children and Families, alleging she abused her daughter. Police in Satellite Beach, Florida, determined the claim to be unfounded and tried, unsuccessfully, to determine the identity of the person who made the false report.

Jenkins told Reuters she has installed security cameras at her home, where anti-mask demonstrators staged multiple protests. She still feels unsafe at times, worried that the threats will escalate to violence.

"All it takes," she said, "is one psychotic fringe loony toon."

Schools Under Siege

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