

National School Boards Association stumbles into politics and is blasted apart

Its leaders compared aggressive school protests to ‘domestic terrorism.’ The backlash was fast and severe.



By [Laura Meckler](#)

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Until this fall, the National School Boards Association was a noncontroversial, bipartisan lobby group. Then its leaders wrote President Biden a letter. It alleged that the threatening and aggressive acts against school board members across the country might be a form of “domestic terrorism” and asked for federal law enforcement intervention.

Now, the association is at risk of total collapse.

In between, conservative [think tanks](#), [media](#), [intellectuals](#), lawmakers, researchers and [activists](#) turned what might have been a forgotten mistake into a potentially fatal blow to a group that has for eight decades been a national advocate for public education.

It is a perfect illustration of how polarized education has become in the past year — a case study in how activists can shape not just big public policy debates, but also obscure interest groups that most Americans had never given a moment’s consideration.

Nineteen mostly GOP-led states have withdrawn from the association or promised to when this year’s membership expires, and six members of what was a 19-person board have left. Several states are discussing forming an alternative association for school boards. A new executive director of the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is working to save the organization, lobbying individual states to reconsider, but so far he has not persuaded any of them to change their minds.

“I hope they’ll give us a chance,” John Heim, the newly installed executive director, said in an interview. His goal, he said, is to “rebuild trust” in the association, which critics believe took sides in a partisan debate.

In October, the association apologized and promised to conduct a “formal review” of its procedures and said it would announce “specific improvements” to ensure better coordination and consultation with its members, but nothing has been announced and a spokesperson would not say where the group is in this process.

If the school board association’s goal was to tamp down conservative parent protests, it had the exact opposite effect, galvanizing a movement that coalesced last fall around the idea of parental rights. The letter shifted the focus away from some frightening threats and decidedly aggressive behavior to a defiant defense of free speech and local control.

Even some supporters of the NSBA said the letter went too far and put them in an uncomfortable position.

“There has been some damage done,” said Jim Green, executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association. Oregon did not terminate its membership but also distanced itself from the letter. “Do we support NSBA’s take as labeling parents as domestic terrorists? We do not.”

Parents and other conservative activists, urged on by national figures and associations, have directed anger against public schools and school boards on two big issues: complaints over coronavirus mask mandates and other pandemic-related restrictions, and concerns about how schools were teaching and talking about race.

Many made their arguments peacefully. But in communities across the country, others yelled and disrupted school board meetings, prompting some boards to adjourn early, which only further angered the protesters.

At an Illinois school board meeting, a man was arrested after allegedly striking an education official. A school board member in Loudoun County, Va., fielded abusive, profane and threatening emails, Facebook messages and phone calls for months. In Florida, protesters camped out in front of a school board member’s house and burned an “FU” into her lawn with weed killer. They called her a Nazi and a pedophile. Someone falsely reported her as abusing her child to the Florida Department of Children and Families. “Be careful, your mommy hurts little kids!” an activist yelled at her daughter.

In September, the NSBA told the White House it was concerned about violence and threats to school board members, Chip Slaven, who was the interim executive director at the time, said in an interview. He said he was already planning to send the letter when White House officials asked for examples.

Slaven said that because this was a sensitive issue, he circulated the letter to the board’s four officers, who all signed off on it. He said he would not normally have done this, but he worried it would be seen as a slap at the Biden administration for not enforcing federal law so wanted them to see it first. One of the officers, Charlie Wilson, a school board member from Worthington, Ohio, confirmed this account.

On Sept. 29, the NSBA sent Biden its six-page letter requesting intervention by federal law enforcement agencies “to deal with the growing number of threats of violence and acts of intimidation occurring across the nation.” It pointed to a raft of incidents in recent months, though not all of them were violent.

“As these acts of malice, violence, and threats against public school officials have increased, the classification of these heinous actions could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism and hate crimes,” said the letter, which was signed by Slaven and association president Viola M. Garcia, a member of a school board in Texas.

Email correspondence from the time suggested that the NSBA might have been acting at request of the White House, according to documents released through open records requests filed by a conservative group called Parents Defending Education. Slaven and the White House said that isn’t true.

In one email, an NSBA board member wrote that Slaven had said the letter had been requested by Education Secretary Miguel Cardona for use by the White House. In another, Slaven wrote that the letter included “additional information on some of the specific threats,” as requested by the White House. Cardona’s spokeswoman said he did not solicit the letter.

Five days after the NSBA letter, Attorney General Merrick Garland responded. He directed the FBI to work with U.S. attorneys across the country to convene meetings within 30 days with federal, state and local leaders to discuss strategies for addressing threats to school personnel.

Slaven circulated a copy of the letter to the NSBA board on the evening of Sept. 29, after sending it to the White House. He told members it would be distributed to the press the next day.

The reaction was swift and fiery, with board members and state affiliates criticizing both the tone and the fact that they hadn’t been offered a chance to vet it before it was sent. “Did anyone consider the impact this might have on members in this highly polarized climate?” Sally Smith, executive director of the Alabama Association of School Boards, wrote in an email.

A board member from Florida, Beverly Slough, emailed a colleague her prediction that this would activate a conservative parent group. “I am so upset. Moms for Liberty will have a field day with this!”

And Bill Ferguson, a school board member in Ohio, wrote the letter “totally undermines” work to convince lawmakers and executive branch officials that school board members have a diversity of political persuasions. “NSBA does not need to become embroiled in such divisive politics at any level,” he wrote. He added in a follow-up note: “NSBA’s future now appears to be at stake.”

To be sure, some in the organization appreciated what the NSBA had tried to do. Steven Chapman, a board member from the group’s Pacific Region, replied to note that a school board in Arizona had been forced to leave the boardroom because of security issues and, after they left, the audience decided to stage their own meeting, elect their own “members” and hold votes. In another case, he said, someone filmed himself on the way to a school with a pair of zip-tie handcuffs, prepared to arrest a principal.

“These are not acts of concerned parents, nor should they be dismissed as just one off situations,” he wrote.

The combination of the letter and the Justice Department directive prompted an explosive reaction among conservative lawmakers and media outlets, feeding preexisting complaints that Democrats, school boards and their allies wanted to silence voices of parents who objected to their policies.

A week later, John Halkias, a school board member from Plain Local Schools in Ohio, wrote colleagues that the letter had been used in legislative debate over a school voucher bill. At a Senate hearing on Oct. 5, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) aggressively questioned Lisa Monaco, deputy attorney general, about the directive.

“If this isn’t a deliberate attempt to chill parents from showing up at school board meetings ... I don’t know what is,” Hawley said. “You are attempting to intimidate them. You are attempting to silence them. You are attempting to interfere with their rights as parents.”

Two days after that, 63 House Republicans signed a letter complaining about the Garland memo. A drumbeat of coverage on Fox News, conservative blogs and outlets pressed the case for weeks that the NSBA and the Biden administration considered parents to be “domestic terrorists.”

Advocates took action, too. Nicole Neily, president of Parents Defending Education, organized a letter to the NSBA signed by 23 groups, calling out the terrorism allegation. Most of the signers were local parent activist groups.

“I wanted it to be a local effort,” Neily said. “I wanted it to be these are parents pushing back.”

They urged supporters to send letters to the Justice Department, and Neily said more than 7,500 used their portal to do so. In mid-October, the organization asked state affiliates for their views, pressuring the group’s members to take a stand on whether the letter was justified. They also sent public records requests to all of the NSBA board members, which unearthed the emails showing the association’s board had been blindsided by the letter.

Conservative activist groups including Moms for America and Moms for Liberty pressed the issue with their members. “We did a lot of social media posting to explain what was going on and [to] encourage people not be part of an association playing against parents in that matter,” said Tina Descovich, co-founder of Moms for Liberty.

For weeks, the NSBA said little to nothing in response, and barred Slaven from defending the letter, Slaven said.

“We should have been clarifying what happened.” He noted that the word “parents” is not even mentioned in the letter and argued the letter had nothing to do with parents expressing their views.

On Oct. 22, the NSBA apologized for the letter, saying “there was no justification for some of the language included.” But it was too late. By mid-October, state associations began to announce they were leaving the NSBA. By year’s end, 19 states said they were pulling out.

“There’s been a lot of pressure on a lot of state associations by Republican legislators in their states to take some action to distance themselves in some way from NSBA. That’s clearly what’s going on,” said Tom Gentzel, who was the NSBA executive director from 2012 to 2020. “If Republican leaders are calling you up and saying, ‘What are you doing [as] part of this national group and you have key legislation pending in the state,’ you have to pick your battles.”

Some cited preexisting concerns about the association. States complained that the NSBA was competing with state school board associations in selling consultant services and other products to local school boards. In August, the group tried to answer that by clarifying the NSBA’s members are the state school board associations, not individual members.

For now, states that have withdrawn are discussing a new association to take its place, and the effort has grown serious. The new group is set to be called the Consortium of State School Boards Associations. Preliminary plans call for it to provide opportunities for collaboration, training and legislative and legal advocacy on federal issues.

On Nov. 23, Slaven said, he was fired and offered a severance package that barred him from discussing anything about the letter with future employers or the media. He said he declined to accept it. A NSBA spokesperson declined to comment on Slaven’s status.

His allies say the NSBA and its affiliates allowed conservative activists who oppose public schools to misconstrue the letter as an attack on parents in an effort to silence a strong national voice.

“This letter was totally distorted and cherry-picked by Fox [News] and other media,” said Wilson, who was forced to leave the NSBA board when Ohio withdrew from the association. “What Ohio did and a number of other states did was read the media response to the letter rather than the letter.”

Meanwhile, Heim, the new NSBA executive director, is reaching out to associations that have left. As longtime executive director of the Kansas association, he has many relationships with his counterparts that he is now drawing on to rebuild the national group.

In December, he called Rick Lewis, chief executive of the Ohio School Boards Association, to solicit input on the way ahead, Lewis said. He said they had an amiable conversation. “He shared the steps they are taking to try and improve as an organization,” he said. “John did not make a pitch for a return. I suspect that will come some day.”

Other states argue it is critical that the NSBA survive. Green, from Oregon, suspects that the groups attacking the organization have a larger, anti-public school agenda. Many of the group’s opponents are also outspoken supporters of school choice programs that direct tax dollars to parochial, private and charter schools.

“If you’re a person who doesn’t support public schools and want to see public schools go away, what better thing could happen than get rid of an organization like NSBA, one of the leading voices for public education,” he said.

Still, he said, leaving the NSBA remains an option for Oregon. He said the board has asked him to assess whether the NSBA, which was already struggling financially, can be a viable organization going forward and what alternatives are available. “My board isn’t ready to pull out yet, but it is a consideration we’re looking at,” he said.