

Letter to Governor Newsom

Dear Governor Newsom,

Throughout the pandemic, your actions in support of education have shown an understanding of the critical function that public schools perform in our society. As you know, school boards serve on the front lines of democracy, offering more access and greater responsiveness to the public than any other class of elected official. Not everyone gets an opportunity to interact with a governor, a senator, a congressperson, or a state legislator. Yet, every citizen can expect to communicate directly with their trustees at local school board meetings, typically twice a month and frequently more often than that.

As a result, school board members are accustomed to dealing with sensitive issues and are no strangers to criticism or controversy. Yet, nothing in recent memory could have prepared trustees for the onslaught they face today as citizens lash out on a variety of topics, most notably opposition to state mandates and local COVID-19 mitigation measures. I've watched in horror as school board members have been accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members. The list of dangerous and outrageous conduct committed against school trustees during their board meetings is far too long to list here, but I will try to provide a representative sample.

In just the past month alone, we have seen a Sacramento-area school board forced to abandon its board room through the back door when the meeting was rendered unsafe because of the actions of protestors. In San Diego County, protestors forced their way into a board room during a meeting where physical distancing measures were in place and refused to leave. Law enforcement did not remove any of the protestors and instead recommended that the board terminate the meeting, which it eventually did. Protestors stayed behind and later posted on social media that they had elected themselves as the "new school board." In San Bernardino and Madera counties and elsewhere, boards were forced to prematurely adjourn meetings in the face of raucous disruptions. In fact, it is doubtful there is a county in this state that has not experienced a similar incident.

A simple scan of the news or conversations with school board trustees from any part of California will confirm that what we are seeing goes far beyond the normal, legal expression of First Amendment rights, which is to be encouraged and embraced. We are increasingly witnessing active attempts to undermine the democratic process through intimidation, threats, and violence.

This is unacceptable not only because of the danger it poses to school trustees, school employees, and members of the public at school board meetings, but also because it prevents these elected officials from performing the public's business at a time when it has never been more critical. And when the governance process is derailed, the group that suffers most is California's students.

Yet, too often, when school districts contact local law enforcement authorities to restore order to these meetings or to enforce mask mandates and other safety measures, law enforcement declines. In numerous cases, law enforcement officers — in brazen defiance of the law and their professional oath — have explicitly stated they will not enforce safety mandates or restrain those whose actions willfully disrupt a meeting and prevent it from proceeding. It bears noting that law enforcement has not always exhibited this level of reticence when dealing with protestors who exercise their constitutional right to peaceably assemble and protest.

The hostile climate at local board meetings and the reluctance of select law enforcement agencies to fulfill their duties have placed school trustees in unprecedented danger. Therefore, I respectfully ask that you, as California's chief executive, collaborate with California Attorney General Rob Bonta to convince, command, or otherwise urge local law enforcement to uphold public health and safety orders, help maintain order at local school board meetings when requested, and enforce the law as they are sworn to do.

I am happy to meet with you to discuss this issue, but I trust the state will not wait to act until a trustee or member of the public sustains a serious injury or worse at a school board meeting. We can avoid the sorrow and the platitudes that would inevitably follow if we take a strong stance now against violence, intimidation, and efforts to willfully disrupt the democratic process as practiced by California's local school boards.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vernon M. Billy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Vernon M. Billy, CEO & Executive Director
California School Boards Association