

Dear Chairperson Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill No. 7552, which seeks to include school superintendents, central office officials, principals, teachers and all school employees within the definition of "public official" regarding criminal threats and extortion.

Our schools are the heart of our communities, yet in recent years, the professionals who lead, operate and work in them have been subjected to an alarming increase in targeted harassment and threats of violence. While healthy debate over educational policy is a cornerstone of our democracy, the use of intimidation and threats against those tasked with educating our children is unacceptable and requires a robust legal deterrent.

School employees serve the public interest just as much as elected council members or state legislators. They should be afforded the same legal protections when their safety is compromised due to their professional duties.

This is not designed to erode the relationship between staff and students. We have policies in effect which address student behaviors. This is primarily to address adults who seek to harass or threaten school personnel.

By clarifying that threats against any school employee carry serious legal consequences, this bill sends a clear message that our state prioritizes the safety of its educational workforce. Certainly at a time when the education profession faces significant staffing challenges, we must ensure that our schools are safe environments. Protecting staff from harassment and threats is vital to maintaining a dedicated and focused workforce.

By expanding the definition of "public official" to include the entirety of the school professional community, Rhode Island takes a proactive stand against the normalization of educator intimidation.

I respectfully urge the House Judiciary Committee to provide a favorable recommendation for HB 7552.

Respectfully,

Jeannine Nota-Masse

Superintendent of Cranston Public Schools

President RISSA