



## ONLINE AND OTHER THREATS TO EDUCATORS

### Updated Guidance from NEA and WEA | September 23, 2025

#### **Introduction: Responding to Increasing Threats Against Educators**

In the wake of the horrific increase in political assassinations, there have also been loud calls to hold individuals — particularly educators — “to account” for their social media and other posts. These efforts to dox individuals for what they have said off-duty raise serious concerns.

For the last several years, violence against, and harassment of, educators has been increasing. As early as 2020, the American Psychological Association published a [study](#) finding that between July 2020 and June 2021, a third of teachers reported experiencing verbal harassment or threatened violence from students, and over 40% of school administrators reported such conduct from parents. The harassment can take the form of verbal threats, online harassment, intimidation, and sexual harassment, and it can escalate to physical violence.

As educators confront the latest efforts along these lines, NEA and WEA would like to remind affiliates and educators of key steps educators can take to protect themselves.

While off-duty speech by educators on a matter of public concern *should* be protected by the First Amendment – unless the educators’ speech is so extreme as to create disruption in the school or university community – educators should also understand that the highly politicized environment of today is not one in which they will necessarily be given the benefit of the doubt as to what their off-duty speech means. Accordingly, we should all speak with care.

NEA and WEA can and will support affiliates in their work to protect educators engaged in lawful protected First Amendment speech that affects their employment. If you need such support, please reach out to your UniServ Director who can assist with accessing resources and finding legal support if necessary.

#### **I. Preventative Steps**

In addition to the general guidance below, your UniServ Council can access prior WEA guidance from 2021 on “Considerations for Educators When Using Social Media,” which will be re-posted on WEA’s SharePoint intranet.

- **Create secure passwords** and use multi-factor authentication to prevent online accounts from being hacked.
- **Scrub private information from the internet.** Google yourself and search online white pages to see if any personal information (e.g., home address, cell phone number) is publicly available. Follow website opt-out procedures to remove information that you do not wish to share. Remove personal contact information from any public resume or CV.

- **Review privacy settings and content on social media accounts.** Ensure that only those who you wish to see your social media posts have access to do so. If you have a public profile, review old posts, keeping in mind that antagonistic members of the public may resurface posts or comments from any time period.
- **Consider speaking out anonymously.** If speaking with the press about an issue that may lead to harassment, consider whether speaking anonymously or under a pseudonym will achieve the same purpose.
- **Consider notifying friendly school officials** of events that might lead to public backlash, but only if prior notice would help them assist you in the event of harassment.

## II. Protecting yourself online

For educators currently experiencing threats or harassment, we recommend the following:

- **Document the harassment** by taking screenshots of all threatening messages or posts, including a timestamp and URL, and logging other threatening communications such as phone calls. This preserves evidence of the harassment for use in any civil or criminal proceedings or school disciplinary action.
- **Report to the relevant social media platforms.** Applications and websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have mechanisms by which to report a specific post or account for content including harassment or hate speech. Often this function can be found by clicking a button for more options on the top right-hand corner of the post or account page.
- **Consider blocking or muting harassers on social media platforms.** The steps to block an account are generally similar to the above process for reporting an account. Blocking an account means that the account will not be able to send messages to you, and you will not see any posts (including prior posts) from that account. Muting is another option that will preserve messages but hide them from your view; a harasser will also not know if you have muted them.
- **Manage compromised personal information.** Doxxing is the practice of publicly revealing another's private or identifying information on the internet, generally with malicious intent. If your personal address or other identifying information is shared publicly without your consent, use the website or social media platform procedures to remove the information as quickly as possible. Change passwords if any online accounts have been compromised.

## III. Alerting your union

- **Reach out to your local affiliate.** Your local affiliate and UniServ Council may be able to help you engage with your employer and connect you with information and resources specific to your situation and your locality. They can help you check your collective bargaining agreement (CBA) and school board policies for relevant protections. Work with your Local EA and UniServ Council to demand that your employer provide the required protections and file a grievance if the employer fails to comply with the CBA.

## IV. Engaging with your employer

- **Report harassment to school officials.** An employer has an affirmative obligation under federal law to investigate and address certain kinds of harassment, even from third parties—but only if the

employer knows about the harassment. Immediately reporting any issues ensures that the school is responsible for taking steps to prevent further harassment.

- **Demand protections from CBA and school board policies.** CBAs may include anti-bullying or anti-harassment provisions. If the employer refuses to provide these protections after your request, file a grievance using procedures in the CBA. School board policies may also cover bullying and harassment, as well as workplace safety and abuse of school IT resources.
- **Know your rights under state law.** Washington State laws protect certificated employees from dismissal without cause or due process, including the right to notice and an opportunity to be heard at a hearing before the school board or an independent hearing officer. Reach out to your UniServ Council or local EA to discuss these protections or what protections are available if you are disciplined or dismissed as a result of a harassment or other campaign against you for protected speech.
- **File a discrimination complaint.** Federal and state laws require employers to protect employees from hostile work environments known to the employer and prohibit employers from retaliating against employees who report discrimination. **Title VII** of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the **Washington Law Against Discrimination** prohibit employment discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex (which includes pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity), or religion. State and federal laws also prohibit employment discrimination based on age, disability, and genetic information. Charges can be filed with the Washington State Human Rights Commission (WSHRC) or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) within 180 days of the discrimination. More information is below.
- **Understand First Amendment protections.** The First Amendment protects public employees from retaliation for protected speech; however, on-duty speech is not generally protected. If you face dismissal or other disciplinary action as a result of your speech or advocacy, contact your UniServ Council to discuss possible recourse.

## **V. Involving law enforcement**

**Report to crimes law enforcement.** Cyber harassment is a crime in Washington State. Such harassment includes making communications that threaten a person or threaten damage to a person's property, or uses "lewd" or "indecent" language when such communications are made anonymously or repeatedly by email, other internet-based communications, or electronic text messaging. See RCW 9A.90.120.

- It is also a crime in Washington State to "intimidate by threat of force or violence" any teacher, classified school employee, student, or administrator in the peaceful discharge of the duties of such educator. [RCW 28A.635.100](#).
- Criminal complaints generally are not appropriate by teachers against students and may give rise to employment-related issues. Please consult your UniServ Council for guidance on specific situations.

## **VI. Other steps to consider**

- **Consider filing a civil lawsuit in extreme cases.** In addition to the statutes cited above, Washington has an anti-doxxing law that potentially creates civil liability for those who publish the "personal identifying information" of another without "express consent." [RCW 4.24.792](#). If you

wish to discuss additional civil remedies available through litigation against the harasser or school employer, please consult a lawyer. While the WEA Office of General Counsel offers legal representation to members under certain circumstances, that office generally does not take on individual civil court cases, unless extraordinary circumstances are involved.

- **Note** also that certain discrimination laws require filing a complaint with a relevant state or federal agency prior to filing a lawsuit. In Washington State, the [Washington State Human Rights Commission](#) accepts discrimination complaints within the State of Washington, and the [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) accepts complaints for cases of employment-related discrimination at the federal level.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

These publications may also be relevant and helpful to you and may be freely shared:

- The [NEA Harassment and Discrimination Toolkit](#) offers detailed information on characteristics protected by federal employment discrimination laws and advice for how educators should respond when facing discrimination or harassment.
- The [PEN America Online Harassment Field Manual](#) provides guidance on how to prepare for and respond to online harassment, including detailed instructions on creating and managing secure passwords, removing private information from online, and reporting offensive posts on various social media platforms.
- The Coalition Against Online Violence provides a guide on [Doxxing: Emergency Steps to Take](#). While the guide is geared toward journalists experiencing doxxing, its recommendations are equally applicable to educators.

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