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WASA, WSSDA Call for Civility in School District Conversations

OLYMPIA—September 30, 2021 — The Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) and the Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA) released the following statement today in response to increasingly hostile and aggressive public meetings, online discussions and in-person confrontations directed toward school board members and school district leaders.

“COVID-19 has presented enormous challenges to our schools, districts, and communities, but one of the most concerning trends is the erosion of civility in many communities where interactions with school district leaders and school board members have turned ugly,” said Joel Aune, WASA executive director. “School superintendents and board members are doing their best to safely operate schools for in-person learning, and serve students based on the guidance of health policy experts and requirements set forth by the state. Unfortunately, many individuals in the community are politicizing the state requirements — which fall outside of local control — to the point where the act of simply holding a public meeting to conduct district business draws threats of violence, verbal abuse, aggression, and intimidation,” he said.

“This kind of behavior has no place in our schools or communities, and is particularly counterproductive to the work needing to be done to help students recover, learn, and grow during this difficult time,” Aune added. “It is imperative that the adults in our communities model the kind of behavior we ask of our students. Right now, this is not happening in a consistent fashion across our state. The students are watching, and what they see in all too many instances is in conflict with the kindness, civility, and decency we expect of them.”

Tim Garchow, executive director for WSSDA, said, “Decisions being made right now undoubtedly have a big impact on students, staff, and families. Some of those decisions can be made locally by school boards, but many of them are made at the state level and beyond the authority of individual districts. It is important for families and community members to share their concerns with their school district. It is important for families to have their voices heard. However, it is equally important to do so in a way that sets an example for students of how to advocate in a

civil and respectful manner. Aggressive, abusive, or hostile language and behavior do not demonstrate a desire to do what is best for children,” he added.

“School directors and superintendents are working incredibly hard to fulfill the demands of their local community, state regulations, and in some cases also federal obligations. Our school leaders are doing everything they can to maintain the safe operation of schools in the face of a constantly changing virus,” Garchow continued. “The fact that children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible for a vaccine makes dialog between schools, districts, families and the communities that much more important. The process of conducting the business of a school district has never been more vital. When it comes down to it, we all want many of the same things. We want to be able to keep our schools open, our children safe, our staff employed, and a return to normalcy as soon as possible. However, when we let our passions degrade one another, it prevents us from achieving our common goal of doing what is best for children.

“We must put an end to ineffective and inappropriate forms of communication.” he said. “We will not tolerate threats of violence, whether in person or online. This behavior has no place in our schools, where educators are working tirelessly to keep children safe and focused on learning. We owe it to our students to model the kind of leadership and civil engagement that is expected of adults in trying situations,” Garchow said.

“It is time to restore civility to our schools and our communities and find a way to move forward, together.”

About the Washington Association of School Administrators

The Washington Association of School Administrators (<http://www.wasa-oly.org>) is committed to the development of quality education through professional leadership. Members benefit from a supportive community of professional leaders working to provide insightful and valuable training, support, and resources to education leaders, and to sustain a positive impact on legislative and community leaders. With more than 1,600 members, membership is open to all education administrators in a central office, building management, and educational agency positions. A not-for-profit organization, WASA is funded by membership dues and association events.

About the Washington State School Directors’ Association

Formed in 1922, WSSDA has grown to include 1,477 locally elected school board directors from across Washington. As a state agency, WSSDA supports its members with research-based leadership development resources, policy and legal guidance, and legislative advocacy. This work is of critical importance because school board directors build the future of public education by setting the policy, governance, and budgetary priorities for all of Washington’s 295 school districts serving approximately 1.2 million students.