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## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRINCIPALS WHEN STUDENTS ARE PLANNING AN ORGANIZED PROTEST OR WALKOUT** ([HTTP://BLOG.NASSP.ORG/2018/02/23/CONSIDERATIONS-FOR-PRINCIPALS-WHEN-STUDENTS-ARE-PLANNING-AN-ORGANIZED-PROTEST-OR-WALKOUT/](http://blog.nassp.org/2018/02/23/considerations-for-principals-when-students-are-planning-an-organized-protest-or-walkout/))


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When students' free expression evolves into an organized protest or walkout during school hours, principals and other school officials find themselves in a conflict between supporting student voice and fulfilling their custodial duty toward students. Here are some considerations if students are planning an organized protest or walkout during school hours:

**Keep students safe.** As always, this is priority number one. We don't want students walking onto thoroughfares and entering chaotic places during protest. Most districts have well-established guidelines that define the roles of school officials, the monitoring and reporting process, and the process for engaging law enforcement to assist in monitoring for student safety. As school leaders anticipate a student walkout, it's wise to revisit those guidelines and consult with the district to make sure they are current.

**Recommend alternatives.** As educators, we want students in school where we can keep them safe while facilitating their participation in the educational program. Convene your student leaders to discuss the purpose of the walkout and how students can achieve their goals in the safest and least disruptive ways. NASSP's Raising Student Voice and Participation (<http://www.natstuco.org/rsvp>) program provides a protocol for student-led schoolwide discussion and the formation of action plans on the issues that matter most to them. If the students are determined to proceed with a walkout, teachers and administrators should monitor the walkout and endeavor to create safe conditions so far as might be in school officials' power. If safety concerns are insurmountable, consider ways to accommodate the protest on school grounds.

**Clarify consequences.** Students should not be disciplined for engaging in the act of protest. But make it clear to students that a *walkout protest* is an act of civil disobedience and, by definition, a violation of rules. Those infractions will be handled in the standard manner, typically as unexcused absence. While students and parents might regard protest as educational activity, the full lesson in civil disobedience is compromised if students are exonerated. However, the penalty should be no greater than if a student left campus for the same period of time without permission for any other reason. By extension, principals should consult policy and clarify the implications of a walkout with the school community in advance:

- What qualifies as a *walkout*? Leaving the building? Leaving school grounds?
- Can a student return to the school building after the walkout?
- Are students who walk out eligible to participate in afterschool/evening athletic events?
- Can a parent call the student in sick to technically avoid an unexcused absence?

**Principals, teachers, and other school officials should not participate in or endorse the protest.** Most district policies on staff expression prohibit protest during the school day, regardless of how strongly the school official feels about the issue. Specifically in the case of a walkout, school officials' participation sets a harmful precedent for endorsing a flagrant violation of school or district policy. Moreover, students with differing views might feel alienated or compelled to participate against their will if school officials are perceived as supporting the protest. Teachers can, however, reduce the negative academic effects of the protest by, for instance, not assigning tests or work that cannot be made up if an absence is unexcused. More appropriately, teachers can provide opportunities for remaining students to have their voices heard as well by writing a letter to a legislator, leading a structured conversation about the topic of protest, and so forth.

**Manage media attention.** Reporters are typically not permitted on school grounds without permission. Consult with your district communications office to determine a policy on press interaction with students on the perimeter of school grounds, where the walkout protest will likely take place. Where principals have the opportunity to address media as district policy allows, use the occasion to celebrate the school's role in empowering students to lead their learning and amplify their voices on issues that matter to them.

**Attend to the students who remain.** As noted above, students with differing views might feel alienated or compelled to participate in a protest against their will if school officials are perceived as supporting the protest. Principals should determine if the protest creates a hostile environment for these students or if the protest issue is so polarizing that a walkout further exacerbates tensions. In any case, work with teachers on strategies to discuss the walkout as the topic comes up in classes.

#### **Additional Resources:**

"Responding to School Walkout Demonstrations," ([https://rem.s.ed.gov/docs/ll\\_vol3issue1.pdf](https://rem.s.ed.gov/docs/ll_vol3issue1.pdf)) U.S. Department of Education—Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center

"School Walkouts as Civil Disobedience: How Should Districts Respond," ([http://www.justiceinschools.org/files/playpen/files/school\\_walkouts.pdf](http://www.justiceinschools.org/files/playpen/files/school_walkouts.pdf)) Harvard Graduate School of Education

"Student Walkouts and Political Speech at School," (<https://www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/immigrants/studentwalkouts20060503.pdf>) American Civil Liberties Union

"A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools," (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>) developed by a coalition of education organizations including NASSP

"Leading Success: Module 11 – Safe and Healthy School Environments," (<https://www.nassp.org/professional-learning/online-professional-development/leading-success/module-11-safe-and-healthy-school-environments?SSO=true>) NASSP

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