



#NoCopsNoGuns: Student Walkout Toolkit

Prepared by Advancement Project and Philadelphia Student Union

Overview

On Wednesday, March 14, organizations across the country who have been working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline will participate in a nation-wide school walkout. These organizations have organized students, parents, educators and community members to stand in solidarity with the Parkland, FL community of students impacted by the February school shooting, while amplifying the voices of students of color who are most vulnerable to the policies put forth by decision makers at the national, state and local level that increase police presence and guns on Florida school campuses. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide students, parents, educators and organizers from around the U.S. with critical information to support their actions on March 14 and beyond. The major sections of this toolkit include:

- Key messages and talking points
- Demands
- City specific “know your rights” information about participating in student walk-outs and protests

Background

On February 14, a gunman opened fire on Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida claiming the lives of 17 students and school staff. Since that tragic day, the nation has heard reactions and responses from the families of the victims and concerned students across the country, demanding solutions that honor those whose lives were lost.

In the weeks following the shooting, communities called on their legislators and school administrators to effectively address gun violence. In addition to conversations about gun violence, the Parkland shooting sparked dialogue about mental health, safety, police in schools, and the alarming move to arm school faculty.

To the detriment of Black and Brown students, the national conversation fails to acknowledge that an increase in police and guns in our schools harshly impacts young people of color.

Advancement Project is standing together with our partners to amplify the voices of students and communities of color who want an end to gun violence without an increase in police in our neighborhoods and schools.

School Walkout Talking Points

School Policing

- **All students deserve to attend schools where they feel safe, supported and respected.** Students in Parkland and across the country have summarily declared that mental health professionals, counselors and caring adults in school are the pathway to preventing mass violence, not teachers with deadly weapons or more school police.
- **Creating police states within schools and communities will not solve mass violence.** Moves to militarize police in schools by equipping them with higher grade assault weapons and surveillance technology has only proved to make students feel less safe in school.
- **Investing in school police is a misguided strategy that does not improve campus safety.** Research confirms that school police fail to deter mass violence, make schools no safer and lead to an increase of school-based arrests for minor misbehaviors. More police in schools creates the appearance of safety rather than actually creating truly safe schools or addressing the underlying root causes of school violence. School based police officers have not prevented mass shootings in Newtown, CT or Parkland, FL.
- **Police presence disproportionately harms youth of color** who are suspended, expelled, arrested and referred to law enforcement than their white peers for the exact same behaviors. Police officers are not usually trained in youth and adolescent development, or in how to effectively interact with students and school personnel. We should not expect police to screen students for mental health issues or to act as counselors and mentors.
- **Investments in policing and armed teachers diverts critical education funding away from student supports** like school psychologists, nurses and educators to create hostile learning environments that mirror prisons and calcify the school-to-prison pipeline.
- **The role of school police officers should not be confused with that of a school guidance counselor,** social worker, student mentor, or educator. School police are sworn law enforcement officers who are almost exclusively trained and tasked with enforcing the criminal code. They do not complete extensive coursework in youth development, receive substantive training on age-appropriate behaviors for students in each age category, nor teach students within the school setting as their primary function. The approach of school police to students is often neither trauma-centered, nor responsive to the negative experience of student populations within schools.

Arming Teachers

- **Arming teachers endangers the lives of students, especially youth of color.** Arming teachers will not protect students and has serious implications for students of color who are disproportionately disciplined in comparison to their White peers for the same behavior. Noting that Black people are three times as likely to be killed by trained law enforcement, it is highly

likely that disparities in discipline and police killings will similarly be seen in gun deaths and student injuries at the hands of educators.

- **The gross majority of educators don't support arming school staff.** While school safety is linked to investments in teachers, class sizes, classroom resources and enrichment programs, there is no evidence that armed teachers and police prevent or deter violence.
- **Since the Parkland shooting, we've seen an outcry from teachers asking for the basic resources to teach and maintain classrooms that support the development of young people.** If states and school districts can't find the resources to fully equip teachers with supplies and mental health professionals, they should not be allocating resources toward more police in schools that criminalize youth of color.
- **Schools that will see more investment in police already make young people feel like suspects instead of students.** Legislators in Florida have already passed laws allocating millions of dollars for school police and surveillance equipment like metal detectors, bullet proof glass, and security cameras. This drastically reduces school climate and students have reported feeling criminalized.
- States like New York, Tennessee and most notably Florida, are already moving forward with legislation that would place more police and guns in schools and in the hands of school faculty. Conflating the role of teachers and police officers absolutely means that students will miss out on valuable classroom time. Instead of providing quality education, faculty will be focused on maintaining a perception of security.

Beyond Gun Control

- **Communities of color have been systematically flooded with guns for generations.** Gun control is critical for keeping all communities safe. However, gun laws that claim to restrict access while further entrenching a racialized weapons culture in our communities will not suffice as a solution.
- **Unrestricted gun laws have led to deaths of thousands of people in this country and the enforcement of these laws has never done justice to people of color.** Gun laws did not protect Philando Castile from being murdered in Minnesota by a police officer in his vehicle after informing the officer of his licensed and properly stored firearm. This will inevitably continue if we do not address the racial inequality that exists within our justice system. Restrictive gun laws will only make a positive difference for people of color when the justice system acknowledges the value in communities of color.
- Similarly, we know that Trayvon Martin may still be alive today if it were not for a Florida Stand Your Ground law that protects perpetrators of vigilante violence against Black people who they perceive as a threat. In states like Florida where Stand Your Ground is coupled with increased gun presence in schools and communities, it is certain that we will see continue to see instances where the death of Black and Brown youth murdered by civilians is considered lawful.
- **Solutions to school safety must center the voices and experiences of youth of color and go beyond gun control.** In the wake of the Parkland tragedy, we cannot disregard the expressed needs of students who are overpoliced to exclusively serve adult perspectives of safety.

Invest in Real Solutions

- **Instead of more police, schools need strategies on how to create positive, supportive learning environments that phase out law enforcement, not increase their presence.**

- **Increasing the number of police in schools is not a solution to preventing violence** and it funnels students into the school-to-prison pipeline. To dismantle the pipeline and address the core problem of racial discrimination in school discipline, while also addressing violence, schools and communities must completely realign funding and policy priorities for school districts. This realignment should include restorative approaches to discipline, a divestment of resources from the criminalization infrastructure and an investment in teachers, counselors, parent engagement and student support services.

Demands

Divestment from school police officers

An improvement in mental health resources in U.S. cities cannot happen without an intentional and accountable effort to divest funding and shift budgeting from School Police officers to other necessary programs that actually promote a nurturing school environment. The expansion of police presence and security personnel/equipment in schools must end, as it only promotes a culture of fear rather than reinforcing the creativity and voice of students.

Comprehensive mental and emotional health services

We want all schools to provide a comprehensive program for mental health services so students can be proactively and consistently supported when dealing with emotional, mental, and social concerns.

More guidance counselors and social workers

In order to address the violence affecting our schools, there needs to be a prioritization around hiring more guidance counselors and social workers, who have the training background specifically to support the emotional and mental state of students and to encourage the development of youth.

Expansion of restorative justice practices

Restorative justice is key in building relationships between students, parents, teachers, school staff and community. It is an alternative to the presence of police and armed teachers that promotes emotional intelligence and communication which are essential skills to be honed for use after graduation. Our schools require an intentional, and systematic effort for restorative justice programs for peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher/administrator mediation.

Protection for students and families from ICE arrests around schools

Over-policing in our schools only serves to further criminalize young people of color at the expense of learning. Immigration raids across the city have occurred in and around our schools and in homes which instills a constant feeling of fear that impacts young people's ability to participate in their education. That is why we know ICE and police are two sides of the same coin for our families. Both are detrimental to our dignity and our survival, and we need to end their reach into our lives now.

Gun control that does not result in targeted policing of black and brown bodies

Enact legislation that restricts the access of assault rifles, or weaponry used in mass killings without thorough screenings and processes for mental and/or emotional, criminal, or social concerns. Additionally, enforcement of laws that restrict access to guns must not be racialized to favor any particular group.

Know Your Rights

This information is not intended to be legal advice. If you have an individual question or issue please consult with an attorney.

What are my free speech rights at school?

The First Amendment generally protects your right to protest (peacefully assemble). Even when you're on school grounds, you still have this right as long as you don't significantly disrupt the functioning of the school.

Can I get in trouble for participating in a school walkout?

Yes, you can because schools generally have the right to make rules about student attendance and put limitations on absences. Depending on what the rules are in your school, the school might be able to impose consequences for missing class or school. This can be anything from just getting an unexcused absence on your record, to a conference, to suspension. In many states, police or truancy officers can also arrest or ticket a student who is skipping school.

Some schools have exceptions to this rule for peaceful student protests. In light of the student walkouts planned after the tragedy in Parkland, many superintendents or principals are announcing that students can participate in the walkouts without consequence.

The school may also try to discipline you for disrupting schools or causing a disturbance, which could include a suspension or even an arrest in some states. The First Amendment protects your right to speech in school but only as long as you don't disrupt the orderly function of a school.

The school cannot punish you more harshly than someone who skipped school for a different, non-political reason. That would be unfair and would violate your rights.

What are my options if I am disciplined for participating?

If you are disciplined for participating in a walkout, you should read your school's rules closely to find out what your rights are. You may be able to request some form of a restorative practice, conference, or other meeting with the school officials and talk about the importance of student activism during the meeting. You may want to discuss with your school your reasons for participating, and express that participating in such an action is essential to the educational process.

Where can I find out the rules for my school?

You should look at your student code of conduct to find out what the consequences are for missing school. You may also want to see if anyone from your school district has made a public statement about their response to student actions after Parkland. Check with your family to and see if any special announcements have been made in school newsletters, too.

School-district Specific Information

This information contains a summary of key parts of individual schools' codes of conduct that may apply if you walk out of school or participate in a protest. If your school district is not listed, you may want to look up your student code of conduct to find out what it says about skipping class, excused or unexcused absences, and truancy. You may also want to look at any rules around being disruptive or insubordinate in school because sometimes schools will attempt to discipline students participating in protests for these offenses.

Broward County, FL

[Broward County Schools' Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may count as an excused absence. The Broward County Schools' Code of Conduct defines an excused absence as one due to a special event, which can be an important public function. A parent or guardian can write a letter to excuse your absence either two days before or two days after the day that you're out of class.

Chicago

[Chicago Public Schools' Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may result in discipline for "inappropriate behavior." The Chicago Public Schools' Code of Conduct defines inappropriate behavior, in part, as leaving a classroom without permission. The consequences that a student can receive for inappropriate behavior are a parent-teacher conference, a restorative response, or detention.

Cincinnati

[Board Policy 5200 of the Cincinnati Public Schools is available here.](#)

[Cincinnati Public Schools' Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may count as an excused absence or, if the walkout happens within the school, no absence at all. Board Policy 5200 of Cincinnati Public Schools states that students must generally have a valid excuse, either through a letter or a voicemail message, to miss school. It also indicates that if you are present at any place where school is in session, it generally counts as attendance.

Denver

[Denver Public Schools Parent & Student Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school because of a student walk out will probably count as an unexcused absence. The Denver Public Schools' Parent & Student Handbook defines truancy as an unexcused absence where the student has not received permission from the school, a parent, or a guardian.

Miami

[The Miami-Dade Public Schools' Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may count as an unexcused absence, depending on how the protest is structured. Miami-Dade Public Schools' Code of Conduct states that students have the right to assemble peacefully on school grounds or in school buildings as long as they do not substantially disrupt functions or cause harm. The code of conduct also expresses that Miami-Dade students have the responsibility to become informed about controversial issues and express their opinion respectfully.

New York City

[New York City Department of Education's Citywide Behavioral Expectations to Support Student Learning is available here.](#)

[Letter from Carmen Farina, New York City Department of Education, March 8, 2018, available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may result in discipline for uncooperative or noncompliant behavior. The New York City Department of Education's Citywide Behavior Expectations define uncooperative/noncompliant behavior, in part, as cutting classes. The school can use a number of responses to address this concern, ranging from parent outreach to a student-teacher conference. If a

school official tries to punish you during the walk-out, you can request some form of a restorative practice or conference and discuss the need for student activism during it.

The New York City Chancellor of Education released a letter concerning the walk-out on March 8, 2018. According to it, for middle and high school students, participating in the walk-out will count as cutting class; however, participating students will only receive a notation in their student attendance record and a conversation with an administrator.

Philadelphia

[The School District of Philadelphia's Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school because of a student walk out will probably count as an unexcused absence. Generally, under the School District of Philadelphia's Code of Conduct, an unexcused absence is one where you miss class or school without a valid excuse, like being sick or having a doctor's appointment. You also need a note from a parent or guardian excusing your absence. In the School District of Philadelphia, the school can label a student as truant after three days of unexcused absences. This means if you have missed school 2 or more other days without a valid reason, participating in the walk out could count towards you being truant. The District cannot suspend or transfer you to an alternative school because of truancy but they can take other steps to address your absences.

The Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia issued a letter on March 6, 2018 concerning the walk-out. In it, the superintendent expresses that the school district will not prevent students from participating and won't discipline them if they do so. However, students will have to gather in a designated area during the walk-out.

Phoenix

[Phoenix Union School District's Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may count as an unexcused absence, depending on how the protest is structured. The Phoenix Union School District's Code of Conduct states that a student is to be counted as present if they are in attendance for at least half of the class period. With this in mind, you can participate in the walk-out half way through class. This may mean that you will not receive an absence for that class.

Pinellas County, FL

[Pinellas County Schools' Code of Conduct is available here.](#)

Missing school for a walkout or protest may count as an unexcused absence, depending on how the protest is structured. The Pinellas County Schools' Code of Conduct states that a student will be counted as present in a class if they attend at least half of the period. You can also be excused from attending schools for participation in an event like an important public function. If you get up to participate in the walk-out half way through class, you may not be marked absent for that class. You can also have a parent or guardian write you a letter, five days before the walk-out, that excuses your absence due to your participation in a special event, which the school district defines – in part – as an “important public function.”