



Guidance on Student Walkouts

February 27, 2018

The recent school shootings are understandably impacting students, parents, teachers and administrators across our state and across our country. In addition to feeling profound sadness, we all share a deep and personal sense of responsibility for the safety of our students and staff in Tennessee. The department continues to offer [school safety resources and trainings](#), and we hope all educators will utilize those as needed.

These tragedies and those that have happened over the last several years, particularly in our schools, have driven increased student-led civic engagement around the nation. We are incredibly proud of our young people, and we support their constitutional rights to peaceful assembly and free expression. Many of you have expressed this same pride and support, while also seeking guidance on the right ways to appropriately and safely assist students during walkouts and other forms of peaceful assembly. This guidance aims to support you and your schools so you can address student walkouts in a positive way and use these situations as teachable moments for the students, educators, and your surrounding community.

We are sharing this guidance with you in light of the three nationally promoted student-led efforts underway, but this could generally be applied to student walkouts in protest of any issue. The upcoming moments we are aware of include:

1. March 14: [@WomensMarch](#) call for school walkout for 17 minutes at 10 a.m.
2. March 24: March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. ([@AMarch4OurLives](#)), with local rallies expected
3. April 20: National School Walkout at 10 a.m. for students across nation ([@schoolwalkoutUS](#))

Given the April 20 event is engaging students nationally, we anticipate students in Tennessee may choose to participate. Additionally, April 20 is the first Friday during the spring assessment window. Therefore, **we recommend that districts do not schedule testing for this date.** We would request that instead you utilize other dates throughout the assessment window, April 16-May 4, to schedule and complete testing.

General guidance for district leaders

If you have not already done so, we recommend you develop and communicate clear guidance and expectations for how school principals and school administrators should handle possible student walkouts, including plans for before, during, and after they occur. This guidance should also include information and expectations on teacher walkouts.

As always, work with the stakeholders in your community who need to advise these plans, particularly if you feel there will be a need for additional security and/or if media will be present. Given the sensitivity of this topic, we recommend your guidance includes sample text that school principals can send to students, staff, and families.



We have provided some general information for school leaders below, which you are welcome and encouraged to work from and share with your communities. We have also provided example communications for school principals.

General guidelines for school leaders

If/when you learn about student-led efforts, here are five suggestions:

- 1. Meet with student leaders.** Meet with student leaders to assess their plans. Use this initial meeting to listen and ask questions. Let students lead the discussion and ask how you can be supportive.
 - Help ensure that any invitations for participation in an event are open to everyone and that the events would be inclusive of ALL students.
 - At the same time, be sure student leaders are respectful of students who may not wish to participate, or students with opposing views.
 - Talk with students about their plans for peaceful assembly. With student input, school administrators may be able to help students determine the best place for a peaceful assembly to take place on school campus or discuss whether they are interested in alternative forms of protest, such as a “walk-in” on the school campus.

- 2. Offer counseling and support.** Remind students that counseling and guidance support are available to any student and that we encourage every student to reach out to a counselor.
 - In Tennessee, the Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services offer help 24/7 at 855-CRISIS-1 or 855-274-7471.
 - Additionally, the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), the [National Association of School Psychologists](#) (NASP) and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA) have produced excellent resources for teachers and parents.

- 3. Prioritize safety.** Remind students that your school and district support their rights to peaceful assembly and free expression, and a student’s safety is the most important priority. Therefore, reiterate that school/district policies, rules, and/or student code of conduct remains in place and will be enforced.
 - Students should not be disciplined for peacefully participating in a walkout, and be clear that your conversations are intended only to support their rights and ensure their safety. Be especially mindful of actions that could imply punishment is coming, such as asking for a list of every student who plans to participate, openly complaining about the walkout, or taking down signage about the event.
 - Explain that during the event there may be increased staff and police presence and that this presence is for student and staff protection and safety, not to quell their expression.
 - If there will be increased security, offer student leaders the opportunity to meet with the heads of security to make a plan and ensure clear, respectful communication throughout the event.
 - Invite student ideas for improving campus safety, security and culture during this event and in the future.

- 4. Make this a teachable moment.** School is about teaching, learning, and developing the future leaders of our community, state, and nation. Assess ways you can turn this into teachable moments for everyone. For example:
- Remind students, teachers, and parents that student expression is a part of the learning process. Students are taking what they are learning in school and making it real. When students are passionate about an issue, it is an opportunity for educators to help students see the connection between curriculum and real life.
 - Show students the variety of ways they are empowered to be civically engaged. Not only are they entitled to peaceful assembly, but they can also contact their elected officials – from the school board and city officials to their state and national representatives – write op-eds for the local newspaper, join civic and community organizations or start a new one, inform themselves and their community about issues they are passionate about, volunteer, start a petition, register to vote and help others to do the same, organize a voter pre-registration drive, and vote in every election.
 - Talk with students before and after the event about its purpose. What is it that needs to change? What is the process for creating that change? How can students continue to be involved?
 - Provide teachers with additional time and space to discuss ideas or share best practices for how to address this in their classroom.
 - *Resource:* 2017 National Teacher of the Year Sydney Chaffee recently wrote about this issue and included several resources schools and teachers can use:
<http://sydneychaffee.com/2018/02/23/how-schools-can-support-student-activism/>
- 5. Prepare and communicate with teachers, students, and families in advance.**
- Set aside time to prepare teachers and staff to handle walkouts in accordance with district guidance. Ensure they understand the guidance as it relates to teacher and staff walkouts and know how to appropriately and respectfully handle the situation if a student walks out in the middle of class.
 - Fully inform students and families when you know an event may be planned and once an event takes place. In addition, be transparent with students, families, teachers and staff on how the district will handle absences if a student chooses to walkout.

Sample Messaging Guidance for School Leaders

Ahead of the event:

Dear [SCHOOL] students and families,

Recently, I have heard that some students are considering plans to protest or walk out of our school in response to_____. We respect and support the right of our students to advocate for causes that are important to them and welcome the opportunity to work with any student or student group to discuss appropriate and creative ways to do so while at school. They can contact me or any teacher at any time.



We are currently aware that students may consider walking out of school on *[X date]*, and we are working with student leaders and teachers to ensure students can express themselves through peaceful assembly in a way that protects the safety of every student, including those who both do and do not participate, and respects the views of every member of our school community. In addition, it is important to know that disorderly conduct that disrupts school operations is not acceptable and will be handled compassionately but firmly, in accordance with our code of conduct.

I encourage you to talk to your child(ren) about how they may be feeling about this topic. Our educators will also be highlighting the connection between what students are learning in the classroom, particularly on civic engagement and students' constitutional rights, and what they are seeing in the real world. We love the passion of our students, and we recognize that student activism is a part of the learning process.

Thank you for your continued support of *[SCHOOL]*. Please let me know if you have any questions.

When a peaceful protest or walkout occurs:

Good morning/evening *[SCHOOL]* students and families,

Today, some of our students participated in peaceful protests on campus in response to _____. Our students *[CUSTOMIZE: walked out of school and peacefully marched or sat on campus, organized speeches and rallies, organized a sit-in in the school cafeteria]* for about *[TIME in minutes/hours/day]*, and then peacefully returned to class for the rest of the day's planned instruction. Our teachers made sure to use this as a teachable moment to tie what students are learning in the classroom every day – about problem-solving, collaboration, reading, writing, and civic engagement – to the current events at our school for those who participated in the protest as well as those who chose not to participate.

We understand that our students may be feeling lots of emotions, including anxiety, fear and even anger about *[TOPIC]*. We respect the right of our students to advocate for causes that are important to them and support their efforts to do so in an authorized and orderly manner while at school. We thank our students for the way they conducted themselves today while allowing their voices to be heard. I encourage you to talk to your child(ren) about how they may be feeling about this event. We also have counselors and staff available and ready to talk to students at any time.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

When a protest or walkout becomes disruptive

[SCHOOL] students and families,

At *[SCHOOL]*, we respect the right of our students to advocate for causes that are important to them, and we have worked to support students' right to peaceful assembly. Unfortunately, some students on our campus today chose to protest in ways that significantly disrupted school



operations and threatened the safety and order for other students and staff within our school. Swift action was taken by school staff and *[CUSTOMIZE: local law enforcement, other officials]* to address the situation. No students or staff members were injured during the incident.

The safety of our students and staff is our top priority. Inappropriate behaviors that threaten school safety will be handled immediately and firmly in accordance with our code of conduct and/or applicable local policies and laws.

We understand that our students may be feeling lots of emotions, including anxiety, fear and anger about today's events. I encourage you to talk to your child(ren) about how they may be feeling. We also have counselors and staff available and ready to talk to students at any time.

We look forward to welcoming students back tomorrow for a great day of teaching and learning. Thank you for your continued support of *[SCHOOL]*. Please let me know if you have any questions.