

## **A Communication Resource: How To Approach Student Activism**

[modified by the Michigan School Public Relations Association from ["How to Approach Student Walkouts"](#)--originally released February 23, 2018)]

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### **Introduction**

Current events are complicated. Each situation is unique and every school may face something different. Always consider your school's policies, codes of conduct, local community needs, and your local climate as you address each instance. You may wish to contact your school district's legal counsel for advice. You may also want to consult with your school social workers, school psychologists and other local health and safety officials, depending on the situation.

[NOTE: This document is informational only and intended to highlight some of the approaches to addressing this issue. Consider using it to aid in your district's communication planning.]

### **Talking Points/Key Messages**

- We're working with students, staff, and appropriate local authorities to ensure students are safe and are able to have their voices heard.
- We will respect the rights of all students, whether they choose to participate or not.
- The role of our staff during this time will be to help keep our students safe.
- This can be a learning opportunity that helps our students apply the citizenship lessons that they are learning in school.
- We encourage our students to be actively engaged citizens who are knowledgeable about multiple viewpoints surrounding current events. We teach them how to participate in our democracy in a variety of ways that might include addressing lawmakers through letters, creative works that help express how they feel about an issue, and discussions. Through these kinds of experiences, our students learn the skills they need to form, support and express their own personal positions on issues.

### **Legal Precedence**

- In [Tinker v. Des Moines](#)--students wearing black armbands protesting the Vietnam War--was deemed protected speech by the First Amendment. (On February 24, 1969 the Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." The Court ruled that the First Amendment applied to public schools, and school officials could not censor student speech unless it disrupted the educational process.) **The standard: Schools must prove a material and substantial disruption to the learning environment.**

### **Overall Points to Remember**

- **Schools must remain neutral**--not seen as being in support or non-support.
- **If you have any concerns, contact your district's legal counsel.**
- **Do not restrict protected student speech.**
- Schools are allowed to set **reasonable time, place and manner restrictions** on an activity.
- **If you have questions about the free speech rights of students, contact your district's legal counsel.**

## **Communicating With Your Audiences**

### **Board/Administration**

- Review your board policy on free speech.
- Review your Student Code of Conduct for rules and regulations.
- Review [Tinker v. Des Moines](#).
- Know that responses and activities may vary by school district, but must allow for protected speech.
- Rely on your superintendent and administrators for your district's course of action.

### **School Staff**

- Remind administrators and staff that school districts don't engage in protests. However, students have a free speech right and may express their political viewpoint, if it doesn't present a material or substantial disruption to the learning environment.
- Work with your union leadership--remind them that school staff must remain content and viewpoint neutral, while they are working at school. Teachers/staff have other avenues/channels through which to express their political views and lobby.
- Provide talking points to staff to share with community members who ask questions.

### **Students**

- Review the Student Code of Conduct with students.
- Help students commit to taking action, to think about how to make it a positive/productive learning experience (e.g. letters to legislators; finding their voice), and how to respect the rights of those students choosing not to participate. This is an opportunity to apply the citizenship lessons they are learning in school.

### **Parents**

- Repeat your key message about keeping students safe.
- Explain that school districts don't engage in protests. However, students have a free speech right and may express their political viewpoint, if it doesn't present a material or substantial disruption to the learning environment.
- Remind parents, if they are on school property during the school day, they are subject to the school's rules and regulations.

### **Media**

- Designate a spokesperson.
- Use your key messages.
- Understand that you don't have to allow the media into your buildings, parking lots, or campus.
- Know that there is nothing to prevent them from setting up outside, across the street.

### **Community Members**

- Remember the school is not required to allow community members to come on the property during the school day.
- During the school day, administrators can regulate who is on school property.

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