

Is a School Boycott a Realistic Way to Change Gun Laws?

By Shawnta S. Barnes - May 26, 2018



Peter Cunningham, the former Assistant Education Secretary during the Obama Administration, recently tweeted, “Maybe it’s time for America’s 50 million school parents to simply pull their kids out of school until we have better gun laws.” To which the former Education Secretary Arne Duncan (who also served during the Obama Administration) replied, “This is brilliant, and tragically necessary. What if no children went to school until gun laws changed to keep them safe? My family is all in if we can do this at scale.

Parents, will you please join us?” I agree that a school, a church, the movie theater, and, honestly, any place, should not be a place where a child fears going because they might not return home. Is a school boycott a realistic solution? It is easy to make grandiose suggestions online, but can this actually work? I don’t think so.

I’m not against boycotting, protesting, or exercising your first amendment right to free speech, but little change will occur if we do not long-term plan and think about the long-term effects and the cost of the sacrifices people must make when they become activists to enact change. When asked by *The Atlantic* writer Adam Harris, “How do you think a boycott would work, practically?” Duncan replied:

Let me just say, I more than recognize how difficult and impractical this is. But the Montgomery bus boycott went on for a year. These were poor people who denied themselves access to public transportation, and they managed to do that for a year and change the world. I would argue that it is also very difficult and impractical to send your kids to school and have them shot and killed. It’s very impractical and difficult to try to go to a movie theater, or a concert, or the mall, or to worship in church, and to be murdered en masse. And there’s nothing easy or practical about this, but it’s all relative. And we’re dealing with a reality today that’s infinitely harder than that.

Yes, people had to sacrifice using the bus to get to work or places they needed to go during the Montgomery bus boycott, but as a History Channel article points out, they were able to get where they needed to go:

Although African Americans represented at least 75 percent of Montgomery’s bus ridership, the city resisted complying with the protesters’ demands. To ensure the boycott could be sustained, black leaders organized carpools, and the city’s African-American taxi drivers charged only 10 cents—the same price as bus fare—for African-American riders.

I believe a school boycott is unrealistic; however, thinking about it raised a few questions for me such as,

1. Can a school boycott work at scale? If so, how?
2. Not having school will require childcare for most parents. Who will watch the children who are not at school, so their parents can still work?
3. How will these children continue their education if they are not at school?

Many of my colleagues have this quote by Nelson Mandela in their email signature, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." How will our children change the world if we keep them at home and deprive them of an education? Many parents can't homeschool or pay for a private teacher. I don't want my children to die in a school shooting, but I also know that I and other working-class families can't keep our children at home. Educators know it can be hard to help children achieve academically when they are at school. Calling for a boycott without a plan to educate children who are not in school may solve one problem, but create another.