

Student Activists Should Be Well Informed

By Shawnta S. Barnes – March 14, 2018



I had good veteran teacher mentors early in my career who encouraged me to include current events in my classroom lessons as a way to engage students. I have always followed that advice. For our quick write last week, I asked my students to express how they felt about the #enough National Student Walkout on March 14 to bring attention to school shootings and common sense gun control laws. I was surprised to learn my students were unaware of the walkout, so they didn't have anything to say. After explaining

what happened in Parkland, Florida, what student activists are planning to do, and why they are protesting, my students were able to write their responses. Most of them felt the protest was necessary. Many of them didn't believe a school shooting could happen at our majority minority urban school and they didn't understand how walking out of school was actually going to stop another kid from doing what the Parkland, Florida shooter did.

However, students in my school spoke up. They asked our principal for permission to participate in the walkout without penalty. She granted them permission as long as they leave out of Door 3 promptly by 10:00 a.m., stay in the courtyard, and return to class by 10:25 a.m., they would be allowed to take part in the walkout.

Now, that students know there is no penalty for leaving class, I believe there will be a mass exodus today. They'll walk outside not because they understand the protest, but because teachers like me brought it to their attention or because of the relentless media coverage.

Is this real student activism? Switching from my teacher role to my parent role, I wonder if schools are playing into the misunderstanding of student activism. I live in Washington Township and Sunday evening parents received guidelines for what they would permit at the high school, middle, and elementary level. My twin sons are in first grade. Other elementary parents and I were surprised there was even an elementary option. One parent told me, "They don't need a walk in instead of a walkout; they need stay in class."

This is what the letter said about elementary schools:

WT Elementary Schools

The elementary schools will operate on a regular daily schedule. Students may even be completing the IREAD 3 assessment during this time. We are unable to maintain normal safety and security measures while supervising elementary students outside during a walkout. We need your support assisting us in this serious safety issue. Therefore, the alternative at the elementary level will be an optional "walk in" supervised in the

gymnasium from 10:00-10:17 AM. Students who do not participate will remain in their classroom for normal instruction.

Activism should not be a fad and students shouldn't participate because everyone else is doing it. It's hard work and many times you don't get what you want. Typically, there are consequences. Today, some youth feel entitled to get whatever they want. For schools to make alternative plans for elementary students, who are probably not discussing the school shootings and who do not understand the process it would take to change the gun laws in our society, without the properly educating our children about the policy process are doing a disservice to our students.

I'm interested to see how many students stay involved in the movement behind the walkout after today. I support student activism as long as students are well informed and understand that activism is more than 15 seconds of fame and a hashtag.