



P.O. Box 6179
Montgomery, AL 36106
(T) 334-265-2754
(F) 334-269-5666
aclualabama.org

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An Open Letter to Alabama Educators and Students:

Tomorrow, students around the country are planning to participate in the National Walkout, a coordinated protest and memorial to the 17 students who were killed at Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018. The walkout is scheduled to last for 17 minutes to honor each student.

In response to this planned walk out, we have heard that there are some school superintendents who are considering suspending students if they participate tomorrow. We want to remind those educators that the Constitution forbids disciplining students more harshly for politically motivated conduct than for similar, non-political behavior. The ACLU of Alabama may intervene if a student who leaves school as an act of political protest faces more severe punishment than a classmate who would, for example, leave class to meet friends or eat lunch off campus.

As for what students can do during school hours:

- Students cannot be punished for expressing their beliefs unless it disrupts school functioning or the substance is lewd or vulgar.
- Students cannot be considered disruptive for wearing t-shirts, armbands, or other clothes or accessories that bear political viewpoints – or face discipline as a result – just because someone may disagree with that view.

Instead of punishment, we ask educators to take this moment to inform students about their rights and about the importance of civic participation. By speaking out and banding together, people of all ages can affect change. We have examples within our own history here in Alabama to teach with. In 1963, young Black students began a campaign of nonviolent direct action in Birmingham to protest racial discrimination. Even though many of these students were arrested and attacked with high-pressure water hoses and police dogs, their protest led to changes in the city's discrimination laws and helped galvanize the nation into passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

We now remind our fellow Alabamians – educators, students, and parents – that young people do not shed their Constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate, but instead can and have changed American history with their actions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brock Boone".

Brock Boone
Staff Attorney
ACLU of Alabama