



School Walkouts as Civil Disobedience: How Should Districts Respond?¹

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On the morning of November 14th, 2016, over 400 students from at least ten middle and high schools from Portland, Oregon, walked out of their schools to “tell adults and to people who actually voted in this election” that “Portland Public Schools does not stand with racism, we do not stand with sexism and we do not stand with Islamophobia.”² The purpose of this protest was explained by some of the students as an attempt to “counteract some of the divisive rhetoric” witnessed during the presidential campaign.³

Over the course of the day, students marched through the city, chanting slogans like “No Trump, No K-K-K, No Fascist USA,” “Not my president,” and “Whose streets? Our streets!” At one point, they sat silently in the middle of an intersection to commemorate the death of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. Some supporters joined them, while other passersby chanted at students, “We won, you lost!”⁴

The November walkout was not the first protest Portland students initiated regarding the 2016 presidential election. The previous spring, Latino students from at least five PPS schools organized their own walkout to speak out about their growing feeling of fear as Donald Trump emerged as the Republican nominee. Partly inspired by students from nearby suburban Forest Grove who walked out their classes to protest the hanging of a “Build a Wall” banner in a school hallway, the Latino PPS students also used the walkout to denounce structural racism in schools, and to declare that school administrators had been “failing to address the issues minority students” were dealing with.⁵

Nor was the election the only target of student activism in Portland. Seventh and eighth grade students from Astor K-8 marched outside their school in October 2016, upset upon learning that after a year in which math classes had been staffed only by substitutes, the recently appointed teacher was being relocated to another school. A month earlier, students from Lincoln High hit the streets demanding the Portland Public Schools (PPS) Board include a ballot question in the November election for a construction bond that would help repair deteriorated school facilities. In previous years, students walked out in protest of schedule changes replacing art classes with extra math instruction, marched in support of striking teachers, stepped out of class to urge boycotts of standardized tests, and rallied against the war in Iraq.⁶ PPS officials have thus been confronting student activism for quite some time.

On Student Walkouts: Approval and Objections

District and school administrators face a number of difficult decisions in responding to the various student demonstrations. Many have worried about what might happen to students who took their civic activism into potentially chaotic public spaces. For example, before the November walkout, the principal of Wilson High sent a note to parents stating that while he hoped “the deep and old wounds that have been torn open in our society once again will help our children now see, and do more, than perhaps my generation has done to deal with the systems of oppression, the marginalization of LGBTQ community, women and minorities, that exists in America,” he could not recommend to parents that students participate in the walkout. “Given the last few nights of protests and the raw emotions that the political

campaign and election surfaced, I think the risks far outweigh the benefits for students.”⁷ Indeed, broader demonstrations across Portland had resulted in more than 70 arrests, violent confrontations between marchers and local police, and even one shooting. Instead, the principal invited parents to have conversations with their children about the intended demonstration, and offered alternative activities to be held inside the school premises.

Nor are such concerns confined to administrators or even just adults. The Portland Metro High School Youth Alliance, for example, did not endorse the walkout despite opposing the election results. Calling attention to the unrest and violence of the larger protests in the city, this group of youth leaders issued a statement on Facebook: “We want to strongly encourage everyone NOT to participate in the walkout on Monday. We value each student’s voice, and right to protest, but we don’t want a powerful message to get lost in something that lacks clarity, organization and a consistent message.”⁸

Defining to what extent a student walkout is part of the students’ learning experience is also problematic. While students might be strengthening civic skills when they protest, some school leaders see student protests as a negative tradeoff with the academic goals of schools. For example, during a 2013 walkout in support of a teacher strike, one principal argued that “missing valuable instructional time to support teachers is not the best way to honor their work.”⁹ Other school leaders, however, have lauded their students’ demonstrated organizational capacity and claimed that “students exceeded Civic Club expectations” for *adults* in their commitment to civic engagement.¹⁰ During the Lincoln walkout, likewise, one teacher sent an e-mail to the student leader recognizing what they had achieved and commenting that the walkout was “most definitely a CAS experience (or even project!).”¹¹ A local blogger similarly agreed, “Chances are they [students] learned more today about becoming a good, involved citizen than in their entire school careers.” He hence argued that “PPS officials should NOT count this as unexcused absences.”¹²

Varying levels of student support for walkouts also shed light on a deeper concern: the impact of student demonstrations on school climate. After Forest Grove students walked out to protest the “Build a Wall” banner, one student published an op-ed in the Portland Tribune to express his concerns about the fallout. Despite lauding its “noble and worthwhile cause,” he felt that the walkout engendered a “with us or against us” mentality that ultimately “morphed into a vendetta against the administration and people who support Donald Trump” and “further polarized and increased the divide between students at FGHS.”¹³ Rather than encourage conversation among students across social, racial, and political differences, he argued, the walkout may have precluded such conversations from happening.

Still, demonstrations are not necessarily the driving force behind deteriorating school climate. In some cases, they are a reaction to preexisting fractures in a community, highlighting how unwelcome, marginalized, and voiceless some students feel. Well before the banner incident at Forest Grove High School, for example, students documented multiple experiences of inequity: “My own counselor assuming I take the easiest classes because that’s what ‘my people’ do”; hearing Mexican and Latino students called “useless farm workers;” being tracked into English language development classes on the basis of Hispanic surnames.¹⁴ In response to such experiences, students met with both school and district leaders but felt their concerns continued to be ignored. As one student put it, “We had two unsuccessful meetings where we took the appropriate steps... I thought (the walkout) was a wake-up call that the school district really needed.”¹⁵ On this reading, the school climate was already toxic, and the walkout merely brought these problems out into the open.

Students may thus interpret actions to defuse or enable protests as signals about students’ value as members of the school community. On the one hand, schools that dismiss or oppose student protests run the risk of reinforcing some students’ experiences of marginalization and disempowerment,

particularly if their protest is a response to those same experiences. As one walkout participant explained, “the whole leadership is pretty much Caucasian, all the teachers are pretty much Caucasian, and it's like they only care about half of the school.”¹⁶ On the other hand, students that do not want to participate in a protest or are actively opposed to it might also feel excluded by their peers and teachers. Actively supporting a protest--especially on the part of faculty--can be seen by some students as a rejection of their beliefs.

Making matters even more complicated, questions about climate and safety are also entangled with the question of whether or not students are engaging in protests voluntarily. This may take the form of peer pressure, as in response to the September 2016 walkout protesting Lincoln High’s poor physical facilities one parent wrote to the district, “my son was shocked by this walk out today. He texted me in a panic and was so confused. He felt forced to take part in it and felt it was what his teachers wanted since they were with him.”¹⁷ Consider, as well, the sense of “with us or against us” that the Forest Grove student writer called attention to.

Pressure might also come from groups who see themselves as allies of students. Following the election, PPS informed parents that the Portland Police Bureau had approached the district with concerns that organizations like Portland Resistance were encouraging students to participate in protests. For the police, this brought up the issue of safety--particularly given the violence of post-election protests. Portland Police Sergeant Pete Simpson explained that, “Our hope would be that anybody in these events will understand that everybody needs to follow the law, and the kids shouldn’t feel like they can do something against the law because these grownups are doing it.”¹⁸

At the same time, claims that adults have unduly influenced student protesters should be treated with a healthy degree of skepticism. Walkout opponents frequently use this tactic to undermine students’ standing as political actors and delegitimize students’ own arguments. Students are aware of this, and often fight back eloquently. As one PPS student lamented during the walkout supporting teachers’ contract negotiations, “It saddens me that people think the teachers’ union is using us as pawns. I would hope that they had more trust in the youth. I go to school with some of the most brilliant people I’ve ever met, and I wish they could realize that.”¹⁹

Finally, student demonstrations typically provoke parental reactions as varied and intense as reactions of students. Some parents believe that students have the right to speak out, and express pride in their children’s political activism. The mother of a 12-year-old anti-Trump protester, for example, affirmed that “it's really important for them to learn how to express themselves and voice their opinion.”²⁰ After the Astor K-8 march, similarly, a father shared that he was “proud of the kids for protesting the right way and wanting more for their education.”²¹

On the other hand, other community members question students’ capacity to understand the political context, and draw a line about the issues they should be allowed to protest given their age. Others question students’ motivations for participating in school walkouts, suspecting students of getting involved just as an excuse to skip class. They also critique protest as antithetical to civic education. One parent posted about the November protest: “High School Students are children! Our child attends PPS and the teachers even talk of the ‘value’ of protesting. It is absolutely ridiculous! We are a Nation of Laws! Portland looks to be a city of poorly educated crybabies!”²²

Handling of Recent Walkouts: Considerations and Effects

PPS district and school-level officials have tried a variety of responses to student demonstrations, including physically preventing students from walking out of school. During the 2016 September walkout

over school conditions at Lincoln High and other PPS schools, the district approved a lockout at Benson High School. As over 800 Lincoln High students approached Benson and called on students to join their protest, they were met by school resource officers and posted signs reading “No one In. No one Out.” Officials justified the lockout on the grounds of student safety.²³ As the Assistant Superintendent put it: “600 students out in the streets created panic in many of us.” School leaders were simply unsure what they should do: “we have not been trained in what to do in situations where so many students are in the streets during a walkout and the liability in which we put ourselves and the District if someone gets hurt.”²⁴

The lockout was criticized by students, parents and other activist groups as a “rash and unnecessary action” that “violated the civil liberties of Benson students.”²⁵ Community members also noted telling racial and economic differences between the two schools--Lincoln is predominantly White, while Benson has many students of color--and raised suspicions that this factored into how prospective student protesters were treated. Even a school board member declared, “It gives every appearance that the district was allowing the students at our wealthiest and whitest school to stage a walkout and a cross-city protest [...] but when it comes to one of our poorest and most diverse schools, the response is a lockout and a police line.”²⁶

Still, safety remained a compelling concern for district officials. In November, having been informed of planned demonstrations for the days after the election, PPS sent an email to parents recognizing “the right of students to demonstrate regarding their beliefs and concerns” but also pointing out that “the safest place for students is in school engaged in their classes.” While not going as far as another lockout, PPS also declared that students who walked out would receive unexcused absences, that K-8 and middle school students should remain in class unless a guardian checked them out, and that students protesting would be responsible for their own safety. They also made it clear that because the walkouts were not district-sanctioned nor school-sponsored events, no staff should participate in them.²⁷

School districts elsewhere around the country, however, have taken much more supportive approaches to student walkouts. In response to post-election school walkouts by middle and high school students, for example, the Des Moines, Iowa, school board emphasized students’ rights to free political expression. “[A]s the elected governing body of this school district each of us took an oath right next to this flag to uphold those rights even when it allows for the expression of opinions that differ from our own.” The district thus committed to “not stand in the way of students peacefully expressing their concerns”, and to “support that walkout with limits and boundaries that would better ensure the rights and safety of all of our students.”²⁸

School officials in Seattle also favored supporting student walkouts in the aftermath of the election, although for different reasons. Although students participating in the protest would receive unexcused absences, the district’s spokesperson observed that “Kids are hurting. They do not need to be punished. They need to talk about it.”²⁹ Demonstrations, on this account, provided an outlet for student expression that district leaders valued, but could not necessarily accommodate within its schools. In line with that position, the district also declared that school staff should observe the student demonstrations “for safety and security reasons.”³⁰ This corresponds with recommendations from the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center, which notes that school personnel can monitor student safety, mediate between students and law enforcement and other first responders, and help defuse demonstrations.³¹

PPS and Future Walkouts

If anything, the Benson High lockout in September 2016 proved to PPS leaders that they needed to rethink district policy about student demonstrations. Lincoln High's principal thought the events signaled the need for "common protocols, guidance and support when handling these issues to ensure that students are treated equally and equitably across our city."³² After the incident PPS' Interim Superintendent wrote a letter to students committing to a review of the district's planning, policies and communications for similar cases.

In parallel to this practical need to revisit the district's position and handling of student walkouts, over the course of the last months, momentum for further student activism and demonstrations continues to build. The Portland Student Action Network (PSAN), noting the increasing political energy among students, has declared on the group's Facebook page their intent to develop a "long-term movement making tangible change on a local level."³³ They have issued a 35-point list of demands that covers discipline reform, action against bigotry in schools, and affordable health care, among other concerns. PSAN is already planning events--including walkouts--for the near future. They will likely be joined by other student organizations both in PPS and around the country, as students in over 20 states planned and carried out school walkouts in the weeks following Trump's election alone.

This continued push for student activism in a context of policy uncertainty presents an ongoing dilemma. Knowing that some students plan for more walkouts and demonstrations in the future, what should district and school level officials in PPS (and around the country) do? How should district leaders set priorities when it comes to ensuring students' political freedom, emotional safety, and physical well-being? How should educators balance students' civic learning against other short- and long-term academic goals?

¹ This case is constructed from real events. Names, dates, figures and quotations have been collected from online media sources. We are deeply thankful for the work of The Oregonian/OregonLive, OPB, Willamette Week, KGW.com Portland, Portland Mercury, the Portland Tribune, FightBack!News, KOIN 6, the Seattle Times, King 5 Seattle, and Seattle Wishesh.

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