

# School Safety and Crisis

## Responding to Civil Unrest in Schools: Prevention to Response

Freedom of speech and the ability to assemble and protest are core values and Constitutionally protected rights in the United States. Throughout our history, they have been a key element in the nation's response to issues concerning injustice, repression, abuse of power, and demand for social and political action. Students and young people have long been involved in—and even the driving force behind—these movements, as we have seen recently with gun violence, climate change, and systemic racism. While students have a right to exercise free speech, schools have a responsibility to ensure safety and maintain the integrity of the learning environment.

As such, school and district administration must prepare for the potential of civil unrest both in the community and at school (e.g., walkouts, sit-ins, protests), and to prevent or mitigate the impact of protests that might turn violent. School leaders should work with students who want to organize protests or walk outs, provide options for safe ways to protest, and remind students and parents of policies and any consequences for unexcused absences. School leaders should review crisis response protocols and plans for the possibility of community protests that result in violence. School psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals should be involved in planning and implementation of this work.

### PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

Members of your school community may feel compelled to engage in civil unrest or protests in response to a particular incident or a series of incidents. Having a school climate where ALL students feel safe and secure in the ability to have their thoughts and feelings heard respectfully is foundational to honoring students' freedom of speech while also trying to channel their concerns into actions that don't result in unsafe or unmanageable disruptions during the school day. It is critical that school leaders listen carefully to students' concerns and develop plans to address them. The strategies outlined below can help educators reinforce resilient behavior, adaptive coping, and constructive approaches to debriefing current events in ways that support the entire school community. The key to each of these strategies is to use empathy to understand first before being understood.

- ***Review culture and climate assessment data to look for information on student connectedness to the school.*** Of particular importance, an analysis of disaggregated data may help assist schools to better understand how various groups in the school are perceiving connectedness. Examine areas of strength and improvement to help students feel safe and connected to the school.
- ***Consider the effects of past traumatic events that have impacted the community and/or student population.*** This includes specific events that directly impacted the school community, such as a natural disaster or school shooting, and historical events that have shaped community perceptions of current events. Examples of the latter can include incidents of discrimination, prejudice, and injustices that have impacted minoritized communities. And it is increasingly common that individuals feel the need to engage in civil unrest or protests in response high profile events in other parts of the country, such as the death of George Floyd. This is especially true if members of the community identify with a perceived injustice that has occurred due to shared traumatic experiences.
- ***Integrate conversations of current events into content covered in the school curriculum.*** This might include discussing current events in Social Studies, History, or English Language Arts courses. When engaging in this dialogue, school staff need to be aware of students' developmental level, community trauma histories,

and the current level of stress in the staff and student body. Curriculum staff can provide guidance regarding the lessons and desired learning outcomes and provide support to teachers on how to have difficult conversations with students.

- ***Provide opportunities for students to discuss current events with trusted adults in the school.*** Having structured community circles during designated times of the school day to allow students to share how they are feeling and how they want to take action against the perceived injustice. This [student lesson plan](#) is an example of how to have conversations with students using a social justice lens.
- ***Provide opportunities for the staff to share their thoughts on current events and how they can support students when conversations arise in school.*** Regardless of personal opinions, school staff members can learn strategies to help students discuss controversial current events in constructive ways.
- ***Have structured discussions about activism and how students can engage in efforts that result in social change.*** Discuss historical events in which youth-led movements have had an impact (e.g., civil rights, school desegregation, immigration reform, LGBTQI2-S rights). Brainstorm ways they can transform their passion and feelings into concrete action. For example, by educating others, creating public awareness campaigns that include social media, and contacting elected officials.
- ***Stop any type of verbal or physical harassment or bullying immediately.*** Issues that spur the desire to protest are inherently fraught and emotionally charged, often with starkly differing viewpoints. Make clear that hateful or intolerant comments—or any comments that are meant to hurt or make others feel threatened, unsafe, or unwelcome—will not be tolerated. Systemically minoritized and marginalized individuals may feel especially at risk. Staff and students should also be mindful of the impact of microaggressions, which may seem less obvious to some yet can be equally hurtful and damaging. Talk to the students involved about the reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity, and provide supports for those who are subject to the bullying. **Reiterate that violence is never a solution to fear or anger and will only cause more harm.**
- ***Discuss responsible civic engagement in person and online.*** Have conversations discussing how easy it is to share misinformation when emotions are running high. Review how to fact check information in order to understand what is accurate before sharing or reposting memes, pictures, articles, posts, and tweets. Remind students to share their thoughts in a respectful manner and to avoid engaging in online arguments with others.

## PREPARATION FOR AND MITIGATION OF CIVIL UNREST

To prepare for and lessen the impact of acts of civil unrest or protests, school Incident Command System (ICS) teams (i.e., leadership of a school crisis team) can consider completing the following in collaboration with their local law enforcement and school building administration officials.

- ***Predesignate areas on school grounds where students can safely protest.***
- ***Set ground rules for activities allowed in areas where students can protest.*** For example, this can include developing and displaying posters or signs that do not violate the student code of conduct.
- ***Determine what levels of physical security may be needed.*** Work with school or district security staff and with law enforcement to determine in advance if security staff and/or law enforcement should be present during a protest. Also determine if officers should be in plain clothes or in law enforcement uniforms.
- ***Determine consequences and remediation for any loss of instructional time.*** Consider the pros and cons of disciplinary action and how it may impact civil unrest. Harsh disciplinary consequences may negatively impact demonstrations and decrease student engagement and feelings of psychological safety.
- ***Develop a plan to engage all families.*** Reinforce school-wide expectations and to communicate empathy regarding the potential impact of current events. It is important to reinforce social justice principles when communicating messages to students, families, and the school community.
- ***Remind students and parents of policies related to unexcused absences.*** Students should not be punished for leaving campus to engage in a protest. Consequences should align with those for any unexcused absence. Similarly, staff should be clear on the school's policy regarding their participation in or active support of protests.

- **Build bridges with student leaders.** Talk with students who may be planning potential demonstrations or civil unrest to understand why they want to protest and how to support safe expressions of their first amendment rights. Work with them to designate times and locations for when and where students can safely express protected speech.
- **Provide psychoeducation.** Educate students and staff regarding the cumulative traumatic impact of current and recent events on individuals who have been marginalized. Have discussions with both staff and students about how such events can make some people feel personally vulnerable or threatened.

## RESPONSE TO CIVIL UNREST

School staff members should follow the procedures listed in their Emergency Operations Plan (EOP; i.e., crisis plan). The following are some tips to follow if your district EOP does not have a civil unrest annex. (An annex is a section or component of an EOP that describes a specific function; e.g., lockdown, shelter-in-place, communications, family reunification, recovery.)

- **Call 911 and request law enforcement support.** Their primary responsibility is to support the de-escalation of any behaviors that may start a riot and to be on the lookout for any individuals who may have a weapon.
- **Notify key departments in your district.** Civil unrest may affect arrival, dismissal, food services, communications, athletics, and more.
- **Engage the necessary functional annexes.** Work with the ICS team and the building staff in case the situation escalates and the building needs to initiate any relevant functional annexes (e.g., shelter-in-place, communications).
- **Manage communications.** Set up communication for consistent intelligence on what is occurring during the civil unrest. Having ICS team members monitoring the events and providing live feedback to the ICS team leaders will assist in flexible, data-based decision making. Be prepared to manage the media.
- **Do not forcibly keep students from leaving the building.** This may increase tension in an already tense situation. Always remember that students have a Constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression. In addition, keeping a large group of students from exiting a building may create an unsafe environment that blocks egress from the building.
- **Be aware of your own biases around the situation.** While you may or may not agree with the reason for the civil unrest, this should not impact your actions and treatment of those who engage in protests or civil unrest. The staff should work to eliminate judgments that the students are “wrong,” “bad,” “trouble-makers,” etc. We must first seek to understand their feelings and demonstrate empathy regarding their desire to protest, demonstrate, or engage in civil unrest. While we must keep students safe, we also must foster a safe and positive school environment now and into the future.
- **Ensure that staff members who are monitoring the civil unrest understand their role.** Have a discussion ahead of time regarding the need for them to remain calm and nonjudgmental, and to keep in mind the best interests of the students throughout the situation. Staff should work to de-escalate student behaviors and monitor for students or staff members who need crisis intervention support. This includes attending to the students who remain in class/on campus.
- **Provide needed technology.** Equip staff members who are monitoring the civil unrest with the necessary equipment to assist in maintaining safety of those engaged in the demonstrations. This may include two-way radios, fluorescent vests, emergency supplies, or other equipment.
- **Work with transportation services to ensure students can get back to the building safely if they walk off school grounds.** This may include working with local law enforcement to provide traffic duties if individuals are walking in or across the street.
- **Provide mental health and trauma supports if necessary.** If protests turn violent, students could experience psychological trauma requiring intervention or increased supports. In such cases, the school or district crisis response team should be called together to actively conduct psychological triage of students (i.e., check on those students who were physically near the event, check with students who knew others involved, and check with

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students who have preexisting traumas or other known vulnerabilities). Schedule a time within 24 hours of the civil unrest to debrief with school staff, students, and the ICS team. Provide opportunities for students and staff to discuss their thoughts on the demonstrations and what additional steps may need to be taken to achieve their goals. With the ICS team, discuss how the response to the civil unrest went. Write up an After Action Report to assist in making any changes to the response to future civil unrest incidents. Remind those who were involved in monitoring and responding to the civil unrest to engage in self-care.

## RESOURCES

NASP School Safety and Crisis Resources, <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis>

NASP Social Justice Resources, <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice>

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