

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN STUDENT WALKOUTS: BALANCING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY, AND SAFETY

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Abstract: *The case study of the 2016 student walkouts in Portland, Oregon, protesting Donald Trump's election (Riveros and Fernald, n.d.), presents an ethical dilemma for school districts as they balance students' rights to political expression with institutional authority and safety. This paper applies ethical frameworks—deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and theories of justice—to evaluate how school leaders should react to student activism. The analysis concludes that an ethically sound response involves supporting student activism while ensuring that policies are fair, inclusive, and sustainable.*

Introduction

Student activism has been a defining aspect of civic engagement in the United States. From protests against racial segregation in the 1960s to contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter and climate change advocacy, students have consistently made their voices heard in political discourse. The 2016 student walkouts in Portland, Oregon, protesting Donald Trump's election, illustrate the tensions between students' First Amendment rights, school responsibilities, and public order. Undoubtedly, ethics in leadership is a significant issue that warrants discussion. Given this importance, academics must refine their operationalization and theorizing (Van Gils & Van Quaquebeke, 2022). Only then will the field produce research insights that apply to practice. This paper explores the ethical dilemmas inherent in these protests and proposes a balanced ethical response that upholds students' rights while maintaining educational continuity and safety.

II. Ethical Issues in the Case

Freedom of speech and institutional authority is one of the primary problems, as students have the right to political expression, but schools must ensure that learning environments remain functional. The majority of these issues have historically centered on the presentation of ideas that were deemed subversive because they were in opposition to the dominant political, ecclesiastical, and economic institutions and beliefs (Stjernfelt & Lauritzen, 2019). For the sake of public safety, freedom of expression must inevitably be restricted to some degree during times of conflict. Besides, the legal framework establishes that student speech is protected as long as it does not disrupt school operations.

Another matter is connected with safety and well-being. In other words, walkouts pose logistical challenges, including concerns over student safety when they leave campus. The U.S. government budget for the fiscal year 2022 allocated \$1 billion to five different school safety initiatives; however, there is currently no conclusive evidence that these programs and

expenditures are accomplishing their intended goals (Bergeron, 2023). The responsibility of schools to supervise minors conflicts with students' autonomy to engage in political protest. Lastly, precedent and consistency can also be viewed as significant issues. If schools allow protests on one issue. Ensuring that policies are consistently applied regardless of political stance is crucial for maintaining fairness.

III. Stakeholders and Their Values

Each stakeholder in the debate over student walkouts carries distinct ethical concerns that reflect broader moral frameworks. For students, the desire to engage politically and advocate for change aligns with Kantian ethics, which emphasizes acting according to moral duty (Freeman et al., 2008). Their activism also resonates with virtue ethics, as it fosters civic responsibility and personal growth (Zagzebski, 2023).

Parents, too, face ethical dilemmas. Some support their children's activism, reflecting the ethics of care, which prioritizes relational responsibilities and the well-being of loved ones (Starratt, 1991). Additionally, teachers, as facilitators of knowledge, face their own ethical tensions. Their professional obligations call for fostering student engagement, yet they must also manage disruptions that affect instructional time. This dilemma reflects a balance between professional ethics, which emphasize student development (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2022), and practical considerations tied to classroom effectiveness. By analyzing these perspectives through ethical theories, we can better understand the moral complexities of student walkouts. Ethical leadership in this context requires balancing institutional responsibilities with a commitment to civic education, ensuring that all voices are acknowledged while maintaining the integrity of the learning environment.

IV. Ethical Frameworks and Application

As I analyze this issue through various ethical lenses, I find that different perspectives lead to different conclusions. Deontologists contend that if an action is performed out of a sense of obligation, it is ethically correct (Freeman et al., 2008). I recognize that schools have a moral duty to both protect students and respect their rights. However, enforcing strict policies without considering context feels rigid and unfair.

Weighing the benefits of student activism against the costs of disruption, I wonder whether the long-term impact of fostering engaged citizens outweighs the short-term inconveniences to school operations. Leaders who believe that their choices are morally right if they benefit the majority of their followers are known as utilitarians (Richard, 2019). They also believe that people must be prepared to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society as a whole and that general laws can be disregarded if doing so would result in a greater good. The field of ethics is broad and philosophical.

Since judgments and the application of ethics are extremely situational, there is no one correct ethical standard for resolving organizational issues.

If schools are meant to shape ethical leaders, then supporting peaceful protest aligns with the virtues of courage, integrity, and justice. In contrast to wrong actions, which violate traditional values like compassion, generosity, loyalty, temperance, courage, truth-telling, and practical wisdom, the violation of a right is a significant violation of justice that calls for the involvement of the law (Zagzebski, 2023). Although moral and intellectual virtues have been

studied by empirical psychologists and incorporated into school curricula in recent decades, it is uncommon for political commentators to use these qualities as a framework for public discourse.

Reflecting on fairness, I see the importance of ensuring that school responses are applied consistently across all political viewpoints. Adopting equity is a fundamental business philosophy, not just a trend (Bosco, 2022). By addressing the underlying causes of injustice and conflict, this viewpoint aims to bring about long-lasting change while acknowledging the interconnection of all persons within the system (Berges-Puyó, 2022). Therefore, creating an environment where justice and fairness are achievable for everyone, regardless of identity, is essential if school administrators wish to address the difficulties and problems that every educational institution faces.

V. Considering Alternatives

One alternative is a strict punitive response, where schools enforce suspensions or truancy penalties for walkouts. While this approach may discourage disruptions, it raises ethical concerns as it suppresses civic engagement and discourages students from participating in political discourse. A harsh punitive reaction might create a chilling effect, discouraging students from expressing their views even outside of school, which contradicts the educational mission of fostering critical thinking and civic responsibility.

Another possibility is a fully permissive approach, allowing unrestricted protests without any consequences. This alternative supports students' rights to political expression but could lead to frequent disruptions and inconsistencies in how school policies are enforced. If students perceive that protests are always tolerated, they may engage in walkouts more frequently, potentially interfering with the learning environment. Additionally, if schools allow some protests but not others, it could introduce biases that undermine institutional integrity.

In recent decades, this social movement perspective on student collective action—which was arguably best developed theoretically in the United States following the 1960s—has been applied to protests in Europe and other places, but it has tended to undervalue one potentially important actor type: formally organized, relatively stable, and frequently representative student organizations (Proteasa & Andreescu, 2019). A more balanced approach, which I find the most ethically sound, is for schools to permit student protests within structured guidelines. This could include designated protest areas, student-led discussions, or scheduled times that minimize disruptions to instruction. Such a model acknowledges students' rights to engage in civic activism while ensuring that learning remains a priority. This approach also opens avenues for dialogue between students and educators, allowing schools to foster a culture of civic responsibility rather than outright opposition to student movements.

VI. Recommended Course of Action

After deep reflection, I believe that the most ethical approach is one that acknowledges students' right to protest while maintaining school order. Schools should develop structured policies that provide designated areas and times for peaceful protest and encourage student-led discussions about civic engagement. Evidence-based policies are essential to the operation of modern schools (Allen et al., 2021). In addition to its regulatory purposes, policies may

establish high standards for instruction and learning as well as chances for genuine interaction between communities, staff, and students. They should also offer alternative forms of activism, such as petitions or structured forums within school grounds.

VII. Implementation and Reflection

As a school leader, I would implement policies that strike a balance between protecting students' right to free expression and maintaining institutional stability. Recognizing that civic engagement is an essential component of democratic education, I would create structured opportunities for students to voice their concerns through organized forums, town halls, and classroom discussions. This approach would not only ensure that student activism remains constructive but also foster a culture of dialogue rather than disruption. At the same time, I would work closely with educators, parents, and district leaders to establish clear guidelines on when and how student demonstrations can occur without unduly interfering with the learning environment.

To measure the success of these policies, I would assess whether student concerns are being acknowledged and addressed through meaningful, ongoing dialogue with school leadership. Gathering feedback from students, parents, and educators would be a critical part of this process, ensuring that policies are enforced equitably and that no group feels disproportionately silenced or penalized. This feedback could be collected through surveys, focus groups, and public forums, allowing school administrators to refine policies as needed.

Additionally, I would advocate for restorative rather than punitive approaches to discipline, particularly in response to student protests. Studies have shown that harsh disciplinary measures, such as suspensions, disproportionately impact marginalized students and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2011). Instead of relying on punitive policies, schools should provide students with alternative, civic-oriented means of engagement, such as policy debates, structured advocacy projects, and community service initiatives. This is particularly important in low-income neighborhoods, where overpolicing and zero-tolerance policies have historically exacerbated inequalities in education.

Furthermore, I would carefully evaluate the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in managing student demonstrations. SROs, as law enforcement personnel assigned to schools, are tasked with advancing "safety and crime prevention in schools" (Renbarger et al., 2022). However, their presence has raised concerns about the criminalization of student behavior, especially in communities of color (Nance, 2016). Instead of relying on law enforcement to handle student activism, I would prioritize training for school staff on conflict resolution, de-escalation strategies, and restorative justice practices.

Finally, recognizing that social and political climates are constantly evolving, I would commit to regularly reassessing and refining school policies to reflect contemporary issues. Education should prepare students to engage critically with the world around them, and school leaders must be responsive to the changing landscape of civic engagement. By fostering an environment that encourages constructive activism while maintaining institutional integrity, schools can support students in becoming responsible and engaged citizens.

Conclusion

Analyzing the case study on the Portland student walkouts, I recognize that ethical decision-making in educational leadership is rarely clear-cut. Schools exist not only to impart knowledge but also to cultivate engaged and thoughtful citizens. Professionals should respect people's rights while simultaneously meeting the legitimate information demands of a vast and complex society (Pandiani et al., 1998). By supporting structured activism rather than suppressing it, schools can model ethical leadership and prepare students for responsible civic participation. Encouraging dialogue rather than punishment ensures that student activism remains a valuable learning experience rather than a source of conflict. I firmly believe that ethical education should not only take place in the classroom but also in how schools respond to real-world issues. Any school must have a strong ethic of justice at its core, giving its leadership a moral compass to use when making decisions and fostering a moral school culture (Berges-Puyó, 2022). This case challenges me to think critically about how institutions navigate complex ethical dilemmas, and I am left with a deeper appreciation for the delicate balance between order and justice.

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