



A Message to School Administrators About the Recent Student “Walkouts” for Immigration Reform

As the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, NCLR is deeply committed to increasing the civic engagement and political participation of the Latino community, today and over the long term. We understand why students were among the more than one million people nationwide who have chosen to participate in peaceful demonstrations calling for real solutions to fix our broken immigration system.

For that reason, we are asking students to exercise leadership in their schools in a way that will build the long-term empowerment of the community. We do *not* encourage continued walkouts and believe it is imperative that students return to class. Furthermore, we believe that future student demonstrations should take place after school, on weekends, or in accordance with school rules (such as a school-sanctioned debate or event). The student walkouts were not part of a single coordinated nationwide effort. Rather, this phenomenon was the result of a combination of organized and spontaneous activity. It is not surprising that many students took it upon themselves to make a statement in some way to express their passion about this issue and used the example set by activists in 1968 which was recently featured in the HBO film *Walkout*.

We understand your challenges as administrators in maintaining order in your schools and addressing the problem of repeated absences resulting from these walkouts. It is important for students to realize that there are consequences for their actions, and we recognize your duty as school authorities to respond to students’ actions and restore order. Civil disobedience often has run counter to existing law – for example, workers who go on strike many times lose their wages and sometimes their jobs; civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s were often jailed. In truly embracing a cause, those engaging in civil disobedience affirmatively agree to face the consequences for their actions. It should be no different with these students.

We encourage you to shift the situation into a positive, “teachable moment,” rather than escalating confrontations. However controversial their strategy has been, the goal of the majority of students is to ensure a better life for their families and communities. Raising this point may provide a useful context for your response, rather than simply provoking resentment from the students upon the issuance of punishment.

We urge that your response, if punishment is deemed necessary, be a constructive one, such as assigning students to perform community service. Such a course serves a larger purpose, providing assistance to community-based groups, while connecting students more deeply to their communities and to other ways of contributing and participating. In addition, if you choose to require students to make up for missed academic work, we encourage you to incorporate relevant lessons from history and current events. For example:

- Viewing and discussing the movie *Walkout*, a new HBO film which chronicles the 1968 student walkouts in East Los Angeles and represents a decisive moment in the Latino civil rights movement. The film teaches important lessons about the value and consequences of taking action, the importance of engaging in organized efforts, and building community ties.
- Profiling the life of farmworker icon Cesar Chavez, a disciple of nonviolent civil disobedience, whose life offers important lessons about the sacrifices activists must endure.
- Studying the acclaimed PBS *¡Chicano!* series, which documents some of the early years of the Latino civil rights movement. Comparing and contrasting that era with today’s environment offers rich opportunities for cognitive academic development.
- Discussing other civic engagement strategies that students can organize in partnership with their schools to build political awareness and participation. For ideas, visit lideres.nclr.org.

Finally, we call your attention to the Los Angeles Unified School District official correspondence regarding schools’ response to student walkouts. Among the responses it mentions is the assignment of community service. The letter and other information can be found at www.schoolwalkouts.info.

We hope that pursuing constructive responses that heighten the importance of education, as well as promote civic engagement and connect students to their communities, will result in strengthened relationships between students and their schools and transform what could be a divisive situation into a unifying one.