



# Illinois State Board of Education

100 North First Street • Springfield, Illinois 62777-0001  
www.isbe.net

James T. Meeks  
Chairman

Tony Smith, Ph.D.  
State Superintendent of Education

March 1, 2018

Dear Educators,

The tragedy in Parkland, Florida, and other campus tragedies across the nation have activated students to raise their voices in peaceful protest against gun violence, including through school walkouts. It appears that there are at least three major student-led efforts underway, with many Illinois schools expected to participate:

1. **March 14:** Women's March Action for students to [walk out of school](#) for 17 minutes at 10 a.m.
2. **March 24:** March for Our Lives [rally in Washington, D.C.](#), and local communities
3. **April 20:** [National School Walkout](#) for students across nation in local districts

This is a moment to support students' constitutional right to free expression and peaceful assembly, while ensuring safety and creating the conditions for teaching and learning.

There are many resources available to help guide your approach at the local level. Our colleagues at the Council for Chief State School Officers have [compiled this step-by-step guide](#) to help create a respectful, compassionate, and safe environment for students and staff. You may also want to review this complementary guidance from the [National School Boards Association](#).

- **Make a plan:** It is important to engage student activists, educators, and the community to create a safe and inclusive place for peaceful assembly, while being respectful of those who may not want to participate or who have opposing views.
- **Use this as a teachable moment:** Our school communities can turn freedom of expression and activism into teachable moments for students. When students are passionate about an issue, educators have an opportunity to help them see the connection between what they are learning in school and beyond. This is true with our middle and elementary students as well and we encourage authentic engagement and discussion across grade levels.
- **Prepare your staff in advance:** Support your teachers and staff with guidance that addresses walkouts and demonstrates how to appropriately and respectfully approach a situation if a student walks out in the middle of class.
- **Communicate clearly with all stakeholders:** Fully inform students and families when you know an event may be planned and once an event takes place. In addition, be transparent with students, families, teachers, and staff about how your school/district will handle absences if a student chooses to walk out. Here are some [helpful communications templates](#) the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools provided to its local school principals and have offered to share.

Civic engagement and students' freedom of expression should be valued and heard. We encourage you to utilize this activism as a teaching moment and work in partnership with students and teachers to foster safe and open dialogue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tony Smith".

Tony Smith, Ph.D.  
State Superintendent of Education