



WALK ON — McLean Students walk out of classes to protest the lack of gun control on March 1, 2018. The nationwide March for Our Lives movement sparked in response to the Parkland school shooting in Florida in 2018. (Photo by Maren Kranking)

SUPPORTING FUTURE CHANGEMAKERS

FCPS allows excused absences for civic engagements

MARINA QU NEWS EDITOR

Fairfax County went viral on Instagram and Twitter on Dec. 19, 2019, when students reposted *Washington Post* and *CNN* coverage of a new FCPS policy.

The school board announced that it will allow one day of excused absences for students who wish to engage in civic activism. This is one of the first policies of its kind in the country, which went into effect on Jan. 27, 2020.

Upon hearing about this change from news outlets and celebrities' Instagram posts, FCPS students shared the news on social media, showcasing their pride.

"I saw on Snapchat that 'Stay Tuned' had done a story about [this policy], and I freaked out that this was getting national attention," junior Claire Akard said. "I loved seeing everyone repost. [Leonardo DiCaprio posted—it's so crazy that celebrities know about what's happening in Fairfax County.]"

Proposed by school board member emeritus Ryan McElveen, the policy acknowledges the rise in student activists and public education's responsibility to train students to participate in democratic society.

"We've certainly seen over the past several years how students are making their voices heard, and this [protocol] provided an opportunity for us to build on that student engagement and formalize a process through which they can make their voices heard," McElveen said.

From protesting in the Fridays for Future youth climate strikes to lobbying in Congress, students in Fairfax County have taken

advantage of their close proximity to D.C., which provides an accessible platform for students to express their opinions regarding political and social issues.

"Social activism is a great opportunity for us to learn about real policies and advocate for change," said Akard, who has protested in the March for Life in past years.

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- BRITTANY PENG JUNIOR

In 2018, then-junior Kimya Shirazi arranged a walkout at McLean in response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. This walkout received full coverage on *ABC 7*, but due to the lack of civic engagement policies at the time, she experienced backlash.

"I was told if I went through with the planning, then every account of another student cutting class or causing a disruption as a result of the walkout I planned would be my responsibility," Shirazi said.

Shirazi said she believes McLean students' activism helped to bring about this new FCPS policy. Politically involved McLean students participated in demonstrations like the March for Our Lives and Women's March

and lobbied in Richmond even prior to the passage of the excused absence policy.

"We ensured there was news coverage every time [we walked out]; consequently, no one could really argue with what we were doing because it had gained so much attention," Shirazi said. "I'm really proud of McLean students because we paved the path for future school districts to follow FCPS's example."

At the time of the school walkouts, each school implemented a different policy on how to handle the students' absences. Afterwards,

in 2019, McElveen introduced the idea of civic engagement absences to the school board.

"The issue we're trying to solve with this policy is that some FCPS schools allow civic activities to be excused absences while others do not. So, this very explicitly gives every student one day a year," McElveen said.

Under the revision of FCPS Regulation 2234, secondary school students could receive one partial day off per school year to take part in community actions and social activism.

"It's a 'personal things absence,' but you just have to check in at school once that day. We have to deal with accreditation issues in state based on student absenteeism, so we don't want this to be considered a full-day absence, but in essence [it] is a full day," McElveen said.

Some students hoped the policy would allow multiple excused days, but they see the importance of not abusing the new guidelines.

"I think the one day policy is supposed to encourage students to stay in school as much as possible and only skip school when it's something super important to you," Akard said.

Similar to other pre-arranged absences, students who wish to participate in social engagement activities are required to submit a form two days in advance to prove that the activity is taking place.

"If you guys follow the rules and get your pre-arranged absence, and you believe that [social activism is] something that you're committed to, I hope that you do it," Principal Ellen Reilly said.

While passionate students are looking forward to engaging in society outside of classroom, Reilly stresses the importance of remembering public schools' primary responsibility: guaranteeing student safety and ensuring classroom instruction.

"When we hear absences, administrators are like, 'What about class? What are students going to miss? How much work are they going to miss? And then how are they going to make it up?' So it causes all those problems," Reilly said. "But I hope that [students can] advocate for themselves and be able to share their thoughts."

To many civically active students, this change in policy relieves their stress about class absences being unexcused.

"I'm truly thrilled that I get to participate in protests and marches without fear that my grades will drop," Akard said.

Students think the policy will help them become responsible community leaders.

"FCPS is recognizing how powerful the youth's voice is," junior Brittany Peng said. "They also recognize that we are capable of amassing power to incite changes in our communities and lead our society to be just, inclusive and empowering. FCPS is setting an example for all school counties to follow in enabling their students to becoming rising civic leaders."

Despite students' overwhelming praise for the policy, others recognize that protesting under this regulation is no longer a form of civil disobedience.

"To a certain degree, [the policy] devalues the true meaning of protesting. Most successful protests in history cause a disruption and face resistance. It's why they gain attention and capture people's drive to ignite change," Shirazi said. "But regardless, it's a step in the right direction, and I'm glad it happened. It's for the best."

In the coverage in *The Washington Post*, the FCPS policy towards excused absence was described as a "conservative backlash." McElveen doesn't see it this way.

"The article from *The Washington Post* and elsewhere cash this in as a conservative versus liberal issue, which I completely disagree with,"

McElveen said. "I think no matter where you are in the political spectrum, you'll be able to take advantage of this [policy]. We've really crafted the policy language so that it's as broad as possible, and we are not choosing some activities over others."

Peng highlights the importance of political engagement and its effects on the future of the younger generation.

"We have to know what's going on. Not only do we have to know what's going on, we have to care about what's going on," Peng said. "The decisions coming out of D.C. affect every American, especially when our political climate is so polarized. We all have a place in our democracy and, therefore, a stake in our society."

42% of students are willing to participate in civic engagement activities **even if they are unexcused**



79% of students are willing to participate in civic engagement activities **when they are excused**



86% of students believe they have **the power to impact society**

*Data obtained from a poll of 209 McLean students