

Dozens of school walkouts are planned Wednesday in Utah to mark the Florida shooting. Here's what you should know about participating

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On Wednesday at 10 a.m. MST, students in Utah and around the country will walk out of their classes to memorialize victims of last month's mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.

Though part of a national campaign, the events are decentralized and student-led, with motivations ranging from wanting to show solidarity with survivors to criticism of the nation's gun ownership laws or calling for enhanced safety measures on school campuses.



An email circulated Friday by Utah officials with the American Civil Liberties Union estimated that upwards of 30 schools along the Wasatch Front, nearly all of them high schools, were likely to have students participating in the 17-minute walkout — one minute for each of the Florida students killed.

Another walkout, dubbed March for Our Lives, is proposed for March 24.

Whatever the reasons Utah students may choose to join in Wednesday's events, here's what they should know before they do:

Will I get expelled or suspended?

In some states, notably Texas, school administrators have drawn headlines for taking a zero-tolerance approach to the walkout, threatening automatic suspension or expulsion for participating students.

But in Utah, school districts are largely accommodating the demonstrations. In many cases, officials have designated areas on campus to host the events, and students have been reassured they will not face academic consequences for leaving class to participate.

Jeff Haney, spokesman for Canyons School District, said in a written statement that the district is neutral on the walkouts. But Haney added that Wednesday and April 20 — the anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre — have been selected as days when students can participate in demonstrations without repercussions.

“Every effort has been made to identify safe spaces for students to express themselves,” he said. “Local law enforcement agencies have been notified so they can provide security. Parents also are encouraged to discuss this issue with their children and arrive at a joint decision about participation.”

While education is compulsory in Utah, the state’s laws regarding attendance are relatively lax and allow parents broad latitude for excusing absences.

“If students choose to not return to class after the walkouts, that will be treated as any other absence,” said Yandary Chatwin, spokeswoman for Salt Lake City School District.

What about teachers?

In many cases, students organizing walkouts in Utah have invited government representatives and members of the public to participate as well.

“We think it’s important that high schoolers speak up about this issue that impacts us deeply,” Sarah Stone, a student at Corner Canyon High School student, said in a news release announcing the Draper school’s demonstration. “We expect accountability from our leaders, for whom we will soon be voting.”

But teachers have responsibilities on campus that could impede them from joining their students. Vicki Olsen, president of the Jordan Education Association, sent an email to union members warning that school employees could face professional consequences if they walk out.

“The official word from district administrators is that teachers should remain in their classrooms and continue to teach even if your students choose to walk out,” Olsen wrote. Sandra Riesgraf, Jordan School District spokeswoman, said the concern is related to classrooms being left unsupervised.

“Because of this, we welcome teachers who want to participate in the walkout to plan ahead and take a personal day so that we can arrange for their classes to be covered,” Riesgraf said.

“Any consequences will be handled on a case-by-case basis.”

Do I have to walk out?

Schools are also making preparations for students who elect not to participate in Wednesday’s demonstration, or those who choose to commemorate the event without engaging in protests. In Salt Lake City School District, Chatwin said alternative events are being planned, like a “Week of Friendship” in which students are encouraged to befriend 17 peers, in memory of the 17 Parkland victims.

“We will support any and all students who choose to participate,” Chatwin said, “as well as students who choose not to.”

Because the demonstrations are student-led, most Utah school districts have encouraged campus administrators to work with organizers on individual plans. As a result, the scenarios vary from designated areas for the walkouts to incorporating the events into the school day through classroom moments of silence or schoolwide assemblies on friendship and inclusion. And, at other schools, it will mean simply that some students migrate outside at 10 a.m. while their peers continue with their lessons.

“The primary focus in Jordan School District is on classroom instruction and student safety,” Riesgraf said. “That is why it will be business as usual for all schools on planned walkout days.”