

Students Stage Walkout to Demand Safer Schools and Covid-19 Protections

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Students in Washington, D.C., are taking a stand to demand change from D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) amid a wave of nationwide protests. Dressed in red for education, high schoolers from some of the district's top public schools walked out of class in protest Tuesday afternoon to push for safer schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The protest is the latest in a wave of walkouts by students in cities across the nation, including in Chicago, the nation's third largest school district; Denver and Oakland. Days after some students walked out of school in Montgomery County, Maryland, which borders D.C., the district's students held their own walkout and virtual rally over Zoom.

Brianna Stallings, a senior at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, helped organize the D.C. protest, which was started by a group called Students 4 Safe Learning. Brianna and other participants said they don't feel safe in school. They want their schools to ensure COVID protocols are in place, including 100% testing for students and staff, KN95 mask distribution and the option for virtual schooling.

"We united over the fact that we didn't feel safe in school and believe that DCPS could do a lot more to protect us," Stallings told CBS News' Natalie Brand. Stallings also said she has to be cautious around her 81-year-old grandmother and mother with pre-existing conditions.

"My grandmother... [is] ... scared for me to come home from school," Stallings said. "I would never forgive myself if I brought something home and affected my family."

The student protesters say if they don't have safer conditions at school, DCPS should return to remote learning until the spread of the virus is under control. In the virtual rally held after the walkout, one Banneker student on the Zoom call said that her sibling, who also attends Banneker, contracted COVID recently and when they were quarantining at home she wasn't given remote-learning assignments. The student said she did her schoolwork by herself but fell behind.

"D.C. was just saying like: take the test. If you're negative, come back," the student said. "And that to me didn't really feel like a safe option [compared to other school districts]."

Parents and civil rights organizations on the virtual call praised the student participants for speaking out. On its Instagram account, @students4safelearning outlined seven key changes it wants to see the city's leaders make in schools:

- Weekly testing for 100% of students and staff
- Accurate COVID data reporting
- Safer meal times/spaces
- Provide KN95 & N95 masks
- Transition to virtual learning amid the latest surge
- COVID protocols & HVAC ventilation systems
- Weekly deep cleaning
- Virtual learning option for all families

Stallings said the group is waiting on a response from DCPS. But the movement doesn't stop with students. Last week, teachers at D.C.'s Anacostia High School removed themselves from the classroom for a day due to safety concerns stemming from the city's violence and also its COVID surge.

The walkouts come as a growing number of states face political infighting over school policies. In nearby Virginia, newly elected Governor Glenn Youngkin is facing a lawsuit from seven school districts after he issued an executive order giving parents the choice to opt out of having their kids wear masks at school.

Many believe teacher attrition is increasing, and a recent survey suggests more are thinking of leaving the profession than before the pandemic. Virginia's 2021 Teacher of the Year, Anthony Swann, says policies like Youngkin's mask reversal are pushing some educators to the edge.

"School safety is being politicized," Swann said. "Teachers are being pushed away from the profession."

Natalie Brand contributed to this report.

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