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An Open Letter to Nebraska School Leaders:

Dear Superintendent,

This week, students across Nebraska and the nation will flex their civic muscles, many of them for the first time. Many students will leave their classes to express concerns about ensuring a safe learning environment, the reasonable regulation of firearms and to commemorate the loss of 17 students and teachers last month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. On behalf of the ACLU of Nebraska we urge you to support them as they do so.

The greatness of this nation relies on the participation of all of us. You are in a unique position to foster this emerging democratic engagement and direct your students into productive action. The lessons learned this week, this month, and this year will follow your students throughout their lives.

Please recognize this for what it is – a rare opportunity for an interactive lesson in participatory democracy. Keep in mind that you are not the first to face these decisions: you stand in the same shoes school administrators wore during the civil rights movement – a movement that is today regarded as a model for teaching students about civic engagement. Reading about it pales in comparison to living it. So, please find ways to let this new generation live it.

I and most of the ACLU of Nebraska staff attended Nebraska public schools; we know the great work our Nebraska teachers and administrators do across the state. We want this generation of students to look back and remember this as the unique moment in time when they were first able to apply their classroom lessons to real life. We encourage you to act with good will and view students' actions in the spirit of an educational moment.

We understand the pressures you face – you work under many burdens: you have an education to transmit and you must keep students safe. But bear in mind, you cannot punish students for exercising their civil rights. Silencing the voices of your students just as they find them breeds the sort of cynicism that has lead two thirds



of our citizens to neglect their civic duty to exercise their right to vote. By not teaching them to engage in a healthy debate, you also risk furthering the divide in this nation that so painfully obstructs collaboration.

For many students, the tragedy at Parkland has awakened an American spirit of action. We ask that you resist suppressing that spirit. Instead, we urge you to lead your students to that ideal of the productive, involved, orderly exercise of citizenship. There are so many ways to accomplish this, such as:

- **Allow students to attend demonstrations.** Nebraska state law encourages alternatives to suspension or expulsion whenever possible for a student who is truant, tardy or absent. Neb. Rev. Stat. §79-267. We urge you to exercise your discretion if a student misses a day or a period for a peaceful demonstration. Absence policies should not be used to punish students who are engaged in the educational experience of participatory democracy -- especially when the engagement is all about the need to ensure that they can pursue their education in a safe environment. These kids are literally fighting for their right to an education, and more importantly, their lives through peaceful expressive means.
- **Give clear guidance on expectations.** Ensure that students know what is expected of them and what they can do to voice their opinions. Students should be allowed to peacefully demonstrate, distribute literature and wear any insignia of their protest, such as shirts. Schools may regulate this speech to prevent disruption of education, but keep in mind that this sort of discussion is educational and the students' ability to express their political viewpoints must be respected.
- **Foster healthy debate.** In today's world, too often we are insulated from opposing viewpoints. This is a great opportunity to foster debate in an accepting environment. I urge you to use this opportunity as a teachable moment. You may want to consider setting aside time for assemblies or other events to consider the urgent issues of school safety that students across the country are now focused on. Teach your students what it means to peacefully exercise their First Amendment rights and to argue persuasively, which requires truly understanding opposing views and remaining respectful. And, of course, equally respect students who do not want to join demonstrations or who wish to oppose the most popular views.



In closing, here is a great local model for your consideration: The best way to respond has already been modeled by the Principal of Papillion-LaVista High School's approach; when his students proposed a walkout, he said, "Let's go together" and joined the 17-minute-long walk out. As Principal Jerry Kalina told the Omaha World Herald, "Kids don't need to hear me being upset and mad at them and throwing discipline at them. Kids needed to hear someone who was going to be comforting, caring, loving and hey, we'll get through this, let's go together. Young people's voices need to be heard."

The events planned for this week and next month are a unique educational moment. We urge that you seize it. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to education. We are happy to serve as a resource to you, your teachers, students and parents to the best of our abilities. Please contact us at any time.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Danielle Conrad".

Danielle Conrad, J.D.
Executive Director
ACLU of Nebraska