LESSONS LEARNED
From School Crises and Emergencies

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TA CENTER

RESPONDING TO SCHOOL WALKOUT DEMONSTRATIONS

In March 1968, over 1,000 students walked out of Abraham Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles to protest the racial inequalities in education faced by Mexican-Americans. This action led to a march of 22,000 students across Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and a series of related protests that today is credited with being a catalyst for the modern Chicano movement. Nearly 40 years later, there was another walkout when in 2006 an estimated 24,000 students walked out of 52 LAUSD schools, joining thousands of students nationwide who walked out of schools in protest of federal immigration policy changes.

U.S. history has a strong heritage of walkout demonstrations—from labor protests at the turn of the 20th century to civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s to war protests in the 1970s. The exodus en masse of individuals from a cohesive group for another organized purpose is a familiar concept in times of controversy and discord. This form of expression by any group is often stirring, sometimes effective, and always disruptive. Even more unsettling is when the group walking out is youth—and the place they are walking out of is school.

This publication will examine the incidence of student walkout demonstrations and the various ways in which administrators, school staff, law enforcement, and the community at large can help keep youths safe, while still supporting their desire for self-expression. Lessons learned by the LAUSD from its multiple and varied experiences with student walkouts will provide tools for school districts everywhere to know how to prepare for—and even to prevent or mitigate, respond to, and recover from—student walkout demonstrations. The following strategies are offered to school districts everywhere to consider in the context of their own state and local laws and district policies and procedures as they develop their own plans for responding to student walkout demonstrations.

> *The work that is done before an event is going to give you phenomenal dividends when the event happens.*—Bob Spears, LAUSD director of emergency services

The Event

A walkout is defined as "the act of walking out (of a meeting or organization) as a sign of protest."[1] When a walkout involves students, the "*organization*" they walk out of is school. For the students of LAUSD, several annual events have triggered walkout demonstrations: Cesar Chavez Day, the national immigration awareness event on May 1, and the anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings. However, walkout demonstrations can occur in any school district and for a variety of reasons: in response to a local ordinance or school policy, the firing of a beloved coach or teacher, or even to effect a change in school rules. Walkouts at school are not limited to students; teachers and other school staff may also leave the school in protest, for example, relating to a labor strike.

[1] *walkout*. Dictionary.com. *WordNet*® 3.0. Princeton University. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/walkout (last accessed: Oct. 14, 2008).

> **LESSON LEARNED:** Student walkouts can take place in any school district and for any number of reasons. LAUSD has coped with student walkouts relating to race issues, immigration legislation, and school shooting anniversaries, for examples.

In LAUSD, recent walkout events involved thousands of both middle and high school students leaving school on a specific day and at predetermined times to join other students in a march down city streets along a route that is usually pre-planned. The key distinction between these events and other school emergencies is the nature of these events as *pre-planned*. Student walkouts are rarely spur-of-the-moment events. Thus, concrete steps can be taken by emergency planners to prepare for the event.

Preparedness

Step 1: Collect intelligence on upcoming events and important issues. At the outset of the school year, LAUSD staff, safety personnel, and school police begin monitoring communication among students to collect intelligence on upcoming events or important issues. This includes monitoring of commonly used student communication channels, such as social Web sites on the Internet (Myspace, Facebook), YouTube, and messaging and blogging sites; flyers posted and handed around school grounds; and the activities of student leaders. Once evidence of a planned student walkout has been identified, school district safety personnel should seek verification from school staff, taking care not to feed rumors but only to confirm the accuracy of information.

Step 2: Begin planning response efforts immediately. After it is determined that a walkout event is scheduled, response planning efforts should begin immediately. Sometimes notice of an event is very short, such as when district officials learn that a permit to demonstrate was pulled by a certain activist group only one week before the designated demonstration date. Other times, a district can spend months planning in advance for a walkout demonstration. As with any event, the more notice district staff have to plan, the better.

Step 3: Initiate prevention-mitigation strategies. A key component of this part of the planning process for LAUSD has become the implementation of several **prevention-mitigation** strategies to try and diffuse the walkout event before it even happens, including:

If kids see on TV that another school is walking out, they want to be part of it; but if you give them a venue/ safety valve, their needs are met in another way … This March, because we encouraged campuses to make this an educational event, students chose not to walk out because they had already had their expression.—Sergeant Michael Vargas, former chief of planning and intel, LA Unified School Police

- Creating an educational component around issues of concern.
- Giving students an alternate forum for political expression.
- Persuading students it is not in their best interests to conduct a walkout.
- Scheduling an intervening event to distract or dissuade students from walking out.

Create an educational component around issues of concern. Since many of the LAUSD student walkouts are based on annual events or anniversaries, the district now anticipates these events and their underlying topical issues and distributes relevant lesson plans and activities to district teachers to inspire classroom discussions. The aim is to structure discussions with students around these topics before they become a source of upset or create a need for protest or demonstration.

Give students an alternate forum for political expression. If students are discouraged from or not given the opportunity to express their feelings or ideas around an important issue, they will be more likely to demonstrate as a form of self-expression; however, if they are provided a forum at school specifically to discuss their thoughts, this need for political demonstration may be alleviated. Schools can open their auditoriums or parts of their sporting fields to give students a space and time to conduct their demonstration, discuss their issues, and have their voice on campus.

Persuade students it is not in their best interests to conduct a walkout. Students may be persuaded before a demonstration that it is not in their best interests to walk out. Parents can be informed of the

LESSON LEARNED: In meeting with the walkout event organizers, the school district Emergency Operations Center (EOC) personnel attempt to convey the perspective of the district regarding the walkout of students from school. They share with organizers the value of encouraging youth to stay present in school, discuss safety concerns that might arise in the event, and suggest alternate demonstration activities (e.g., scheduling for after-school hours, holidays, or weekends). This technique has proved successful for LAUSD—fewer organizations attempt to incite student walkouts since these negotiation talks have been included in preparedness activities.

potential for their children to participate in upcoming demonstrations and encouraged to talk to them about why they should not leave school. School officials may also be able to teach students that politically, a walkout is not the best plan. Omar Del Cueto of Garfield High School tells how one year, he helped persuade students from walking out in protest on Cesar Chavez Day. "Before the walkout occurred, I called [the daughter of Cesar Chavez]; she said that the way to honor him was not by skipping school. So I got on the public address system not only to validate [the students'] feelings, and to give credence to their concerns, but to tell them that according to Cesar Chavez's daughter [walking out of school] isn't how he would want his memory honored."

Schedule an intervening event to distract or dissuade students from wanting to walkout. Finally, students may be distracted or dissuaded from participating in a walkout. Students are often inspired to join a walkout demonstration already in motion when they see it proceeding past their school. Thus, if a pre-determined march route is known, a bordering school may plan to conduct a lockdown drill to distract students at the corresponding time. This way, students will be inside the school building and not able to see and join the procession.

Students may also be dissuaded from participating in the walkout if there is a special incentive to stay at school. For example, one school official recommends creating an enticing lunch menu option for the day of the walkout or scheduling an important school event—like the announcement of prom candidates.

Step 4: Bring all relevant and interested parties to the planning table. While prevention-mitigation strategies are being implemented with the aim of diffusing the demonstration, walkout response planning should still continue. Initial planning should include convening relevant district parties and community partners to determine how to coordinate response efforts. Planning partners may represent the following:
• Local emergency management agency
• District/school incident management teams
• School administration and teachers
• Student leaders
• Media
• Health departments
• Local businesses
• Law enforcement
• Public and school transportation systems (city transit, school bussing)
• City government

LAUSD's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) staff meets with all involved parties prior to the event. Since its district stretches geographically across 13 different cities, many different law enforcement, community, and municipal agencies must be contacted, along with local colleges, traffic control, Metro Transit Authority, first responders (fire, emergency medical services), and public health agencies, among others. The EOC staff also meet with the organizers of the walkout event, if possible, to discuss with them the laws and regulations governing their anticipated actions.

Step 5: Create an event plan of action that clearly delineates the roles of all parties involved. Once all relevant parties convene, a plan of action is conceived that anticipates when the event will occur, what is expected to happen at the event, what the event will look like, and how to respond to it. Each representative agency or group is tasked with a specific role.

Step 6: Disseminate information prior to the event on how to respond. Prior to the event, the EOC develops information about the demonstration and communicates the district's response plan to the following parties:

- Executive district staff and local superintendents, so they can support the efforts of the EOC and are aware of their role in response efforts.
- Parents and families, so they can play a role in discussing the event with their child.
- School sites, so they can prepare for the event and designate school personnel with close connections to students and the culture of the school to accompany the students, should they walk out. The EOC provides a full package of directions and procedures for school administration and teachers to follow in the event that the student walkouts occur.

Response

When LAUSD students walked out of schools over several days in March 2006 to protest immigration laws, the superintendent and the Los Angeles County sheriff's department responded with truancy citations and even arrests. Now, student walkouts are responded to by a team involving the LAUSD EOC, LA Unified School Police Department, and on-site student relations personnel. Together, this team works to ensure that students are kept safe and are allowed to voice their free speech rights in a manner that is peaceful. As a result of these proactive measures, the district has experienced fewer student walkouts overall and safer and more orderly demonstrations when they do occur. Following are the keys to this more successful response.

Our operational philosophy is that we treat kids as if they are our own; even when kids are misbehaving, we still treat them as if they are our own.—Sergeant Michael Vargas, former chief of planning and intel, LA Unified School Police Department

On the day of the student walkout event, LAUSD responds to the situation from two primary vantage points: the Emergency Operations Center and the school site with students. Each has a coordinated set of procedures that ensure an organized and effective response.

EOC Response

Use a NIMS and ICS structure for centralized command. The LA Unified EOC serves as the centralized command center for any emergency event in the district, conforming to the basic framework of the Department of Homeland Security's National Incident Management System (NIMS) and using the Incident Command System (ICS).

Bring important roles under centralized command. The EOC houses the incident commander, a district representative, and other personnel involved in the following activities:

- Planning and intelligence
- Finance and administration
- Liaison management
- Public information
- Logistics

The day of the event, the EOC opens up several hours before school begins. Throughout the response, EOC staff make ongoing updates to a centralized information board documenting and displaying everything that happens within the district relating to the walkouts, including information communicated from law enforcement officers and district staff in the field. When the walkouts begin, these contacts monitor and convey to the EOC the estimated number of students who are walking out and the route they are expected to take.

Monitor and communicate intelligence from the field. The information collected at the EOC regarding the number of students walking out, where from, and their expected march route is conveyed to district administrators, school personnel, and other interested parties (e.g., school board members, the media) via email/listserv at regular intervals throughout the day. This helps to ensure that any information circulating about the event is accurate. "Not all information coming in [to the EOC] is intel—only when it is confirmed and classified as intel is it returned to the field," explains Sergeant Mike Vargas of the LA Unified School Police Department.

Serve as the centralized response locale for the event, from start to finish. The EOC remains operational long after the event ends—ensuring that all students have been accounted for, communication has been conveyed, and plans are in place for the next day.

On-site Response
Designate specific roles and personnel to protect youths during the event. At the school site during the walkouts, the LAUSD designates individuals to fill various roles to help keep the situation safe and orderly for students. These include:
- Operations coordinators, who monitor the status of the walkout event to try and determine how to best help the situation;

- Site supervisors, who stay with the students (and who also are tasked with trying to prevent the walkout before it happens); and
- Youth relations personnel, who are familiar with local districts and schools, have relationships with local businesses, and understand the community and culture, allowing them to help monitor and diffuse the situations students may encounter once they leave the school campus. These personnel also help to ensure accurate information about the event is communicated to the EOC.

Once students begin to walk out of school, minimize potential *flash points*. If students walk out of school, it is important to limit the situations that could cause group excitement or increase the number of students who leave school. Consider the following ways to minimize these flash points.

De-emphasize the rebellious nature of students' actions by acknowledging that protesting, or demonstrating, is within their constitutional right to freedom of speech. Although students are not to engage in activities that materially and substantially disrupt school or school activities, interpretation of the laws of the U.S. Constitution, California and Los Angeles (including first amendment rights, the education code, penal code, and city ordinances) support the right of students to demonstrate based on their freedom of speech. However, laws—and their interpretation—will differ by state or locale. The LAUSD Board of Education has decided not to prohibit students' right to demonstrate, but to monitor such situations so as to establish a balance between a disciplined environment for education and allowing students' freedom of speech. Prohibiting students from walking out—and responding to their actions with threats of truancy citations or arrest—tend to be more provocative than persuasive.

Do not forcibly prevent students from leaving the school. Over recent years, LAUSD staff have learned that if students are walking out of the school—and all other efforts to stop them before this point have

This room [the EOC] does not end because the event ended. A lot of other entities stop when the event ends, but this room continues. As incident commander, I have been here until 10 p.m. or midnight, wrapping up that day and planning the next … then I'm back at 5 a.m. to do it again.
—Lieutenant Randy Brooks, incident commander

failed—the worst thing to do is to try and stop them at the school boundaries. "If you try to stop them at the gates," shares Steve Zimmer, intervention/community service coordinator for John Marshall High School, "you are creating a flash point and will get 150 more kids to go along with them."

Designate school personnel to accompany the students on their walkout route. School personnel who historically have a good relationship with students should be designated to accompany the students once they have left the school building. These individuals can serve multiple roles:

- To facilitate assistance from law enforcement and first responders to students, when needed;
- As a communicator of status updates to the EOC (via radio, often);
- As an advocate for students, who will turn to this school personnel to help make decisions or communicate needs; and
- As someone who can help diffuse situations.

Ensure safety of students. LAUSD has developed several ways to ensure the safety of students during a walkout demonstration.

- Guarantee on-site personnel are equipped with all necessary safety equipment. This includes: communication devices (e.g., radios, cell phones), emergency packs/supplies, and access to necessary support, such as the nurse's office, EOC, and first responders.
- Utilize the Los Angeles Unified School Police Department.

In the past, student walkout demonstrators have incurred injury and arrest from the Los Angeles Police Department. Since then, LAUSD responds first to these situations with their School

Police Department. These officers have a special relationship with students; their service area is the 710 square miles of the LAUSD but does not include the population at large. This provides officers with a slightly different perspective. "Instead of seeing these youths as 'little criminals,' we are used to working with kids and our first priority in this type of situation is to get them back someplace safe," one LA Unified School Police officer describes. When students leave the campus, the school police officers follow them by mandate until they are returned to a safe place.

Look for opportunities to diffuse the walkout demonstration. LAUSD operations coordinators have learned that it is possible to curb the fervor of a student walkout once they are in the field. For example, the on-site liaisons can try to identify the individual student(s) who appear to be the leaders of the march and attempt to talk to that individual, build a rapport, and come to some understanding. "It is possible to convince one individual who can convince 100 others to get on a bus and go back to school," explains LA Unified School District Police Sergeant Armando Farias. Rather than threatening students with truancy citations or other repercussions for

LESSON LEARNED: Steve Zimmer, intervention/community service coordinator for John Marshall High School, recalls that when over 500 students walked after major immigrant rights mobilization, the school representative was on hand to diffuse situations—with store owners, with city law enforcement, with members of community trying to agitate the student protesters, and with other bystanders who were opposing the cause. "The only thing that kept it from being a major flash point," he explained, "was that the people out there knew kids, understood kids … they didn't say that they necessarily support or do not support their cause, but said that above all else, we keep a relationship with the students."

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walking out, most of the time it is more effective, the officers find, to simply talk students into returning to school.

Omar Del Cueto, principal of Garfield High School indicates that one strategy that can be used to bring accountability to students during a walkout is by equipping adults on the scene with handheld video cameras. When students perceive that their behavior may be caught on film, they are more thoughtful about their actions.

Ensure students are returned to school safely following the walkout event. Once students walk out, LAUSD readies their transportation services to retrieve the students after the march. With eight staging area locations throughout district that can dispatch buses, once the on-site representatives give the word, the EOC deploys buses to pick up the students and return them to school.

Recovery
After students are returned to the school site, attendance is taken and compared to the attendance from the beginning of the day so it is known how many students left school, but did not return. Then, school staff debrief with the students. This is an opportunity for instructors to dialogue with students about the rights and wrongs of the situation and confer with them on whether there is a better way for their voice to be heard. Once again, the

district relates to the students in a way that promotes the spirit of education and opportunity for students to express themselves—not punishment for their desire to be political.

Following the walkout demonstrations, the EOC and all the staff and personnel that were part of the planning process also participate in a debriefing to look at improving the management of such events. In the end, efforts to recover from the event can become lessons learned, and translate into ways to help prevent or mitigate a similar event in the future.

We go the extra mile to look after a child's safety.—Bob Spears, LAUSD director of emergency services

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Conclusion

The experiences of LAUSD with student walkouts are part of a long history of political demonstrations in an urban and ethnically diverse area. However, protest demonstrations can happen anywhere, and for any number of reasons. It is therefore important for all school safety teams to undergo the planning process for responding to this type of event (e.g., meeting with community partners, developing protocols and procedures) and to ensure response efforts are documented in a district's school safety plan. LAUSD has learned to respond to these types of protests by honoring students' desire for expression, while still ensuring that students are kept safe and within the guardianship from the school. The district has also developed ways to mitigate the desire for students to initiate a protest demonstration by providing them with alternate forums for expression. Over time, it has established a fair balance between promoting political expression and freedom of speech with the need for loyalty to the institutional framework of education. Through these methods, students can learn to thrive and find their voice, with the support and protection of adults behind them.