



School Walkout: An Adult Ally Guide

1. Amplify their voice, not yours.

The moment news spread that the students of Parkland, Florida were using their voices to speak out against school violence, Rep. Shawn Harrison staffer claimed that the students were paid actors. This reaction isn't uncommon. Some adults in positions of power are hesitant to include youth voice in the public sphere, and some will use any means necessary to discredit their perspectives.

Remember that the steps we take to empower students must be about boosting their authentic message and not pushing our agenda. When advocating for the perspectives of youth, a good approach is to remove yourself from the equation entirely.

As adult allies, it is essential that we create spaces for youth to use their voice. Allies can support youth voice through advocacy and by offering long-term assistance as youth work to be heard and respected in their steps toward change. Adults can partner with young people to develop and utilize long-term strategies for the amplification of youth voice and perspectives. Furthermore, allies can take the direct approach of inviting youth to participate at the table with decision-makers who can assist them in bringing about change.

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The children followed my incredible lead during today's walk-out. They really look up to me and honestly I've earned it!

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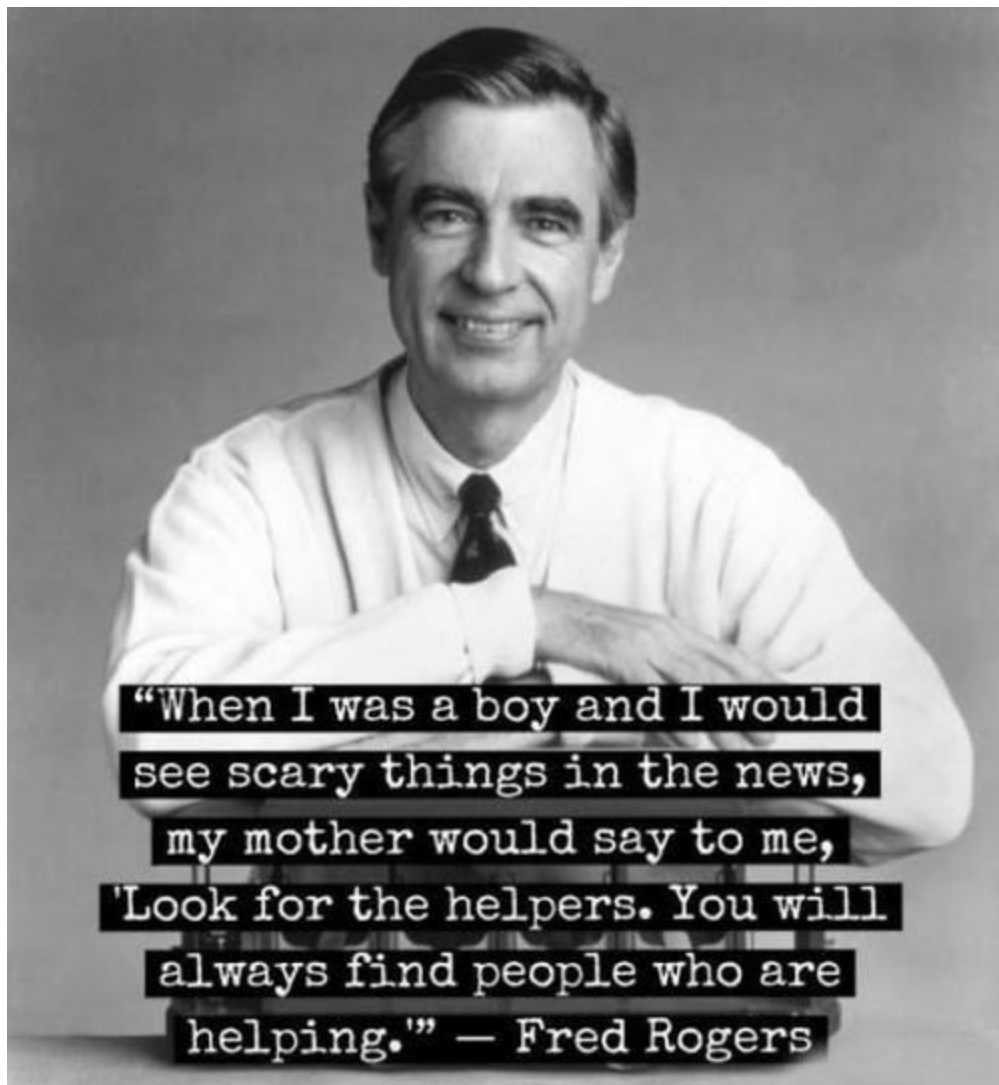
Handed out organic coffee to students who walked out of class. This is what youth leadership looks like!

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2. Broadcast your willingness to be a “helper”.

Youth voice dies in a vacuum. Organize with other adult allies (i.e., parents, community members, church leaders) and figure out a way to signal to students that you are available and willing to support their voice. It can be as simple as clicking share when a young person speaks up on social media or making your own posts to express interest in partnering with and advocating for youth. You may also choose to take a more direct approach by asking what you can do to help. Consider using the following question: “if you had an assistant to help you organize, what would you ask them to help you with?”

Find a way to be a helper: Just like Mr. Rogers’ mom said you would be:



3. Assume competence in youth leadership.

When it comes to school violence in the U.S., many prevention and support tactics have been tried, but so far nothing appears to be helping. It's time to acknowledge that the missing piece of this devastating puzzle might well be the students themselves.

Following the leadership of students doesn't mean you should never speak up or share your opinion. We've all had experience following a boss or supervisor that didn't always get it right. Part of assuming confidence means giving young people meaningful and respectful feedback when appropriate. It's also important for you to ensure that students have a grasp of the bigger picture when approaching complicated subjects.

"The number one mistake professionals make when trying to partner with youth is not taking the time to adequately prepare them, especially as it concerns the scope and resources of the project. People forget that it takes time and effort to prepare an informed voice, whether young or old." — Martin Rafferty, Founder of Youth ERA

4. Don't assume anything else.

It can be difficult to remember the kinds of obstacles we faced as students and let's face it, most adults never had to endure the level of fear that the threat of school violence presents in our current climate. When partnering with and working to empower young people, it's important to acknowledge the following factors:

- **Scheduling:** youth schedules are different. 7:00 am might be too early and 7:00 pm might not be too late.
- **Transportation:** youth may need transportation support; offer to drive them to their destination.
- **Youth culture:** try to remain flexible and willing to adapt to the changing needs and interests of the young people you've partnered with.
- **Group dynamics:** tailor your support tactics to suit the personalities of the youth you are partnering with; don't be afraid to welcome humor when appropriate.

5. Say "your voice matters" and mean it.

Young people tend to feel discouraged when they can't see the impact of their efforts. You can encourage youth directly by noticing their efforts and acknowledging their impact on your community. To help youth feel inspired, try sending out a press release to your local news outlets to spread awareness of the efforts they're making.

6. Be realistic about consequences (but be prepared to fight them).

Martin Luther King, Jr. described the student sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement as an “electrifying movement of...students [that] shattered the placid surface of campuses and communities across the South.” So far, students haven't had to face the violent consequences that their civil rights counterparts faced. However, on the morning of the first walk out in Texas, one school district announced that all participating students would face suspension.

It's critical that we inform students of the consequences facing those who choose to participate in school walkouts and other protests. It's also important to use our voices and influence to challenge those consequences whenever possible. We must work to find respectful ways of challenging school boards and other officials when students face unjust punishment. If you know a student (or are a student) who is being unfairly targeted, you can enlist the support of Youth Era by emailing us at youthvoice@youthera.org.

Visit youthera.org for more information.