Students have a right to protest, schools must respect it

Students have led the way on climate protests in recent weeks and months, challenging the complacency of established politicians standing silently by while we move towards the point where it will be too late to reverse climate change.

These students, who should be applauded for the courage and dedication to the biggest political challenge they are likely to face in their lifetime, instead face schools that have resorted to threats and punishment. In a number of cases, students have been threatened with or given after-school detention for taking part in local strikes, were marked as truant or even suspended.

These restrictions and penalties are not only unwise, they also interfere with the rights guaranteed to everyone under the age of 18 under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Under-18s have the same right to free expression as anybody else, a right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. They also have the right to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly. These rights unquestionably include the right of young students to speak out and protest about climate change, the burden of which will fall most heavily on those who are the youngest among us today.

The CRC also sets out the aims to be achieved by the education of our youngest citizens, including the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and their preparation for a responsible life in a free society. A school that fully respects the education and development of students to become active and engaged members of society would support those who want to campaign about the major political issues that will shape their lives and the lives of generations to come. It is a short-sighted school that excludes these lessons from its curriculum by punishing students who engage with their society and its government.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations’ body responsible for implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has itself applauded the students taking part in the Fridays for Future protests, and several UN experts joined the Committee, expressing their gratitude to young people for their actions that are “desperately needed in today's political climate of lassitude and decision paralysis”.

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2 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 15; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 21.
3 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29.
Children should be supported and not prevented from participating in civic life. Governments have a responsibility to act but, in the face of their inaction we should all be able to mobilise.

Instead of punishing students for living up to the responsibility casually cast aside by adults, they should be applauded.

For students who face punishments for protesting, use this letter template to challenge these measures.

We are also monitoring which schools are trying to prevent students from striking. If this is happening in your case, please let us know at contact@crin.org