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One of the nation's biggest school systems will let students take time off to protest. The conservative backlash has begun.

Students — many of them high school-age — gather in the District to protest during a global climate strike held Sept. 20. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

Hannah Natanson
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One of the nation's largest school districts will allow students time off to participate in protests, a novel policy that proponents argue is the only way to handle a wave of student activism roiling the nation.

Starting Jan. 27, Fairfax County Public Schools in Northern Virginia will permit students in seventh through 12th grades one excused absence each school year for loosely defined "civic engagement activities," school system spokeswoman Lucy Caldwell said. Such activities might include marches, sit-ins or trips to Richmond to lobby legislators, said Fairfax School Board member Ryan McElveen, who introduced the policy.

Fairfax Schools — whose approximately 188,000 students make it among the dozen largest school systems in the United States, and the biggest in Virginia — is probably the first

district in the nation to adopt this kind of rule, said experts who have studied student activism. When McElveen searched for model policies in the months before debuting his own, he could not find one.

“I think we’re setting the stage for the rest of the nation with this,” he said. “It’s a dawning of a new day in student activism, and school systems everywhere are going to have to be responsive to it.”

But he has already faced some backlash online from conservative critics who charge the policy is the latest instance of the left coddling its too-liberal, too-sensitive youth.

The controversy shows that the hyperpartisan sniping dominating America’s political stage has seeped into the nation’s school systems, said Meira Levinson, a Harvard University professor who studies education. Schools throughout the country are reckoning with a disturbing new reality, Levinson said: Every move by administrators and students, no matter how anodyne, is swiftly interpreted as a “win” or a “loss” for the right or the left.

“Each side is so suspicious of the other that it’s become very hard for adults to trust what’s happening in schools is legitimate, if the other side seems to be ‘winning,’ ” Levinson said. “We’re all always looking for what’s the political agenda — and that’s why, with this new policy in Fairfax County, there’s going to be contestation about it.”

When a nearby school district in Maryland explored adopting a similar policy last year, it also faced criticism from the right, according to the architect of that proposal, Montgomery County Schools board member Patricia O’Neill. After O’Neill spoke about her policy — which the school board later tabled — she was deluged with hundreds of emails, letters and calls from self-identified conservatives throughout the country who argued students belong in school, not in the streets protesting.

At one point, O’Neill was invited to discuss excused absences for student protesters on the conservative “Laura Ingraham Show.” She declined because “this is not an ideological fight for me” — and she didn’t want to drag her school system into a political battle.

That was probably wishful thinking, according to Thai Jones, a lecturer at Columbia University who studies radical social movements. In today’s climate, it is all but inevitable that support and opposition for the Fairfax policy would split along ideological lines, he said.

Thousands rallied in the District in March 2018 for the March for Our Lives protest. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

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For one thing, most major student-led movements today — whether opposition to gun violence, or calls for government action to address climate change — tend to promote causes regarded as left-leaning, Jones said.

"Plus, people who call themselves conservatives probably do still count respecting authority — staying in school — as a crucial and central tenet of the social order," Jones said.

It was student activism following the 2018 massacre at a Parkland, Fla., high school and, more recently, surrounding climate change that spurred McElveen to introduce the proposal in February, he said. Still, aware of the fraught political moment, administrators crafted the policy to be as neutral as possible, McElveen said.

Under the guidelines, students must fill out a form at least two days ahead of their planned absence that explains the reason they plan to miss school, McElveen said. They must obtain permission from a parent or guardian, and they must stop by their school campus at least once on the day of their excused absence — a measure adopted to address worries about accreditation, McElveen said.

But the teenagers do not need administrators' sign-off, McElveen said. Although front office staff at each school — most likely an assistant principal — will glance over a student's request, school officials can't veto it, McElveen said. Instead, if a reviewer finds the stated reason for skipping school troubling, a regional assistant superintendent can be alerted and may intervene — but possibly after the protest.

The built-in bureaucratic delay is purposeful, McElveen said.

"There is no strong definition of a 'civic engagement' activity," he said, "because I think we have to be careful not to pick and choose activities."

Skipping school to participate in large-scale protests is not common among students who favor conservative causes, Levinson said. Although there are exceptions — for example, the tea party rallies a decade or so ago — conservative student activists typically prefer less disruptive forms of protest, she said.

"Kids on the right who are active, they tend to be doing it by preparing to run for school board, or being aides in legislature," Levinson said. In research for her recent book on educational ethics, "I kept looking for examples of students protesting on the right, and it's very, very hard to find."

Wendy Gao, a Fairfax student who leads several groups devoted to fighting climate change, said she has never heard of a "conservative-type rally" scheduled during the school week. All of her activist friends, she said, skip school only "for liberal issues like climate change."

Still, given the district's expansive definition of civic engagement, more staid right-wing student activities will probably qualify — for example, attending the Conservative Political Action Conference. The annual get-together draws tens of thousands of conservative activists and officials from around the nation to the Washington region.

Gao, an 18-year-old senior at Oakton High School, said she is optimistic that the new Fairfax schools policy will help increase the number of students who participate in climate strike days, which she views as crucial in pushing the adults running the country to act.

"Skipping school and business as usual is to show that there's no point in going to school if we are having our future taken away from us," Gao said. "There's not a point to our education if we're not going to be alive in 10 years, 20 years, the end of the century."

Gao grew passionate about climate change as a sophomore, when she joined Oakton's environmental club and learned about the effects of global warming. She had never participated in any kind of activism, and her parents were initially less than thrilled by her newfound desire to stay away from school for protests.

"They got on board, but it took a lot of convincing," Gao said.

A frenzied bout of activism this fall — Gao missed school at least five times over the past few months — led to several missed assignments and a dip in her grades just ahead of college admissions season. Fighting for the planet's future, though, is more important than almost anything else, Gao said.

Besides, she can still save her grades. At least, she thinks so.

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