

Excusable absence

BY REBECCA ZISCH

REBECCA ZISCH SPLITS HER TIME BETWEEN THE WOMEN'S STUDIES DEPARTMENT AT UNLV AND THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT CCSN. SHE IS ALSO A REGULAR COMMENTATOR ON NEVADA PUBLIC RADIO.

On Monday, Southern Nevada saw something that surprised many people: Widespread political acuity and activism by local teenagers. For the second time in as many months, hundreds of Las Vegas high school students chose to skip school in order to demonstrate their support of U.S. immigration reform. They joined the hundreds of thousands of protesters across the country making similar statements through marches, walk-outs and other public demonstrations.

As a community, we should be proud of these students. They appeared organized, focused, prepared and peaceful. Isn't this the type of adult behavior that we hope public education will instill in young people? Don't we want youth to already be dedicated, responsible and civic-minded when they begin college and apply for jobs in the community?

But despite the success of the protests, in the aftermath, school administrators and community members voice contrasting opinions. For example, school district administrators have decided protesting students will have unexcused absences added to their records for the days they missed school for demonstrations. This may not seem like a problem, but the district's policy regarding unexcused absences states that students who accumulate three on their records are reported to Child Protective Services, which then investigates the complaint as educational neglect.

In all other cases of absence, it is up to a student's parent or guardian to write a note of explanation and approval. And for students who cannot produce such a note, an unexcused absence is warranted. But even the students whose parents approve of and support their recent political action will receive an unexcused absence. There is no issue of educational neglect in these situations except on the part of the school district. The district cannot overrule a parental decision and decide, just because students were admittedly participating in a political protest, their absences are deemed unexcused.

Also, members of the community have complained that the Clark County School District should not have supplied buses to transport protesting students back to their schools; that it indicated the district supported the students' absences and it was an inappropriate use of taxpayer money. First, the district is clearly not supporting the students' protests if they won't excuse their absences. And, in fact, the buses were requested by Metro officers to ensure the safety of the students, many of whom would have otherwise walked back to their schools and homes.

Furthermore, school buses are part of the free public education that remains a right of all children in America. And education is not just what happens in the classroom; it's not just the curriculum that is studied in preparation for standardized tests. The education of our youth includes socialization and learning how to be proud and valuable citizens. Young people should not be hidden away until their 18th birthdays; they should be nurtured, encouraged and educated in and out of the classroom. And while their right to exercise their freedoms appears to have been recently dismissed by many adults in our community, they still have the same freedoms as the rest of us, including freedoms of speech and assembly. **CL**