



# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

*Leadership for Educational Equity and Social Justice*

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## **Social justice and the First Amendment for all, except for students?**

President Barack Obama is quoted as saying “A change is brought about because ordinary people do extraordinary things.”

I’d be hard-pressed to call professional athletes “ordinary people” but I would call their acts of silent protest extraordinary. NFL players taking a knee during the national anthem to protest violence against African Americans has become conversation at a many a table across our nation. As we might expect, the evolution of this silent protest has found its way to athletes in other sports, and our high school students.

But instead of seeing this symbol of discourse as an opportunity to discuss, listen and teach; adults are confronting students and choosing punishment as their choice of action.

Last month a Florida student kneeling for the Pledge of Allegiance was told by a teacher that he must stand. Early this month, two Texas high school football players were kicked off the team for kneeling during the national anthem. On Long Island, the Rockville Centre Diocese threatened students at its high school with “serious disciplinary action” if they knelt during the anthem, yet later recognized that students who challenge racism and racial discrimination are strongly in line with Catholic teaching.

Yet while some schools recognize that high school sports are an extension of the classroom and therefore actions such as taking a knee during the anthem generates the ability to have meaningful discussion among high school communities, other school leaders see this as an opportunity to condemn. Many adults say social justice is about “all students” when, in fact, these silent protests are about representing the voices of marginalized students who don’t have equitable means of survival.

Social justice isn’t about equality. It’s also not about uniformity. When a student takes a knee he/she are choosing to challenge a violent societal norm. As adults, it makes many of us uncomfortable as we decide what’s right behavior for our young people. We do so based on our beliefs and our own biases. The America we learn about in school is built on justice and the fundamental right to choose. Yet, when our students make a choice, not because they do not

value our military, but because the wish to protest injustice, our first inclination is to punish them?

It is due time we start embracing a spectrum of thinking that is uncomfortable to so many of us. These protests are a good thing. Here's the reality: their recognition of social justice issues proves our students are paying attention. In an age of supposed apathy and social media induced isolation, students are engaged. They're taking notice of what is happening and they are having conversations they've never had before. With us, and with each other.

Too often we have seen adults treat these silent protests as a hindrance. A problem. A roadblock to what we do. What every adult needs to do is treat these protests as an opportunity. An opportunity to talk. An opportunity to listen. An opportunity to grow.

From the lens of an educator, we need only look historically back to 1968, when Olympic athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave a raised-fist "black power" salute on the medal stand as the *Star-Spangled Banner* was being played. The Australian sprinter Peter Norman stood in solidarity, an Olympic Project for Human Rights" badge pinned to his jacket. They were thrown out of the Olympics and Norman's career was effectively ended. 49 years later, students are engaged, empowered and they need us to stand up and take notice. To stand, or kneel, in solidarity with their efforts to make choices and to try to change the world. These are complex issues during complex times and it's now more than ever that our schools need to use this opportunity for active engagement and courageous conversation.

Our students are counting on us.

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