



STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 8, 2018

On March 14 schools throughout the United States will witness student activism at work as a national walkout is anticipated in remembrance of the tragic events in Parkland, Florida, last month. The proposed walkout presents significant challenges for public school systems across the nation, including Gwinnett County Public Schools. We understand the desire of students to send a strong, unified call for action, but we also are responsible for providing quality instruction in a safe, secure learning environment for every student, every day. Given these conflicting realities, how should we respond?

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*is to pursue excellence
in academic knowledge,
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world-class standards.*

437 Old Peachtree Road, NW
Suwanee, GA 30024-2978
678-301-6000
www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us

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not to discriminate on the basis of race, sex,
religion, national origin, age, or disability in any
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or any other program, activity, or service.

In Gwinnett, we believe the student walkout, however well-intended, could negatively impact our ability to meet our primary responsibility. Classroom learning will be affected if students miss instructional time, and the safety of students could be compromised if they leave class or campus without permission. **For these reasons, Gwinnett County Public Schools does not condone a walkout during the school day, expecting instead that our schools provide more appropriate ways for students to make their important voices heard.**

This decision has no connection to the cause for which the walkout is being promoted. It is based solely on what is best for students in terms of retaining an orderly and safe school environment. While free speech is a right we respect, students cannot be allowed to disregard school rules. If they do, they face consequences, not for their message but for their behavior – being tardy to class, missing class, or creating a disruption to the school day. The time spent out of class will be considered an unexcused absence and school rules and consequences will apply.

In addition to the all-important safety concerns, there are legal implications for school districts in this matter. If a school or school district approves or condones a walkout by students in the present situation, it must take the same position with any and all student groups that want to take similar action in the future, regardless of the cause being promoted. A public school that is selective in allowing certain walkouts but not others could face legal action for enforcing school rules inconsistently based on speech, message, or cause, a potential First Amendment violation. If it sets aside enforcement of school rules for one group of students who participate in a walkout, the school creates a precedent that will dictate how other such activities must be handled.

Gwinnett County Public Schools supports our students' desire to express their views and their hopes for change, but they must do so within the guidelines that promote a safe, orderly learning environment. School leaders have met and continue to meet with students to discuss meaningful ways for them to express themselves and share their concerns without disrupting the instructional day. We believe this is a wise and reasoned response to the challenges our schools and communities face as we jointly confront the grave societal issues associated with the horrific events of February 14.

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