



Empowerment, Education, Accountability

March 8, 2018

J. Alvin Wilbanks  
CEO/Superintendent  
Gwinnett County Public Schools  
437 Old Peachtree Road, NW  
Suwanee, GA 30024-2978

Re: Student Walkouts in Support of School Safety

Dear Mr. Wilbanks:

Gwinnett STOPP urges the Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) to allow students to participate in the March 14<sup>th</sup> National School Walkout and the April 20<sup>th</sup> National High School Walkout for Anti-Gun Violence. We urge GCPS to follow the lead of Fulton County and change the middle and high school bell schedules so that students wishing to participate in these events may do so without fear of disciplinary action.

As stated in the Marietta City Schools' February 25<sup>th</sup> letter supporting student participation in the National School Walkout, "schools educate our children so they learn to be independent and critical thinkers in a democratic society." Supporting "student voice" and teaching students how to engage with current issues in an effective and meaningful way is consistent with GCPS' commitment to academic excellence and a world class education.

Historically, students have been at the forefront of political change as evidenced by Claudette Colvin, who refused to give up her seat on the bus nine months before Rosa Parks, and others who joined the Civil Rights Movement<sup>1</sup> and the students who organized and led the East L.A. Walkouts of 1968 demanding a better education<sup>2</sup>.

Knowing how to effectively participate in political change is an essential part of educating today's students. The students who want to participate in the March 14<sup>th</sup> and April 20<sup>th</sup> Walkouts are engaging in political speech, perhaps the most important political speech of their young lives. Students do not lose their constitutional rights at the school house gates<sup>3</sup> and have a right to engage in political speech on campus.

By following Fulton County's lead and changing the bell schedule, GCPS will be providing students with an educational opportunity, an opportunity to use their voice, to understand how they can impact change, and to be empowered to communicate their concerns to adults within the school system and to other community leaders. By changing the bell schedule, GCPS will be teaching students how to use their voice to advocate for change in a manner that does not infringe upon the rights or safety of other students.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth in the Civil Rights Movement - Civil Rights History Project. (2018). The Library of Congress. Retrieved 8 March 2018, from <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/youth-in-the-civil-rights-movement/>

<sup>2</sup> Sahagun, L. (2018, March 1). East L.A., 1968: 'Walkout!' The day high school students helped ignite the Chicano power movement. Retrieved March 08, 2018, from <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-1968-east-la-walkouts-20180301-htmlstory.html>

<sup>3</sup> See *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969)

GCPS has a history of adjusting the bell schedule for events such as Relay for Life and Red Ribbon Week, events whose educational value is similar to that of the March 14th and April 20th Walkouts. Gwinnett SToPP is concerned that allowing non-academic speech for Relay for Life and Red Ribbon Week, but not the March 14<sup>th</sup> and April 20<sup>th</sup> Walkouts, GCPS would be favoring some speech and/or speakers over others and engaging in content-based or speaker discrimination.

As you stated on the March 4, 2004 Message from the Superintendent on School Safety, "School security is not an option. It is [GCPS'] commitment."<sup>4</sup> The students of GCPS would like to speak to the GCPS community and the larger Gwinnett community about that commitment to school security by participating in the March 14<sup>th</sup> National School Walkout and the April 20th National High School Walkout for Anti-Gun Violence. Gwinnett SToPP urges GCPS to allow students to participate by making a space for civic participation and without fear of discipline for doing so.

Sincerely,

Marlyn Tillman  
Executive Director

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<sup>4</sup> Wilbanks, J. A. (2004, March 4). Gwinnett County Public Schools. Retrieved March 08, 2018, from <http://publish.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps/home/public/about/school-improvement/content/academic-support/message-from-superintendent-school-safety>