

To: Whitfield County Schools Parents, Students, and Staff

From: Dr. Judy Gilreath, Superintendent

Last week several students approached administrators about participating in a nationally advertised walkout during class hours to honor 17 students who lost their lives in the recent shooting incident in a Florida high school. The walkout was to last seventeen minutes, one minute for each student who died. Their stated desire was to honor the fallen and protest school violence. I initially decided to grant their request.

After further thought and discussions within the administration, however, I have made the decision not to approve a student walkout during the school day on Wednesday. As always, the safety of our students and staff is at the top of my list of priorities, and I feel that allowing students to be outside at an announced time is not the best course of action. Several factors counseled my decision. If some students wish to use the time to protest guns in schools, others may feel strongly otherwise, and confrontations could ensue. The possibility of individuals from outside the school community being drawn to the campuses poses risks we simply cannot ignore. Also, we have determined that the instruction day is for instruction, not collective student action addressing an issue of public interest, no matter how timely or important.

Students do have rights under the First Amendment to our Constitution to express their views. They do not have the right to express those views whenever and however they wish, and they have no right to walk out of class during the school day without consequences. I have discussed this issue with our school system's attorney at length, and we are in full agreement on this point. Students may engage in collective peaceful protests outside of the school day.

Considering all the above, I have decided that we will continue instruction as usual all day on Wednesday, and any student who chooses to walk out of class will be in violation of the school Code of Conduct concerning an unauthorized absence from class. I ask your cooperation in making sure that teaching and learning is not interrupted at any of our schools.