

March 13, 2018

Dr. Eric Williams
Superintendent
Loudoun County Public Schools
21000 Education Court
Ashburn, Va 20148

Dear Superintendent:

I am writing to you regarding Loudoun County Public Schools' (LCPS) concerning regarding upcoming student walkouts: <http://bit.ly/2Dn7vc4>. We are extremely disappointed that LCPS does not support the efforts of their students who choose to participate in this historic moment.

We would hope that you would see this planned, national March 14 walkout for what it is – a rare opportunity for an interactive lesson in participatory democracy. LCPS principals and administrators are in a unique position to foster emerging democratic engagement between students and should not punish students for participating in what will be a defining moment in their young lives.

The ACLU of Virginia and our colleagues across the nation are urging school administrators at all levels to view the planned walkouts as educational opportunities. We are urging you to resist suppressing the spirit of public engagement and public service that is motivating most students and urging them to lead their students to that ideal of the productive, involved, orderly exercise of citizenship.

There are many ways to accomplish this, including:

- Allow students to attend demonstrations. School absentee policies in Virginia and elsewhere allow for occasional absences and excused absences for religious education, doctors' appointments and even educational family events. Attending a demonstration for 17 minutes of a school day should be treated equally. Absence policies should not be used to punish students who are engaged in the educational experience of participatory democracy -- especially when the engagement is all about the need to ensure that they can pursue their education in a safe environment.



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- Give clear guidance on expectations. Ensure that students know what is expected of them and what they can do to voice their opinion. Students should be allowed to peacefully demonstrate, distribute literature and wear any insignia of their protest, such as shirts. Schools may regulate this speech to prevent disruption of education, but keep in mind that this sort of discussion is education and the students' ability to express their political viewpoints must be respected.

- Foster healthy debate. In today's world, too often we are insulated from opposing viewpoints. This is a great opportunity to foster debate in an accepting environment. I urge you to use this opportunity as a teachable moment. You may want to consider setting aside time for assemblies or other events to consider the urgent issues of school safety that students across the country are now focused on. Teach your students what it means to peacefully exercise their First Amendment rights and to argue persuasively, which requires truly understanding opposing views and remaining respectful. And, of course, equally respect students who do not want to join demonstrations or who wish to oppose the most popular views.

Thank you for working positively to encourage civic engagement and protect freedom of expression in your schools. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Claire Gastañaga". The signature is stylized with loops and flourishes.

Claire Guthrie Gastañaga
Executive Director