

FW: Per our discussion of ACLU concerns with PWCS

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Claire Gastanaga

Today, 1:37 PM

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From: Phil B. Kavits [mailto:KavitsPB@pwcs.edu]**Sent:** Monday, February 26, 2018 11:39 AM**To:** Claire Gastanaga <claire@acluva.org>**Subject:** Per our discussion of ACLU concerns with PWCS

Ms. Claire Gastanaga

ACLU

701 East Franklin Street

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Dear Claire,

Thanks you for taking the time to speak with me briefly about the School Division's position on recent and planned student demonstrations. Since your concerns were addressed to Prince William County Public Schools (PWCS) Superintendent Steven Walts, in a message dated February 22, 2018, please consider this a response on his behalf to that message as well. Regrettably, your message was sent late in the day to an email box which gets a substantial number of messages; consequently, our ability to respond was

As you are well aware, the primary obligation of any school system is to educate students (which certainly includes allowing them to exercise their right to free speech and protest). However, all of this assumes that schools are first keeping students safe, and secondly maintaining an environment in which education can happen). The Superintendent's original message to Prince William County families and students, of which the ACSL is critical, was primarily about measures intended to ensure student safety and the integrity of the educational environment. To accomplish that end, The Superintendent's message emphasized that normal school rules will remain in place, while also noting that the School Division will work with students and staff to facilitate their right and responsibility to be heard. When others commented that the emphasis focused too heavily on the need to maintain safety and order, Dr. Walts sent a subsequent message to clarify the Division's support of students' rights to peacefully assemble and protest. While we had no time to respond before seeing your very public criticism, the message Dr. Walts sent (below), certainly addresses your concerns:



February 22, 2018

Dear parents, and middle and high school students,

It's important for concerned students and parents to demand safe schools and especially an end to school gun violence. If you didn't understand that I feel this way, I clearly sent the wrong message yesterday. Allow me to again.

Parkland, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine, and all the others were sickening. If you're passionate about stopping school shootings and saving lives, take action. Work with your friends. Join in safe, well-organized demonstrations. As I said yesterday, that's your right and your responsibility.

So, can you protest or speak out at school or elsewhere? Absolutely!

Last night, Kate Arnold, your Student Representative to the School Board, floated one possibility. It would have willing staff members oversee the safe exit of students for a facilitated event. Other employees could supervise students who choose not to join in.

That might work.

While school employees can't create student protests, they can provide opportunities for conversations, and facilitate safe, supervised places for activism. I expect that principals will work with students and staff to identify a reasonable number of "right" approaches for each school. That will also let teachers and others make appropriate arrangements for pre-scheduled, principal-approved, events, and free students from concern about disciplinary action in these special cases.

I'd already heard that many of you may want to take part in the nationwide April 20 observance of the Columbian anniversary. That's why I promised yesterday that we'd work to find ways to let you do that without violating any PWCS rules or disrupting teaching and learning.

So why did I remind you yesterday that students can't just walk out of class or school at will? PWCS is responsible for the safety and the education of 90,000 students. How can we keep you safe if you can freely leave school time to participate in protests on campus or off? It's unlikely, but you could become somebody's target, or be involved in an accident. And how can we give you a good education if classes can be constantly disrupted by students walking out to protest. We do have to enforce our normal school rules, even as we allow for some flexibility. Remember, no one has more reason than students to demand safe schools. And no one wants you to succeed more than I do. I just want to make sure you're safe, and still getting a good education while you try to tell the world about the need to prevent school shootings.

Thank you,

Steve Walts

Superintendent

DR. STEVEN L. WALTS

Superintendent of Schools

This message went to all PWCS middle and high schools students, as well as to every student household Divisionwide. It was delivered in multiple languages to make certain that the position of the Division and the Superintendent are well understood throughout the school community.

While you may prefer the response from one School Division over another, it seems counterproductive to take aim at a Division that is striving to do nothing more than make certain that any students protests that do take place are safe and do not disrupt the educational environment. In past years, other protests have resulted in students walking in busy streets and taking other significant risks; in one School Division, a student was hit by a car. It is our responsibility to make sure that does not happen with any anticipated walkouts.

I hope you will review the Superintendent's latest message and share with the public that PWCS intends to encourage students to exercise their rights, safely and respectfully, without infringing on the rights of others; objectives with which the ACLU can certainly agree.

Philip B. Kavits
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