March 1, 2018

Dear Putnam County Community:

In the wake of the recent tragedy in Parkland, Florida and other losses of life on school campuses across our nation, several nationwide online movements are urging students and staff to stage walkouts during the school day advocating for political action on the issue of gun control. The days, times and organizers of these events vary. The first date and time for these walkouts brought to the attention of Putnam County CUSD #535 is March 14th at 10:00 a.m. The organizers are asking students to walk out of schools at that time for seventeen minutes, one minute for each life lost in Florida. This is to pay tribute to those tragically taken while raising awareness to the frustrations that are growing over gun violence. To be clear, this suggested movement is student led, not school or district led.

As Superintendent of Schools for Putnam County, I wanted to take this opportunity to provide some insight as to the expectations and policies in anticipation of such an event. As a fellow parent and community member, I know many of you have lots of questions and concerns. First of all, the safety of everyone in our schools is our upmost priority, a responsibility we take very seriously. With student input, we will provide a safe space on campus for students to assemble peacefully. We encourage students to stay on campus for safety reasons. Likewise, with student safety as our goal, the general public will not be allowed on school property during this time to participate with students in this peaceful assembly.

We intend to utilize this event as a teachable moment for our students on an age-appropriate basis, particularly for secondary school students. We intend to ensure that all viewpoints are respected by staff and students. Should any of our students choose to participate in a peaceful student protest, the following protocol will be implemented to maintain student safety:

* Designated personnel will supervise the areas where students may choose to peacefully protest or pay tribute to the lives lost.
* Arrangements have been made with local law enforcement (Putnam County Sheriff’s Department and Granville Police Department) to be present on each campus to help implement additional safety measures in the event anyone chooses to leave a building. Teachers and staff will remain with our students in designated areas to keep students safe.
* We will ensure that there is a source of communication for those designated to supervise students either via radios or cell phones.
* Classroom instruction will continue for all students that wish to remain in the classroom. Staff will remain with students in their classrooms and will monitor the students’ attendance. Students that return to class in a timely manner after the peaceful assembly will not face any attendance consequences. However, students that choose to leave the campus and school grounds will receive an unexcused absence and the consequences outlined in the student handbook. Staff members will also report the names of students that do not return to class to the building office. Administration will be monitoring this closely.
* Parent/guardian notification will occur for any student choosing to leave campus or school grounds without returning to class.
* Parents are encouraged to discuss the walkout with their children and to remind them to stay safe by remaining on campus. Additional guidance on student behavior is outlined in Putnam County CUSD #535 School Board Policy 7:190 under Prohibited Student Conduct number 21. This policy provides that engaging in activity, on or off campus, that interferes with, disrupts, or adversely affects the school environment, school operations, or an educational function, such as threats, intimidation, endangering the health or safety of students, staff, or school property is prohibited.
* While the school district encourages respectful and civil behavior, we remind students that a walk out is not an excused absence. Students are reminded to be conscious of their surroundings and safety.

Our goal is the creation of a secure learning environment that allows student and staff to fully engage in the educational process free from political or religious partiality. Because of the timing of these walkout movements and the potential impact on school safety, it is our goal to identify safe alternative means for student expression to occur on campus.

Considering our role as impartial educators, teachers and staff will provide students interested in having a dialogue about the tragedy and national movements with the opportunity for constructive classroom conversations. Staff have been reminded to maintain their neutrality on these topics while on school time.

Public educators play an important role in setting an example for our students of how to respect varying viewpoints, and to encourage student dialogue without, by our words or actions, inhibiting any student from expressing viewpoint that may be contrary to others. This is an extremely tense time and collaboration is critical for the good of our community. The school district will not engage in any political battles but will remain focused on providing the safest learning environment for our students, families, and community.

Yours in Education,

*Carl B. Carlson*

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Superintendent