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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, Independent School Headmasters, All Educators
FROM: Secretary Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D. 
SUBJECT: Student Voice and Civil Debate
DATE: February 23, 2018

Over the last few days, I have been proud to see so many students in the Vermont State House, presenting in legislative committees and giving voice to their priorities. They and their priorities are diverse: from net neutrality, to gun safety, to substance abuse prevention, to environmental preservation. What these students have in common is a passionate interest in an issue, a clear vision of a need for action, and the confidence and poise to come in and make their case to legislators and the Governor. I am proud of both their civility and their direct and incisive questions. They make me optimistic about our future.

In a related set of events, several groups have called for demonstrations of solidarity with the students of Parkland, including walkouts from schools.

First and foremost, I support students' first amendment right to free speech, and I encourage students to engage in civil debate about critical issues that affect their wellbeing. Vermont has a strong tradition of student voice, and we celebrate our students for their efforts to engage in and positively shape the future of our state. And at a time like this, we need to hear our students' voices more than ever.

That said, the right to free speech does not extend to disrupting classes (which prevents others from learning), nor to leaving school without permission (which potentially creates a safety threat).

Several of you have indicated you are working to find ways to respect and support your students' exercise of voice, while maintaining an orderly environment. For example, this might include working with student leaders for an assembly on March 14 at 10:00 a.m., to observe 17 minutes of silence together to honor students in Parkland and to honor the right of students to attend schools free of fear.

Others are providing opportunities for "active civics" by bringing students to the State House to engage with legislators or encouraging them to write to elected leaders.

We are in an extraordinary moment of history, and more than ever, our children need the skills of citizenship, so they can lead strong communities for the next generation. However, this also means teaching them to do so in ways that are not disruptive to the rights of others and in ways that model the skills of democracy. And, a joint assembly, convened by adults and students working together, is a powerful way to affirm our shared belief that children deserve schools in which they are free from fear.

I encourage you to work with your students and support civil and peaceful opportunities for student expression and student voice, while holding all members of your community to your codes of behavior.

In closing, I want to reiterate the importance of reinforcing the message statewide that if students hear or see something that makes them concerned, they should report it. We keep each other safe by acting to take care of each other. If you have an incident, reach out to Rob Evans, our School Safety Liaison, who is tracking incidents and providing resources and supports. And, do not hesitate to reach out if you need any assistance.

Again, I am so grateful for the care and commitment you demonstrate, every day, to the wellbeing of our children. They are our public trust.