

Utah Students Demand Change as Part of National Walkouts

Thousands of Utah students at least 30 schools participated in walkouts to protest gun violence and demand change as part of national demonstrations one month after the deadly shooting inside a high school in Parkland, Florida.

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By BRADY McCOMBS, Associated Press
SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — As her voice rose with emotion and anger, 17-year-old Elizabeth Love delivered a message to politicians while speaking to about 500 fellow students gathered outside one of at least 30 Utah high schools that held walkouts Wednesday to protest gun violence.

"This is just the beginning. Today, by walking out we showed our leaders and lawmakers that we are watching and we are listening and we demand change," said Love, as students erupted in cheers. "We'll keep walking out, and we'll keep marching and most importantly we will keep voting until we get that change. By the time our little sisters and our little brothers go to West, they better feel safe."

Love, a senior at West High School in Salt Lake City, delivered the final speech at an event where about 500 students gathered outside the school's front entrance and listened quietly as student organizers read the names of the 17 people killed in Florida and released one orange balloon for each.

They read something personal about each of the deceased and interspersed the commemorations with calls for lawmakers to enact laws to prevent more school violence, including a ban the sale of assault rifles.

Some wore orange pins that said "Enough." They held signs that said, "Protect kids not guns," "Fear has no place in school" and "Am I next?"



Students at Weber High School observe a moment of silence as the names of the victims from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting are read aloud during a school walkout in Pleasant View, Utah on Wednesday, March 14, 2018. Students across the country planned to participate in walkouts Wednesday to protest gun violence. (Benjamin Zack/Standard-Examiner via AP) The Associated Press

They were among thousands of students at schools across Utah who participated in walkouts to demand change as part of national demonstrations one month after the deadly shooting inside a high school in Parkland, Florida.

The demonstrations lasted 17 minutes — one minute for each of the students and staff members killed in Florida.

The walkouts in cities such as Logan, Provo and Park City took place in front of schools and on football fields. Most were at high schools, but a few elementary schools held events.

At Woods Cross Elementary School in the suburb just north of Salt Lake City, 12 fifth and sixth grade students took the offer to come into the gym and talk about school shootings and laws, said Rachel Peterson, the physical education teacher at the school who spoke with the students.

"Mostly, we came to the conclusion that we all need to more kind," Peterson said. "The gun was just a tool to show his hurt."

Several elementary schools in the Salt Lake City School District held kindness days, with one school urging students to say hello and smile to 17 people, said superintendent Lexi Cunningham.

Most school districts allowed the walkouts without punishments under the condition that students returned to class afterward, said Jason Stevenson, spokesman for the ACLU of Utah. The organization provided training ahead of the events to remind students they have constitutional rights to free speech while at school.

Students at West High School urged lawmakers to take steps to make them feel safe again, but also said they do not want teachers to be armed or have police officers in class.

Abena Bakenra, 17, said she's developed an unsettling habit of looking for hiding spots in each school room she enters. She said she doesn't want to live in fear anymore.

"Enough is enough," said Bakenra, a senior. "It's our generation and the power of our voices that can make this happen."

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