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# Stoneman Douglas students join walkout for gun control

By [Associated Press \(http://www.thegardenisland.com/author/associated-press-2/\)](http://www.thegardenisland.com/author/associated-press-2/) | Wednesday, March 14, 2018, 6:26 a.m.

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PARKLAND, Fla. — Students streamed out of their classrooms at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High Wednesday morning as part of a nationwide protest to mark the one-month anniversary of the school shooting that killed 17 people and injured 15 others.

They walked past the school fence, now covered in signs offering messages of support from across the country, and past mementos and flowers left for fallen classmates. They gathered on the school's football field, where they chanted "MSD" and embraced in a massive circle as a song written by several students after the shooting played over speakers.

"They're not gonna knock us down. We'll get back up again."

And then, mixed with students from a nearby middle school, they walked to Pine Trails Park down the street, where they promised to keep the pressure on America's politicians to change the nation's gun laws and prevent another shooting like the one at their school that rocked the country exactly one month earlier.

"We're not just kids anymore because we looked down the barrel of a gun" said a student addressing her classmates from a stage at the park. "We took all the pain and all the suffering and turned it into this."

Similar scenes unfolded across South Florida and the country as students walked out of their classrooms at 10 a.m. on Wednesday to urge Congress to take action against gun violence. In a sign that the youth-led gun-control movement sparked by the Parkland shooting may have staying power, they joined young people from more than 2,500 schools across America in 17-minute demonstrations in remembrance of the 17 students and staff members killed at Stoneman Douglas High.

The protesters — some of whom began walking out as early as 8:30 a.m. — are calling for a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines and for expanding background checks to all gun sales, among other proposals. They also oppose any legislation that would “aim to fortify our schools with more guns.”

In South Florida, demonstrations were planned at more than a dozen schools and colleges, including Miami Dade College, iPrep Academy, Miami Country Day School and Alonzo and Tracy Mourning Senior High in Miami-Dade as well as Hollywood Central Elementary and Coral Springs High School in Broward County, according to Empower’s website.

The demonstrations were expected to take a variety of forms across the country. Some students planned to circle their school holding hands while others planned to sing songs or read the names of people killed by gun violence, Empower said. Some gathered in Washington, D.C., where they turned their backs on the White House. Thousands more were expected to flood into the Capitol later in the day, according to CNN.

At Cooper City High School, students set up 17 empty desks, according to Miami Herald news partner WFOR-CBS4. Back in Parkland, students at Westglades Middle School left campus and walked over to Stoneman Douglas, where families looked on the football field in support and the media craned to watch and listen.

“Now let’s go back to teaching and learning,” Stoneman Principal Ty Thompson told students after 17 minutes passed.

The Miami-Dade and Broward school districts sent letters home to parents this week stating that school administrators will allow students to peacefully protest. The letters referred to the planned demonstrations as a “teachable moment.”

Broward school staff members were instructed to stay with students who walk out of class to ensure that they are supervised and that they remain in a designated area, but it was difficult to keep some schools fenced in. In Parkland, after Westglades students joined them, some Stoneman Douglas students left the school to gather in a nearby park.

“It’s important we need to express ourselves and this can’t happen again” said Stoneman Douglas student Juan Rojas as he joined his classmates for a walkout.

In Miami-Dade, public schools were not allowing students to leave campus, but allowed them to demonstrate on school grounds. Some Miami-Dade schools also planned activities and lessons for March 14 “to help students express their support for Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and learn about the issues,” district Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said in the letter.

Carvalho gathered with students and the media at iPrep, where he is principal, and gave a fiery speech from atop a playground platform. The superintendent said while Miami hasn’t experienced the kind of horrific school shooting that rocked Parkland, it has dealt with a series of shootings during his 10 years as superintendent in which kids have been killed.

“Equally reprehensible and behind everyone of these incidents there is a firearm,” Carvalho said. “There is no place in a peaceful America for an AR-15.”

In Coconut Grove, Miami Commissioner and Congressional candidate Ken Russell led a group of students from the private Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart in a march down to City Hall. Camille Garcia-Mendoza, an 18-year-old senior, said the strength of students’ voices will eventually overpower the National Rifle Association, which just saw Florida’s pro-second Amendment Legislature pass a gun control law named after Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

“We are more powerful than them, our voices are louder than theirs — we can stop this,” Garcia-Mendoza said.

Not all school districts welcomed the demonstrations. Administrators in some parts of the country threatened to suspend students who participated.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida sent school superintendents a letter on Monday urging them to “embrace” the walkouts and use them as a teachable moment. The letter cautioned that school administrators can’t punish students for exercising their civil rights.

The national walkout is the latest in a series of protests planned in the wake of the Parkland shooting. Stoneman Douglas students have organized a March 24 “March For Our Lives” in Washington, D.C., and another march in Parkland on the same date. A national demonstration is also planned for April 20, the 19th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado.

Students from at least a dozen South Florida high schools also walked out of class on Feb. 21 to honor the Parkland victims and mark the one-week anniversary of the shooting.

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