

## ***‘LET US NOT LIMIT THIS NARRATIVE’***

### **Walkout**

#### **High school students vow to be heard with unified message**

#### **WALKOUT WEDNESDAY**

**Meghan Finnerty, Lauren Peace, Sarah Taddeo and Victoria E. Freile**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Dylan Holcomb and his peers at Brighton High School spent just less than a month coordinating a student-led walkout to take a stand against gun violence following the bloody massacre that left 17 dead on Feb. 14 in Parkland, Florida.

Like thousands of high school students around the country marking National Walkout Day by leaving their classrooms in remembrance of the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the Brighton teens were ready to go at 10 a.m. and nothing — not even an unanticipated half-foot of snow — could soften their message.

An estimated 600 Brighton students made their way from the sanctuary of their classrooms out onto the school’s snow-clad football field. They stood before a group of student leaders where they listened to statements that expressed not only solidarity with the victims and survivors of Parkland, but also opposition to all violence.

“Let us not limit this narrative to the innocent suburban victim, but let us keep in mind all of those lost to racist, homophobic, terroristic and domestic gun violence,” Dylan said before the crowd.

Throughout the demonstration, student speakers stressed time

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WALKOUT

Olivia Grieco, Amanda Gregory and Aviya Garg brave the cold and snow during a walkout Wednesday

**Olivia Grieco, Amanda Gregory and Aviya Garg brave the cold and snow during a walkout Wednesday at Brighton High School to protest gun violence in schools and promote school safety. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



**Students at School of the Arts walk out. One holds a sign, 'We are the change.' TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

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and time again that the movement to end gun violence, led primarily by America's youths, will not end here.

“I urge you, do not let this protest be an isolated event,” Brighton senior Jordan Meeker said. “Continue to push for the change that you desire to see by organizing and participating in further peaceful protests, writing your state and federal senators and congressmen and women, and remembering to go and vote. If we continue to come together to fight injustice, we are sure to make an impact. Do not give in, and do not give up.”

An estimated 3,000 schools participated nationwide. While some school districts engaged in the planning and used the students’ desire to foster an educational experience, others discouraged student-led walkouts.

Schools in Monroe County worked with local police in advance to ensure student safety in the case that students chose to leave school.

Monroe County saw students walk out at School of the Arts in Rochester and World of Inquiry School No. 58 on Wednesday morning.

Aquinas Institute and McQuaid Jesuit High School held indoor prayer services; Hope Hall held a Remembrance Ceremony, also indoors.

In Greece, Webster, Penfield, Pittsford and Fairport, students participated in discussion forums and unifying activities to remember the victims of Parkland and to promote peaceful assembly. Brockport High School allowed high school students to walk out, but didn’t stop classes, according to the district.

About 400 students participated in a 17-minute walk at Eastridge, as biographies of the 17 killed in Florida were read over the stadium sound systems.

At School of the Arts in Rochester, a parade of students streamed from the doors just before 10 a.m. The rally was held in a parking lot off Prince Street, where several hundred students gathered to hear student speakers and spoken word performances. Student organizer Grace Myers, 18, estimated that the crowd comprised most of the student body.

“Gun violence is a public health crisis in the United States,” Grace said. “Mobilizing youth and having them take 17 minutes out of their education in order to protest can be really impactful.”

As they huddled in the blowing snow, some students carried signs bearing phrases such as “Fear has no place in our schools.” Others started chants, including the national stand-by “We are the change.”

“We’re here to stand in solidarity with the Parkland teenagers and we’re here to try to enact some political change,” said Beatrice MacLagger, 17, who was among the many teens to walk out at the School of the Arts.

Beatrice said teens aren’t just focusing their efforts on Wednesday’s demonstration, but are writing to congressmen, senators and other politicians. They’re also urging students who are 18 to register to vote.

Aquinas participated in National Walkout Day with a student-led prayer service inside the fieldhouse. The student organizers said the event was not political. Its priority and purpose was to come together and remember the Parkland shooting victims.

While no bell or announcement came over the school sound system, students gathered at 10 a.m. The 17-minute event included prayer, passages, a poem and a song of reflection. The student body appeared solemn, as the names of the 17 victims of the Parkland shooting were read aloud as students held handmade signs with their names.

The students dressed in maroon, unified as a school and in the same school color as that of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High..

Senior Kaycee Viator, 18, said she was fortunate to be an Aquinas student and the day brought her mixed emotions.

“I’m happy that we’re able to be strong,” Kaycee said.

Principal Ted Mancini added that he was proud of the students for demanding they be heard.

“Thirty years from now, they’re not going to talk about what they did in math class, but they will remember what they felt today, or what happened today or that they had the opportunity to do this today,” Mancini said. “Perhaps it will give them a chance to use their voice again, or find their voice when they need to.”

On Twitter, Aquinas football coach Derek Annechino shared a separate message, joining a large number of people around the country encouraging students to create a positive and safe school climate by “walking up” instead “walking out.” The movement encourages students to reach out and connect with peers, particularly those who might sit alone or work alone in class, and to be kind to one another.

On Facebook, McQuaid said the prayer service was its students’ idea. “This morning, students gathered in the gym as class officers read the names and a brief bio of each victim of the Parkland shooting. Following each name a candle was lit in his or her honor.”

While there was much discourse leading up to the day, the wave of student-led action on Wednesday was by students and for students, a point many school districts made clear. School administration as well as parent teacher groups held back, letting students take the lead, although some offered guidance and support.

Churchville-Chili parent Jeff Briggs was concerned students might not understand what their action stood for or how it would be conveyed. Briggs referenced a national conversation about stricter gun reform legislation and politics. While some actions across the country were in protest, others stood in solidarity with victims — or a combination of the two.

He opened the conversation with his 13-year-old daughter, who is in seventh grade, inquiring what she would do. “She had no idea about the legislation,” Briggs said. “We talked through it.” While he supports his daughter, Alexis Cannan, “I want her to understand the facts of everything that she is supporting.”

Alexis told him she thought the planned action was solely about remembering the school shooting victims. The decision to participate or not was left up to her and Alexis decided to walk out.

Jori Cincotta, a Pittsford parent involved with her regional and local PTA, said the association chose not to take a stance on the walkouts.

“For all of us, we believe that it is important that our association in no way co-opts the efforts of our students. It is their voice, not ours. Above all, we believe it is essential that we listen to what our students have to say. As we listen to our students and our children, our resolve will be strengthened and our advocacy better informed,” read a statement from the National PTA.

Imani Hudson, a senior at Brighton High School, said that the morning proved to be an opportunity for just that, showing the nation that students have a voice and demand to be heard.

“We are almost 18, (some of us) are 18, and we will be going to the voter registration very soon. We are the future generation and we stand to make a difference in this world, not when we’re older, but right now,” she said.



Samiha Islam holds a sign as she and other classmates brave the cold and snow during a walkout Wednesday

**Samiha Islam holds a sign as she and other classmates brave the cold and snow during a walkout Wednesday at Brighton High School to protest gun violence in schools and promote school safety. MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

**“Continue to push for the change that you desire to see by organizing and participating in further peaceful protests, writing (politicians), and remembering to go and vote.”**

**Jordan Meeker**

Brighton High School senior