



Thousands of students marched from Wooldridge Square Park to the Capitol to protest for changes in gun-control legislation. Photo by Ian Clennan.

Students storm Capitol for safer schools

Hundreds from Mac, thousands from Travis County, walk out for stronger gun control

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photo editor

For most of us, the idea of gun violence at school is an abstract fear. If a potato chip bag pops in the cafeteria, we jump because our fear and awareness of school shootings is keen. For Crockett student Robert Spong, however, fear of gun violence is not abstract.

Spong has lost three friends to gun violence in the last two months, and it was that reality that brought him to leave school and come to downtown Austin on Friday along with thousands of Austin-area high schoolers, hundreds of them from McCallum.

"The reason I came is because three of my friends have died because of gun violence in the last two months," Spong said. "One of them was right down the street from school going home, and the other one was in his apartment and [was] killed just because somebody wanted to kill him, just because they wanted to catch a body for their gang. [But from] what I've seen here today, I really think we're going to make a change."

Spong was one of thousands of Travis County students who walked out on Friday as part of a nationwide protest in thousands of U.S. cities. Most of the students who participated were not even born when two active shooters at Columbine High School killed 12 students and one teacher. But on the anniversary of the 1999 shooting, and a little over two months after the Feb. 14 shooting in Parkland left another 17 innocent people dead, many students marched to the Capitol, outraged because they feel they live in a world of constant Columbines and that the government has done little to change that fact.

"I feel really strongly about the common sense

gun-control movement because some of my friends have been affected by gun violence," Ann Richards junior Almina Orbach said. "This issue is personal for me because I have friends at Atkins who have had two shooter lockdowns this year. It's the fact that this issue is so prevalent in our society, and it shouldn't be. Students should not fear for their lives when they go school."

An estimated 300 McCallum students left their classes at 10 a.m. Friday morning and walked in silence to honor the victims of the Parkland shooting. Converging in the band practice parking lot, students took their seats, looking to the 10 student leaders and speakers that sat with their hands locked during 17 minutes of silence—for the number of victims killed in the Parkland, Fla., shooting on Feb. 14. Clearing her throat and stepping up to the microphone, junior Liz Epperson began to read the organizers' mission statement to the assembled students.

"This generation has never known a time before Columbine; we live with the daily threat of gun violence, even in school, a place where we should otherwise feel safe," Epperson read aloud. "We are more than dissatisfied with a government that does not work towards a solution. We demand that our elected officials act out of the best interest of the people they serve, and not in the interests of the National Rifle Association. We call for a ban of civilian possession of all semi-automatic weapons, as they have no place in our society. We call for better regulations on who can access guns, including mandatory background checks, registration, and better license requirements. Although we are outraged by the behavior of our Congress, this will be a peaceful protest."

After Epperson read the mission statement,

senior Isabel Lerman took the stage to read off a list of demands, which included a reinstatement of 1994 assault weapons ban, the establishment of universal, comprehensive background checks, a ban on high-capacity magazines, an end to the resale of APD firearms to the general public, closing the gun show and online loopholes and increasing funding for mental health personnel on campus.

"We get branded as these crazy gun-hating liberals, which I think is kind of ridiculous," Lerman said. "We're not saying we should ban all guns; we're saying we need to keep a better eye on who has guns, who can have guns and what kind of guns they can have. It's not an issue that's going away anytime soon. I hope that people that go to the rally start making a change in their lives and in the lives of others around them. Be the change you want to see."

Senior Nico Leuba Jones, one of the lead organizers of the rally, read out the organizers' statement to police, which disclosed that while the presence of campus School Resource Officers and the APD presence downtown was intended to keep peace amongst the demonstrators, some individuals felt less safe in the presence of law enforcement. Then, junior Isabella Hernandez took the stage to speak about how gun violence disproportionately affects women of color, women and LGBTQ+ communities.

"I feel very strongly about gun violence, especially in the communities of color because it disproportionately affects communities of color," Hernandez said. "As a person of color, I feel that it's important to represent that community and others that are affected because it's my duty, and it's the issue that I feel most strongly about."

A comprehensive *Washington Post* analysis of 200 incidents of school gunfire since Columbine

revealed that children of color are far more likely to experience campus gun violence than white students. Hispanic students are gun victims nearly twice as much as white students, and black students three times as often.

"It's more than just mass shootings, too," Lerman said. "It's police brutality and domestic abuse. If you're a woman, a person of color or LGBTQ+ you're far more likely killed or attacked with a gun, and that's just not fair. It's a community issue, and even if you're not in one of those groups it's important to be aware of [the issue] and foster change."

Sophomore Kelsey Tasch then took the stand and began to question why students and American citizens had become so desensitized to gun violence. Transitioning the conversation towards guns in the context of domestic abuse, junior Elsa Roberts shared her thoughts on the accessibility of guns in the hands of chronic substance abusers and those with criminal records that have the potential to harm the people in their lives. Jaylen Wilbourn read aloud a poem addressing her reaction to the President's "thoughts and prayers" in the aftermath of the Parkland shooting. As the speeches in the parking lot came to a close, students stood and began the trek up to the Brentwood station, where they boarded the 801 and 1 Southbound buses to Wooldridge Square Park, where students from all around Austin were congregating to march to the Capitol.

"It's always really sad to know that people [my] age are being killed," Marielle Glasse said. "You plan for four years about what you're going to do outside of high school and for someone to not make it through because of a school shooting is heartbreaking. I knew Draylen Mason, the 17-year-old kid who was killed [by] the Austin bomber, and that was really big shock. I want to feel safe, but I

don't think I feel safe because sometimes I'll start thinking about what's happening in the world or I'll read an article or I'll see an interview, and I think my sense of security is false."

Glasse was one of many students at the walkout who have been personally affected by violence. Another Austin-area student, Mya Cruz, has had many close friends and family fall victim to gun violence throughout her life, which motivated her to join the protest.

"[On my shirt], I have my cousin, who is a victim of gun violence," Cruz said. "He was shot and killed. I know a lot of people who have been shot and have been injured. I have a younger sister who's currently in school and God forbid something were to happen in school where she gets hurt and I can't be with her."

Cruz argues that the lack of gun legislation in the country should be a personal issue for everyone, whether they have known a victim or not.

"It's definitely a defining [issue] for us, because [our generation] will be the leaders in charge of the future, and we have to be able to trust each other and make the world a better place," Cruz said. "As long as we work together and are all fighting for the right cause with good morals in mind, we can make a difference no matter what our ancestors have done in the past. It starts now. I think it's important that anyone who has the ability [should] call their congressman, ask about gun reform laws and become as well-educated as you can. Don't let the ignorant people stay ignorant. Help educate them and help them understand what needs to be changed and why."

McCallum students who walked out of classes in the morning were met with a small number of counter-protesters in the band practice parking lot in the form of four students holding signs showing their support for the Second Amendment.

"We want to represent a large part of McCallum who are pro-Second Amendment and pro-gun who are forced to be quiet because of the aggressiveness of the left towards gun control," senior Owen Myers said. "I believe in the Second Amendment since it was instituted in the beginning of this country. I obviously don't believe in fully automatic



weapons. They aren't legal anyways. I'm pro-rifle, pro-gun, and I'm pro-Constitution."

Once at the Capitol, students citywide were met with more counter protesters, who congregated near the Texas Rangers monument at the front of the Capitol. One counter protester, who identified himself only by the first name Joe, had an AR-15 strapped to his back, wore a "Make America Great Again" cap, and firmly expressed his desire to educate students on the issue of gun violence.

"I'm a Second-Amendment advocate, and I'm here to try and facilitate civil conversation and to make it clear as to which way I lean," Joe said. "I feel that a lot of these people aren't educated and don't know what the laws or true statistics are. I'd like to see people get educated, [and] actually [be] open to conversation and to different opinions."

Another McCallum student who met protesters at the Capitol, sophomore Ryan Vincent, firmly believes that proposed gun legislation should not be affected in wake of the tragedy in Parkland. He cited universal background checks as a compromise between gun-control advocates and pro-Second Amendment lobbyists, as he believes that these checks impede rights to privacy. But one compromise is enough, according to Vincent, who argues that registering private sales or closing the gun show loophole (two demands of the protesters) would take away too many of his rights under the Second Amendment.

"I'm here to protest for guns, because the only thing protecting people from other people is guns," Vincent said. "I do feel incredible pity and sorrow for the people who lost their lives and the parents who lost children, but I don't think it's a good excuse to add more gun control. Most of the people here saying that it's really easy to buy a gun clearly haven't bought a gun before."

The march from the park to the Capitol remained peaceful. Numerous law enforcement officers lined the walk on bicycles. Some of the protesters with signs and chants walked so quickly that march marshals had to stay at the front of the procession to slow down the advance of the crowd. McCallum junior Sophie



Beilinson said the crowd's adrenaline was fueled a commitment to effect substantive change.

"I think it's important for the people we're surrounded by and in our community to know that we're not accepting what's going on, and we want change," Beilinson said. "It's personal because this could happen to me, this could happen to my siblings, this could happen to my best friends. I think we're the start of a change in the entire world and the start of noticing the problems that are occurring without people understanding what is really happening."

Upon arriving at the steps of the Capitol 15 minutes early, the gathering of students, teachers and passionate adults flooded the Capitol lawn, pushing towards the front, eager to see the speakers who were timed to start at 1. As the organizers flew about the stage trying to make up for lost time, one lead organizer, Headwaters sophomore Sasha Ashton, stood at the front, leading chants to keep the protesters engaged and enraged.

"No matter your level of education or your opinions of the Second Amendment, or gun rights, if you are a moral human being, you will take any action necessary to prevent losing the lives of children," Ashton said. "If that's not a good enough reason [to march], I don't know what is."

The rally commenced when the Texas Resistance Choir sang the National Anthem, adding the unofficial fifth verse written half a century after the original anthem by poet Oliver Wendell, which reflects some of the nation's internal moral struggles during the Civil War. Then, after a brief introduction by the event's emcee Bayley Stewart, local student activist and Westlake sophomore Jemima Abalogu took the stage to speak about Power to the Students, an organization that was founded after the Valentine's Day shooting in Parkland. Lloyd Doggett, a UT alumnus and Texan Congressman who represents the district that stretches from Austin to San Antonio, shared his disappointment with his congressional colleagues. He said students needed to walk out of school because "too many elected officials had walked out on them already."

Doggett then said, "I was on the University of

Texas Campus when Charles Whitman had the first mass shooting here in Austin decades ago. I have been involved in gun violence issues since I served in the state Senate here in the Texas Capitol, and I see so much pain and horror that's unnecessary. If we can just stand up to the NRA, we can turn this around."

Rep. Doggett was also a speaker at the Town for Our Lives meeting on April 9, and has repeatedly stated his support for the student movement.

"[We must] keep hope alive with gatherings like this, but the only thing that will get action on gun violence is to throw out the people that won't support us and bring in some people who will," Doggett said.

After speeches from three more gun-control advocates, Felix Kahlor took the stage. A fifth-grader from Maplewood Elementary and a self-proclaimed "serious young man," Kahlor shared his thoughts on gun violence and police brutality. Last to take the stage, Steven Trenfield, a teacher in the Academy for Global Studies at Austin High School, rose to speak about his students, many of whom organized the rally, and how his role as a teacher affected his views of the proposed legislation to give teachers guns.

"The safety trainings [for teachers] are all terrible," Trenfield said. "We lock the door and try to cover the windows so that no one can see in; it's just dumb. Nobody's going to fall for that. I get that it clears the halls, but it's not enough. I'm not saying we shouldn't have lockdowns; I'm saying there should be something else."

Trenfield was embraced by his students stage right and a roaring applause of students like 12-year-old Wesley Aubin of the Headwaters School.

"I think [gun violence] is one of the biggest problems in our generation," Aubin said. "When I grow up I'm going to stay involved in this topic and, when I grow up to be old enough, vote. I might want to get into politics and try to help everything work out. I want to be a congressman because I just feel super strongly that I want to help everyone."



1. Sasha Ashton of the Headwaters School raises up a sign on the Capitol steps and joins in a chant before the speakers, including herself, started the official program. Photo by Lily McCormick.

2. Hundreds of McCallum students funnel through the passageway to the band practice parking lot, where student leaders would address them following 17 minutes of silence in memory of the Parkland, Fla., shooting victims. Photo by Dave Winter.

3. In tears, senior Marielle Glasse embraces senior Jasmine Skloss-Harrison after student speeches at McCallum. "Jasmine had to go back to class, but she was just telling me to be safe and to be careful, because you really don't know what can happen," Glasse said. "I want to feel safe, but I don't think I feel safe." Photo by Charlie Holden.