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Students plan walkouts, rallies to honor shooting victims and urge change

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Eighteen-year-old Jonathan Weinberg has found it difficult to watch the news lately.

The Concord High School senior cringes at the sound of gunshots on the television, his mind filled with images of students hiding under desks, in the closets of classrooms, texting parents messages of “I love you” for the last time.

It’s become too commonplace for loved ones to be burying their high school-aged children – many younger than Weinberg – on nightly broadcasts, he said.

“Whenever it comes on TV, I have to force myself to listen to it,” Weinberg said. “It’s hard.”

The fear of guns at school became even more real for Weinberg and his classmates last week. Concord High was one of at least four New Hampshire high schools to receive threats that something similar to the massacre in Florida might happen at their school.

The threat at Concord High was sent around via the social media platform Snapchat on Wednesday night. By Thursday afternoon, police announced that they had identified the two students involved, and that they had been removed from the school’s campus.

Exact attendance numbers have not yet been tallied, but officials guessed that about a quarter of the school’s population was missing Friday, the day the threat described a shooting might occur. It was also the day before the start of February

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vacation week, which traditionally garners lower attendance, teachers said.

Weinberg and some classmates decided it was time to take action at Concord High and stage a walk-out for school safety. They joined students across the state – and country – planning similar events to honor students killed at school.

A generation of school shootings

The shooting in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 14 that killed 17 high school students wasn't unlike other school shootings that have happened in high school students' lifetimes.

There have been 17 school shootings in which three or more people were killed since the oldest current high school students were born in 1999, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"This is something that's always been present in our lives," said Concord High student Laila Ruffin El, who is vice president of the senior class. "This is not something we can think about like, 'Oh, what was life like before school shootings?'"

Both Ruffin El and Weinberg remember experiencing active shooter events at their elementary schools in New York and Vermont.

They described growing up in a generation after Columbine, where kids in middle school made jokes calling students who were bullied or who don't fit in "future school shooters," and regular lockdown drills became a normal part of a school calendar.

But something about seeing the survivors of that shooting in Florida – high school students, like them, who had lost so much – traveling to the Florida Statehouse, debating with legislators, even the president, on national TV made Ruffin El and Weinberg want to take a stand.

Weinberg decided to approach Concord High Principal Tom Sica about the idea for a school-wide walkout on March 14, the one-month anniversary of the shooting in Florida.

Students would have the opportunity to leave class at 10 a.m., and stand outside the school in silence for 17 minutes, one minute for every life lost in the shooting, Weinberg said.

This event would take place in conjunction with other high school walkouts around the country happening at the same time, Weinberg said. Another walkout

would be scheduled for April 20, to honor the 19th anniversary of the deaths of 15 students in the Columbine school shooting in Colorado.

He said he wanted to clear the event with Sica, who was supportive, to make sure students didn't have to worry about any consequences of participating in a walkout event.

"We didn't want to ask everyone to come on our bandwagon if they're all going to get suspended," he said.

At John Stark, another school that experienced a shooting threat last week – this one scrawled on a student's desk – Principal Chris Corkey said he had heard interest from some students in his peer leadership group.

"If this is something you want to do, I said to them, 'we need to plan it, and we need to plan the day around that ... We'll put it into the schedule so you can have a student assembly on the topic,'" he said.

Those who want to attend can attend, and those that don't want to don't have to, Corkery said. An important aspect of putting together an event like this is making sure all students feel safe and comfortable, he added.

"We do things in a safe and orderly fashion with no surprises," Corkery said.

Eve Caplan, a sophomore at John Stark, was inspired to take her advocacy to the next level.

Along with another high school student in Plymouth, Caplan is planning a "March for Our Lives" event in Concord for next month in solidarity with marches all over the country advocating for tighter gun laws, including one in Washington, D.C.

Although she's been concerned about gun violence in schools for a while, Caplan said it wasn't until she saw the bravery of the shooting victims in Florida that she felt she could step up.

"In Parkland, all those kids are doing it, and I thought, 'Why not try to do it here? Why not me?'" Caplan said.

Caplan, who does not yet have a driver's license, is taking the reins in applying for an event permit and looking for backers in local organizations for the march on March 24 at the State House.

Participation and education

On Wednesday, Weinberg, Ruffin El and a group of other students sent out a

survey to Concord High students to gauge their interest in a walkout event.

The survey presented questions like, "Have there ever been times when you felt unsafe at school?" or "Have you been distracted by thoughts of tragedies at other schools around the nation?"

Three-hundred thirty-two of 1,600 students responded to the survey, Weinberg said. About half of the students who responded said they had been actively distracted by shootings at other schools in the country, and more than 80 percent said they'd be interested in an event at Concord High to promote school safety.

And not only did students respond, but they wanted to participate, too. Students suggested events to accompany the walkout, like drives in the cafeteria to write letters to legislators, and meetings with advisory groups after the walkout so students have the chance to talk, process and reflect about how the event made them feel.

Weinberg said it was important to the student organizers to make the walkout an inclusive event.

Although he said on a personal level, he would like to see stricter gun laws – particularly laws limiting access to assault rifles – he said he knows that students who choose to walk out of class might have completely different ideas on school safety than he does – and that's okay.

"We're not trying to exclude anyone, or make people feel bad for the views that they have," he said. "We're trying to pay respect to the people who lost their lives."

Education

If anything comes out of the walkouts at Concord High, Weinberg said he hopes students will learn a bit about social movements, and how students can be a powerful force in shaping change in the country.

"If we show that these events have created change, hopefully they will see we aren't just looking for a free time away from class," he said.

Lise Bofinger, a teacher at Concord High School for more than 30 years, said she's seen how resilient high school students can be, especially in the face of adversity. For example, when a student who brought a gun into school was killed at the high school in 1985. Or later that year, when Concord High teacher Christa McAuliffe was killed in the Challenger explosion.

In 2009, she saw kids stand boldly in the face of the Westboro Baptist Church,

when that organization decided to picket outside Concord High. And she witnessed the wave of support from Concord High Students for former principal Gene Connolly after he was diagnosed with ALS.

“You see how much kids can learn from tragedies, maybe especially after tragedies,” she said.

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