

Clayton High School Students Stage Walkout Over Gun Violence | Clayton, MO Patch

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CLAYTON, MO — Students at [hundreds of schools across the country](#) will walk out of class this morning to demand stricter gun laws and safer schools. Today marks the one month anniversary since 15 high schoolers, two coaches and a geography teacher were slaughtered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on Valentine's Day.

At least a dozen schools around St. Louis have planned protests starting at 10 a.m., including Clayton High School, where some teachers have seen an opportunity to add civic engagement to the curriculum.

But that doesn't mean the school district isn't enforcing its standard disciplinary policies. The more than 300 students who participated in today's protest will all receive lunch detention for Missing class. Other schools have gone farther, threatening suspensions or — in the case of Riverview Gardens High School last month — even [preventing students from returning to campus to ride buses home](#).

"It's very important not to let the disciplinary consequences overshadow what these kids are doing," said Clayton School District chief communications officer Christopher Tennill. "This is really the heart of civil disobedience, making this choice knowing there are consequences. But they are the same consequences there would be with any unexcused absence, which would just be a lunch detention."

Tennill said with so many active, civilly engaged students, it is important for the district to treat them all the same.

"If we excuse these students today and tomorrow we have a group of students who want to hold an NRA gun rally, then we'd have to excuse them as well," he explained.

The American Civil Liberties Union has called on schools in Missouri and nationwide to allow students to take part in the planned walkouts. "As educators, you can take full advantage of this moment, and nurture students to learn for themselves about participatory democracy, helping them develop into active and responsible citizens," the group said in an open letter published Tuesday. "Alternately, you can squelch the students' efforts, and contribute to an all-too-prevalent cynicism about a person's ability to make a difference in government and society."

At Clayton High, students will take the walkout a step further by holding a voter registration drive, as well as writing letters and creating videos to get their message out at lunch time.

That message includes calling on Washington to lift a ban on federally-funded gun research and challenging Missouri's lax gun laws, which the students say make it harder to buy a boat or get a driver's license than obtain a weapon.

Federal law requires licensed firearms dealers in all states to initiate background checks prior to the sale of a gun, but such laws do not apply to private sales and are often inadequate, critics say. Missouri, for example, does not require state-level background checks or serve as a point of contact in the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. Instead all state firearms transfers are processed through the FBI's national database, which is often not up-to-date.

Further, Missouri repealed a law in 2007 that allowed for longer, more comprehensive background checks. Cassandra Kercher Crifasi, a researcher at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, said the repeal led to a [spike in murders and 70 percent more guns making their way to criminals](#) across the state.

Clayton High School teachers will echo their students' call for gun reform when they hold their own rally at 4 p.m. They were not allowed to participate in the student-led protest.

More than 30,000 Americans are killed by guns every year and twice that

number are injured, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 13,000 are murdered. The rest take their own lives or are victims of shooting accidents. Almost half are children or young adults.

Last year St. Louis cracked its 25-year murder record. Per capita, the city ranks third for homicides in the United States and first for non-fatal shootings, according to data from the FBI and Major Cities Chiefs Association.

James Croft, outreach director of the Ethical Society of St. Louis — part of the American Ethical Union — has lobbied for stricter gun laws, and called the rise in student activism encouraging. Such civic engagement, he said, is important to the development of young people into responsible adults. Croft holds a doctorate in human development and education from Harvard University.

"Young people have a right to autonomy," he said. "Some people are concerned about young people leaving their schools and classrooms to participate in these protests. But my perspective, as a former high school teacher, is that it's extremely important as part of their civic education to actively participate in the political process. It's profoundly educational to participate in walkouts like the ones happening today. I believe it is so important at this moment for young people to make their voices heard."

He said the best way for students to learn autonomy is to create something of value in their communities, and he praised the efforts of students at Clayton High School and elsewhere in working toward that goal.

"What these students are doing is trying to change the society in which they live, a society in which they have a stake but not a vote, so they're coming up with creative ways to bring attention to the issues that are important to them," Croft said. "I think that demonstrates a high level of maturity, and I think it is to be respected and supported."

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