



Americans Against Gun Violence
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**2019 National High School Essay Contest
\$1,000 Award Winner**

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Student Voices: Now is the Time

Start with little actions; bigger ones will follow. Fight for your life before it's someone else's job to do so. I scribbled thoughts like these in my notebook. In less than 24 hours, on National School Walkout Day, I'd be giving a speech.

The next morning, on the anniversary of the Columbine School shooting -- a massacre that took the lives of kids just like me -- we walked out of our classrooms and gathered in front of the school. We held posters that depicted our thoughts and expressed our outrage. After a walk around the campus, we observed a moment of silence. Then we went to the student center to listen to eight speakers including myself and to sing inspiring songs.

At the end of the event, everyone sang "We are the World" by Michael Jackson, and for a moment I doubted myself: would a walkout from one high school make any difference in the fight against gun violence? But as I reflected on the determined teenagers that orchestrated this event, it occurred to me that this walkout was part of the larger history of the fight against gun violence. We were one piece of the solution. I felt proud as I looked out at the faces of my peers.

A fellow activist and inspiration to me is sixteen-year-old Whitney Bowen. She lay with members of Teens for Gun Reform in front of the White House this February, demanding change. In Whitney's words, "You hear someone drop a book and you hear a loud noise and somewhere in the back of your mind as a 16-year-old hearing about these things you wonder, where's the nearest exit? And do I need to be worried for my safety right now?" Whitney's feeling is the sad reality of American school life.

As an international student living in the States, I share Whitney's feeling -- American schools are not being protected from gun violence. When I step off the plane and into JFK airport, I think about these American tragedies. The large guns of security personnel disturb me. Back at school, I learn two different drills: the fire drill and the lockdown. My peers and I take this practice very seriously.

I cannot end this essay without mentioning the most recent tragedy in Christchurch. New Zealand gives us an inspiring example of change. Less than a week after the Christchurch attacks, New Zealand announced major changes in gun law. They recognized the magnitude of the event and the mass availability of the weapons, and Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister, announced that "every semi-automatic weapon used in the terrorist attack on Friday will be banned in this country." Rebecca Peters, the leader of Australia's successful 1990s gun law reform campaign, praised Arden's actions: "It's been the fastest response ever by a government after a tragedy."

The United States government must follow in New Zealand's footsteps and take immediate action against gun violence. Legislators should protect us. Now is the time.

References

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