



Americans Against Gun Violence
P.O. Box 661252
Sacramento, CA 95866
(916) 668-4160 / (888) 286-8122
www.aagunv.org / info@aagunv.org

Student Walkout at Vigil for STEM Charter School Mass Shooting Victims Highlights Importance of Our National High School Essay Contest

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

High school students attending a vigil in the school auditorium on the evening after the mass shooting on the campus of the STEM* charter school in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, disrupted the program after U.S. Senator Michael Bennett (D-Colorado) and U.S. Representative Jason Crow (D-Colorado) spoke concerning the need for stronger gun laws to prevent such tragedies from recurring.¹ Prior to the comments by the congressmen, the students had joined in singing the Beatle's song, "Let It Be." After the congressmen spoke, however, some students shouted profanities at the press and started chanting, "Mental health, mental health, mental health,"² even though there was no indication that the alleged shooter had previously demonstrated any signs of mental illness.³

Many students walked out of the auditorium as one of the adult organizers of the program apologized, stating, "This was not our intent." Students subsequently returned and seized the podium. One male student said over the microphone, "This is not a vigil, this is purely a political stunt." Another said, "We can't be used as a reason for gun control." A female student said, "I don't condone the constant use of children and violence in schools as a prop." Videos of the event show many students cheering in response to these statements. The videos also show what appear to be sympathetic older adults in the crowd.

A much larger vigil, attended by about 1,000 people, was held without interruption earlier in the day at a Methodist church in Highlands Ranch. The theme of the vigil was, "Light, Hope, and Healing." The vigil was reported to be nondenominational.⁴ The program included many references to a higher (Christian) spiritual power, but there was no reference, direct or implied, to gun control.

The mass shooting at the STEM charter school on May 7 was committed with one or more handguns, allegedly by 18 year old Devon Erickson, a student at the school, who was possibly aided by a younger female accomplice.⁵ Erickson reportedly walked into a high school English class while the teacher and students were watching a movie, shouted, "Don't you move," and then began shooting. An

* STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math.

18 year old senior, Kendrick Castillo, was fatally wounded as he tried to tackle Erickson. Two other students, Brendan Bialy and Joshua Jones, succeeded in subduing Erickson and restraining him until police arrived.⁶ Bialy was not injured. Jones suffered two gunshot wounds that were reported to be minor. In all, eight students sustained non-fatal gunshot wounds. Two of these students were reported to be in serious condition.⁷ As with most other school shootings,⁸ the gun used in the shooting was taken from the student's home.⁹

The STEM charter school shooting occurred exactly one week after a mass shooting at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in which two students were killed and four others were wounded.¹⁰ Like the STEM shooting, the UNC Charlotte shooting was committed with a handgun; a student was fatally wounded as he attempted to take down the shooter; and the shooter had no apparent motive.

Including the mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April of 1999 in which 12 students and a teacher were killed and 24 other students were wounded, the STEM charter school shooting in Highlands Ranch is the fifth Colorado school shooting in the past 20 years.¹¹ Highlands Ranch is just 9 miles from Littleton.

STEM charter school was temporarily closed in April, along with Columbine High School and hundreds of other schools in the Denver area, locking out a total of about half a million students, when the FBI reported that an 18 year old young woman from Florida who was "infatuated" with the Columbine mass shooting had flown to Denver and purchased a shotgun just days before the 20th anniversary of the Columbine massacre.¹² Despite concerns about her mental health, the young woman had been able to purchase the shotgun legally at a gun store in Littleton after passing a federal background check. Schools were reopened when the young woman was found dead in the mountains near Littleton, having apparently committed suicide with the shotgun.¹³

Highlands Ranch was the site of another mass shooting on New Year's Eve in 2017 when a law enforcement officer was killed and four other officers and two civilians were wounded as the officers were responding to a domestic violence call in an apartment building.¹⁴

Highlands Ranch is 24 miles from Aurora, Colorado, where a gunman killed 12 people and wounded 58 others in a movie theater in July of 2012 in what was up to then the worst mass shooting in U.S. history.¹⁵ A representative on the Colorado State Legislature, Tom Sullivan, whose district includes portions of Aurora and whose son was killed in the movie theater mass shooting, said after the STEM charter school shooting that people in his part of Colorado weren't inherently more violent than any one else in the world, "We just have easier access to firearms and are better at killing people than anyone else....It's sick."¹⁶

Although Representative Sullivan wasn't specifically referring to the walkout at the

STEM charter school vigil, I believe the walkout, the vulgar comments the students made to the press, and their parroting of NRA rhetoric once they seized control of the microphone are symptoms of the sickness to which Sullivan alludes. The students who initiated the walkout and later spoke at the microphone appear to have been already infected with gun lobby ideology, and videos of the walkout indicate that the contagion spread rapidly to other students who were present at the vigil.

One wonders how the students who initiated the walkout and later seized the microphone at the vigil had become brainwashed with gun lobby ideology at such an early age. Even though the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school focuses on science, technology, education, and math, it's possible that students could have been indoctrinated by one or more teachers at the school. When we sent out announcements of our 2019 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest to educators earlier this year, we focused on government, history, and social studies teachers, but we received the following reply nevertheless from a science teacher in another state:

I wish you would spend your time and resources on teaching kids to be good parents and stay with the kids they make and stay married. This is the key. But no. The same people that condone killing babies and pushing promiscuity in movies and culture want to prevent people from defending themselves with firearms.

Whether or not teachers at the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school contributed to indoctrinating the students who initiated the walkout, it's clear that the involved students had not been taught to think critically about the gun violence issue. We didn't specifically target the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school with the announcement of this year's Americans Against Gun Violence national high school essay contest, but you can be sure that every teacher and administrator there will receive an announcement of our 2020 contest.

Although the Denver press described the walkout at the STEM charter school vigil as being "spontaneous,"¹⁷ the video images of the walkout, which show a group of male students in matching T-shirts initiating the protest by marching out in single file while older male adults look on approvingly; and the fact that the statements made by the students who later seized the microphone come straight from the NRA playbook, suggest that the walkout might have been orchestrated in advance with gun lobby assistance. Gun control opponents might have been tipped off to the fact that Senator Bennett and Representative Crow would be including mentions of the need for stronger gun laws during their comments at the vigil by "tweets" that the two congressmen sent out earlier in the day.¹⁸

If the walkout at the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school was orchestrated by the gun lobby, it would not be the first time that the NRA has reared its ugly head in Colorado in the immediate aftermath of a school shooting in the state. Ten days after the Columbine high school massacre, the NRA held its annual convention in

Denver, despite the protests of the mayor and nearly 2,000 other Denver area residents.¹⁹ The convention reportedly observed a moment of silence for the Columbine victims, but in his keynote speech, movie actor/ NRA president Charlton Heston likened supporters of gun registration to Adolph Hitler; likened opposition to gun control to support for the Civil Rights Movement; and said that America had “no more precious inheritance” than the Second Amendment.²⁰ He was referring, of course, not to the original version of the Second Amendment, which begins with the phrase, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state,” but rather to the NRA rewrite of the Second Amendment, which effectively deletes that phrase,²¹ and which the late Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger called “one of the greatest pieces of fraud” on the American public by special interest groups that he had seen in his lifetime.²² Sadly, though, the NRA rewrite of the Second Amendment would subsequently be endorsed by a narrow 5-4 majority of Supreme Court justices in the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision.²³

My first reaction as I read about the walkout at the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school vigil and watched the videos was frustration, anger, and even a bit of despair. The more I thought about the walkout, though, the more energized I became.

The walkout at the Highlands Ranch STEM charter school should erase any doubt as to the importance of our Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest as a means of not only fostering and rewarding critical thinking in our youth on the gun violence issue, but also as a means of empowering and motivating them to write, speak, and act with the necessary knowledge and confidence to be effective in helping to curb the epidemic of gun violence in our country – an epidemic in which American high school age youth are murdered with guns at a rate that is 82 times higher than the average rate in the other high income democratic countries of the world.²⁴

If high school students can be indoctrinated with gun lobby ideology at an early age, they can instead be taught the truth about the reasons why the United States has by far the highest rate of gun violence of any economically advanced democratic country in the world, and they can be taught that if they wish to honor and protect their own lives, the lives of their classmates, and the lives of family members, other friends, and other members of their communities, they should demand more than “thoughts and prayers;” more than improved access to mental health services; more than expanded background checks, bans on new sales of assault rifles, and other “quarter measures and half measures”²⁵ that other gun violence prevention organizations refer to as “common sense gun regulations.” They should join Americans Against Gun Violence in demanding that the rogue *Heller* decision be overturned; that our country adopt a complete ban on civilian ownership of handguns, comparable to the ban that Britain enacted following the 1996 Dunblane elementary school massacre;²⁶ and that we adopt a ban on all automatic and semi-automatic rifles, comparable to the bans that Australia adopted within just 12 days of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre²⁷ and that New Zealand recently adopted within one week of the mass shootings at two Muslim

mosques in Christchurch in March of this year.²⁸ And we can also teach students that the day of a mass shooting, the day after a mass shooting, and every other day of the year, during which, on average, more than 100 Americans are killed with guns²⁹ and two to three times this number are wounded,³⁰ is an appropriate day to talk about and act upon the need for stringent gun control laws.

We're currently in the final stages of choosing the winners in our 2019 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest. The prompt for this year's contest was the following excerpt from the majority opinion written by Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*:

The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that doesn't have "some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia."³¹

We'll be awarding a total of \$15,000 in contest prizes this year to twelve winners. We read and rate the essays blinded to any student identifying information, but we know that at least one of the essays was submitted by a student from Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

We'll be posting the winning essays on the Americans Against Gun Violence website in the near future, and when we do, I hope that you'll read them. With few exceptions, the messages that students convey in their essays are much different than the statements that students made at the STEM charter school walkout. I'm sure that you'll find the winning essays to be both poignant and inspiring.

I hope, too, that you'll make a contribution to the Americans Against Gun Violence essay contest fund to help ensure that we'll not only be able to continue to offer the contest in future years, but that we can steadily increase the number and monetary amount of awards that we offer. Contributions to the essay contest fund are tax deductible to the full extent allowed by state and federal tax regulations, and 100% of all donations to the essay contest fund go directly to student awards.

Thanks for your support of Americans Against Gun Violence and our national high school essay contest. Working together, we can stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our country and that disproportionately harms our children and our youth.

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Note: Dr. Durston is a board certified emergency physician and a former expert marksman in the U.S. Marine Corps, decorated for courage under fire during the Vietnam War.

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