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Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/27/when-students-stand>

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Two weeks ago, 18-year-old Emma Gonzalez didn't even have a Twitter account. Today, [@Emma4Change](#) is approaching 1 million followers, far exceeding those of the National Rifle Association. Her We Call BS [speech](#), delivered just three days after the Parkland, Florida, school shooting that left 14 of her fellow students and three school faculty and staff dead, has been viewed over 2 million times.

In a remarkably short period of time, the student activists who survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting have galvanized a national debate over gun violence and school safety, sparked school walkouts and protests across the country, and mobilized a national [March for Our Lives](#) in Washington for March 24.

While many people are inspired and energized by the student Never Again movement, others have been cynical or hostile, accusing the students of being paid actors, FBI plants, or manipulated by gun control groups. Bill O'Reilly [questioned](#) whether the media should be promoting opinions by teenagers who are in an emotional state and facing extreme peer pressure. Even sympathetic observers have been skeptical that the students have the skills or long-term commitment to achieve real change.

In my 20 years as a children's rights advocate, I've learned that underestimating young activists is a mistake. Over a century ago, striking child textile workers marched with [Mother Jones](#) from Pennsylvania to the home of President Theodore Roosevelt in New York, helping to lay the groundwork for U.S. child labor laws. In 1963, thousands of children left their classrooms to [march](#) through Birmingham as part of the Children's Crusade, helping to turn the tide of public opinion in favor of the civil rights movement.

Teens of color have been mobilizing against gun violence for years in response to the shooting deaths of children such as 17-year old [Trayvon Martin](#) in Florida, 15-year old [Hadiya Pendleton](#) in Chicago, and 12-year old [Tamir Rice](#) in Cleveland. In July 2016, four African-American teenage girls led a march of over 1,000 people down Michigan Avenue in Chicago to protest gun violence. High school friends of Pendleton sparked the annual [Wear Orange](#) campaign (named for the color worn by hunters in the woods). Teens of color have demonstrated with Black Lives Matter, joined sit-ins and policy debates, and met with political candidates on gun violence.

Inspiring teen activists aren't unique to the United States. Around the world, high school students have been on the forefront of social change. After the end of Sierra Leone's civil war in 2001, 15-year old Chernor Bah led a [national campaign](#) for free education. At the time, children had to pay to attend school. For poor families, the fees often were prohibitive, and Bah himself had been kicked out several times for failing to pay. Bah and some of his friends formed children's clubs across the country, organized public forums with politicians, started a weekly radio program, and drafted a Children's Manifesto calling for free education. Within a year, the government adopted a free education policy, and hundreds of thousands of children enrolled in school for the first time.

In other countries, children are mobilizing to end child marriage. In Malawi, for example, girls have persuaded village chiefs to enact local by-laws to [protect children](#) from early marriage, and helped convince the national parliament to raise the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18.

In the United States, Portugal, Uganda, Pakistan and India, children have gone to court to sue their governments for failing to protect them from the effects of climate change. In 2015, children in the Netherlands won a suit against the Dutch government, claiming it was in negligent breach of policies to stop global warming. The court [ordered](#) the government to reduce emissions by 25 percent within five years.

To be sure, kids don't file lawsuits by themselves. Like all activists, they need allies, including adults, to support their efforts. But that doesn't diminish their right to speak out and be heard, or their ability to lead.

Last week in Texas, when high school students planned a school walkout to protest gun violence, their school principal threatened them with three-day suspensions. In response, college admissions officers from MIT, Cal Tech, Smith, UMass and other schools tweeted in support of peaceful protest and to make clear that disciplinary actions resulting from peaceful demonstrations would not hurt the students' chances of admission. Other adults should also support, not penalize, the students' activism.

It's too early to know where the student Never Again movement will lead. But the power of teenagers to change the world should not be in doubt.

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