

As students plan another walkout, experts credit social media and civics classes for activism

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FULL TEXT

High school students in Naperville, Aurora, Elgin, Geneva and Oswego plan to walk out of class this week to raise the issue of gun control and school safety as they mark the 19th anniversary of Columbine High School shooting in Colorado, an event that happened before they were born.

The ability of teenagers to organize and bring a nearly two decades-old problem to the forefront of America's consciousness is a testament to how tech-savvy these young people are at marketing and communicating their message.

It should be no surprise, experts say. The toolbox of knowledge this emerging generation possesses and their ambition to have their voices be heard is helping teens shift their rhetoric out of the classroom and into public.

Known as Gen Z, iGen, Centennials and Founders, the group of 23 million born from 1996 to the present doesn't remember a time before social media or smart phones, according to the Center for Generational Kinetics, a company based in Austin, Texas, that studies what makes this generation tick.

The center's research shows not only is iGen educated —a larger percentage of Gen Z will attend and graduate from college than any previous generation, Millennials included —they also are adept at web-based research and know how to self-educate on any topic.

How Gen Zers collect and share information reflects how deeply they rely on mobile devices. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey shows 88 percent of American 18- to 29-year-olds are connected via social media, mostly through Snapchat and Instagram. Gen Z views Facebook as for older generations.

Educators say students' reliance on social media and Illinois' new social studies standards likely are driving much of the recent political discourse and activism at the high school level.

West Aurora High School Principal Charles Hiscock said the major change he's seen recently is not students' desire to get involved in issues, but their access to social media.

"There's always kids that want to get involved and always kids that are pushing things," the 26-year educator said. "I think the difference is with social media and some of the outside influences, (and) I think it's easier for them to do it and easier for them to make their voices heard."

Walkouts on March 14 across the county were driven by a national organization, which was able to get the word out quickly via social media.

Hiscock said social media allowed West Aurora students to easily recognize that other students felt the same way, and that they could take action.

Before social media, students likely were having conversations with each other, Hiscock said. With social media, they are able to have conversations with other schools across the state and nation. During those conversations, students are willing to dig deeper and work to find solutions, Hiscock said.

“(Our students have) been really good about resisting the urge to just call names and just get out there and make noise, as opposed to doing something that’s meaningful,” he said.

Naperville Central High School social studies teacher Seth Brady said another reason why students appear more engaged than in the past could be attributed to how Illinois approaches civic lessons in high school, including the new Illinois Global Scholar certification. “I think a contributing factor is definitely new social studies standards that emphasize taking action as the end to an arc of inquiry,” he said.

“Our state is also a handful of states that has brought civics education back in recent years through new legislation and leadership from the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, Democracy Schools and the McCormick Foundation,” Brady said.

Glenbard North High School civics teacher and civics club sponsor Erica Bray-Parker said she has always taught some form of government class over the last 24 years.

Some of her students in Illinois’ 6th Congressional District recently hosted a gun violence prevention dialog as part of the national Town Hall for Our Lives movement led by survivors of the school shooting in Parkland, Fla.

Bray-Parker said high school students definitely are more social-justice oriented, and she believes it’s the result of a new requirement that students fulfill a civics class before graduation paired with Parkland students’ national call to action against gun violence.

“I think this is turning into a perfect storm,” Bray-Parker said. “There’s this major event kids are passionate about, and they’re in classes that teach them how to write their representatives and how to follow them on Twitter.”

Whether iGen’s passion can sway an election is unclear. A 2016 report from the Center for Generational Kinetics indicates 47 percent of the Gen Zers say voting is important, though most of them at the time they were surveyed were not old enough to vote.

Where students are getting traction is pressing legislators to action.

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Two bills drafted state Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, D-Oswego, with the help of high school students passed out of an Illinois House education committee last week. The bills were outgrowths of a Youth Advisory Council initiated by Kifowit to give teens a chance to change their community with their ideas.

Kifowit said Gen Zers have a “phenomenal grasp of the issues,” adding her college-age daughter has been talking about world news and politics since the sixth grade.

"They have a profound connection to the world," she said. "Truly in their heart of hearts they want to change the world."

Rekha Iyer, a student at Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, said social media helps spread her message about the need to improve school concussion protocols. Hers was one of the two Kifowit youth bills.

Rekha said a Brain Injury Awareness Month fundraiser she hosted March 31 at the Drake Hotel in Oak Brook raised \$6,000. She used social media to promote it.

Not only was she able to share information about her brain injury experiences, Rekha said social media allowed her to disseminate details about the fundraiser quickly. "Social media is a huge equalizer," she said.

How the activism of iGen in high school will translate into adulthood is anybody's guess, but the Center for Generational Kinetics suggests the group could change how business is conducted.

The center's research shows Gen Zers are very eco-conscious and concerned about humanity's impact on the environment, and they're big on volunteering.

With those aspects in mind, North Central College in Naperville opened the Center for Social Impact to develop what the Naperville institution describes as the "next generation of change-makers."

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Co-director Jeremy Gudauskas said the social impact center will serve as a one-stop clearing house for students share ideas related to volunteering, academics and research, social entrepreneurship, civic leadership, and advocacy and activism.

Gudauskas said he's seen a "huge spike" in volunteering college students in recent years. "That generation has matured in age where community service was a part of their lives. They've taken that value of getting involved and evolved it," he said.

In addition, he said the college recognizes students' desire to make a positive impact with their lives and careers. "For the emerging generation, the idea of finding a job meaning and purpose is important," he said.

That trend is confirmed by the Center for Generational Kinetics, whose research shows Gen Zers prefer to have a job that makes a positive impact.

While not new, social entrepreneurship is generating a lot of buzz lately.

Gudauskas said at one time starting a nonprofit was seen the logical means to solve complex social issues facing a community. Now, he said, colleges and universities like North Central are developing programs that focus on social entrepreneurship to fix the same problem with a greater return. "I can put pressure on the legislature to change laws. Or I can meet a market need and leverage change in different ways," Gudauskas said. "We see that in our students. There is a hunger."

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