

Tarrant students take to the streets

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Fueled by a frenzy of text messaging and radio and television reports, hundreds of Tarrant County students walked out of their schools Tuesday to protest proposed changes in federal immigration laws.

Throng of students waving Mexican flags and chanting slogans converged on downtown Fort Worth. Police officers in patrol cars and on horseback struggled to keep them on sidewalks.

Some students with cellphones said they had received this text message: "Latinos, Tuesday is the day 4 u 2 wear ur white shirt 2 let them know we are against law HR 4437. Pass 2 all Latinos."

"We are here for family," said Marco Flores, a 16-year-old sophomore at South Hills High School. "This country is composed of immigrants. If we hurt this country, we have only hurt it by making it money."

Authorities called the protests mostly peaceful and reported only a handful of arrests and citations.

One serious injury was reported in Dallas, where an SUV full of students rolled over the hand of an 18-year-old student on her way to a protest, severing it, police said.

A Fort Worth student was arrested after he pushed an officer from her bicycle, a Fort Worth police spokesman said. She was not seriously injured. Two other teenagers were arrested after becoming unruly and resisting officers' orders, the spokesman said.

In Dallas, where Tuesday's protests made national headlines, city officials shut down the elevators at City Hall after protesters entered the building. Outside, young people jumped into the reflecting pool as police officers formed a barricade.

The walkouts came a day after similar ones in other U.S. cities, where thousands protested the House bill that would make it a felony to be in the country illegally. It also proposes building fences along portions of the U.S.-Mexico border.

At the end of Tuesday night's regularly scheduled school board meeting, Superintendent Melody Johnson reviewed the day's events. School officials respect students' desire to protest, she said, but skipping class is unacceptable.

"We don't condone the walkouts," Johnson said. If there are walkouts today, buses will not be provided to return students to their campuses, she said.

District officials taped a message in English and Spanish that was sent to students' home phones Tuesday evening. The message urged parents to talk to their children about the protests but to encourage them to stay in class today. Students who leave school today will be marked absent for the entire day, the message stated.

Dallas officials called for an end to the walkouts and said students could be arrested for truancy today.

"These students have sent a message, and hopefully it has been heard in the ... White House," said Domingo Garcia, a Dallas lawyer and national civil rights chairman for the League of United Latin American Citizens. "However, we are asking all the students, as well as all the parents, that this message has to be done in a more constructive manner."

Roberto Calderon, an associate professor of history at the University of North Texas, said the issue is close to the hearts of students because many are second-generation and have undocumented relatives.

"In a way, students' lives and educational opportunities are compromised because if HB 4437 were to go through, in its most Draconian trappings, we are talking about people being deported," he said.

The march on Fort Worth

The idea to march downtown formed before classes at Polytechnic High School in east Fort Worth. Students said they had been given permission to protest around the campus perimeter in exchange for doing a history assignment.

About 7:45 a.m., about 150 students gathered and chanted, "El pueblo unido jamás será vencido," or "The people united will never be defeated."

But then the crowd drifted onto East Vickery Boulevard and headed west over Interstate 35W.

"The kids are too energized," said Reyna Martinez, 17, a junior who helped organize the protest.

"A lot of us made it across the border, so we're going to make it across the bridge."

By 10 a.m., the students reached City Hall. Martinez announced that they had made their point and that it was time to go back to school.

"You guys, this is good enough," she yelled. "We don't want to turn this into a riot or anything stupid."

But word of the protest had spread to other schools. Students arrived in waves: Just when one group would break up, students from another school would show up and take its place.

The walkout began about 10:45 a.m. at South Hills High School, Principal Glynn Torres said.

Students said they had received text messages and cellphone calls from students at other high schools, urging them to come downtown. Some walked about eight miles, stopping for breaks at gas stations.

Students from Polytechnic and Paschal high schools met at Trimble Tech High School and walked north under Interstate 30. Police used their cars, sirens and loudspeakers to keep them on the sidewalk. Officers stopped a Ford F-150 pickup that carried 15 screaming, sign-waving students and gave the driver a warning.

Some students seemed mystified about the protest's purpose.

"Everyone just started talking about it, and at third period, they all started walking," said Jose Hernandez, a junior at Paschal. "I'm not really sure why."

Some gathered on the steps of the Tarrant County Courthouse, a sight that pleased onlooker John Chidgey, an immigration lawyer.

"It's just wonderful," he said. "If these kids figure out how to translate this action into influencing the Senate, then that is the American way. They are not doing it with money, they are doing it with feet."

Authorities conceded the area to protesters, blocking the intersection with police cruisers. The students eventually began walking back south toward Fort Worth City Hall.

They were led to school buses where Deputy Superintendents Walter Dansby and Pat Linares pleaded with them to board the buses and return to school.

"You've made your point," Linares said.

Soon after, another group of students, including some from Daggett Middle School and Arlington Heights, Diamond Hill-Jarvis and Dunbar high schools, gathered outside the courthouse.

One student held a sign reading: "U.S. builds wall, U.S. will fall."

Police wrote citations to students who crossed the street illegally.

"I was here, like, five minutes and saw everyone crossing the street, so I just started walking with them," said Jordan Navarro, a 15-year-old student at South Hills. "Next thing I know the police stopped me and said I was jaywalking."

Protests staged countywide

Earlier, Arlington students, mostly from Sam Houston, Bowie and Martin high schools, walked out of class, school officials said. Police blocked major intersections during the march, which culminated in a noon rally on the Arlington High School football field.

Superintendent Mac Bernd characterized the gathering as "respectful and peaceful."

Pablo Sanchez, 16, who waved a Mexican flag at passers-by on New York Avenue, acknowledged that some students were probably using the issue as an excuse to get out of school.

"I know there's some that are doing that," Sanchez said. "I'm just doing this because I'm supporting other Mexicans."

In North Richland Hills, about 50 students left Birdville High School and walked toward Richland High School to meet with other students. But the group thinned to about 25 during the three-mile trip.

A few passers-by in cars shouted obscenities at the students and yelled, "Go back to Mexico."

"We are not criminals," Birdville High student Nely Silvas said.

In Mansfield, about 50 students walked out of Mansfield High School about 1 p.m., school officials said. Most gathered in a parking lot or across the street.

Back in downtown Fort Worth, a small group of students stood on the sidewalk outside Starbucks, still holding signs and cheering at passing cars. Outside the courthouse, a school bus waited for students to board.

Yahaira Villanueva, 15, a student at Castleberry High School, wasn't quite ready to leave.

Cranking the flash on her disposable camera, she stepped off the curb and aimed the lens at the small group of teenagers lining the sidewalk on Weatherford Street. One student climbed onto the back of another and held up the Mexican flag.

Just before the camera flashed, the students screamed in unison:

"MEXICO!"