

SAFE SCHOOLS COALITION

Colorado Springs

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Nine and a half years ago Colorado became the epicenter of the nation's focus on the problem of violence in our schools. Prior to its occurrence, the tragedy at Columbine High School on April 19, 1999 seemed unimaginable to us in its nature and scope. It seemed inconceivable to us that two young men could be so misdirected. In the aftermath of Columbine we did a great deal of study and introspection about school safety and passed a variety of laws related to the subject. Our main focus was recognizing threats within our school communities.

Then, in September of 2006, a fifty-three-year-old deranged drifter entered Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado, took six female students hostage in a classroom and sexually assaulted them. When police entered the classroom he shot and killed one of the hostages, Emily Keyes. In reacting to the hostage taking, law enforcement very capably applied the lessons learned at Columbine. But even the best efforts of law enforcement in reaction to a crisis cannot prevent adverse consequences.

In April of 2007, the worst incidence of violence in an American educational institution occurred at Virginia Tech University, resulting in the death of thirty-three people. A violent rampage on an idyllic college campus really dramatized the tensions between what we hope to have in an academic environment and what we can lose if we take all possible steps to ensure the greatest possible security.

The bottom line ladies and gentlemen, is that in the nine and a half years since the Columbine incident in 1999 there have been almost 250 school related violent deaths in the United States -- over half of them by shooting. School violence continues to be of paramount concern and it is an issue we will be dealing with for the foreseeable future.

We now clearly understand that the threats to the safety of children at school are both internal to the school community and external to it. Not only do we need to be concerned about our ability to detect troubled students and school personnel, but we need to take all reasonable steps to prevent outside threats from entering our schools.

Despite all that has occurred in the nine and a half years since Columbine, there remains a real need to continue the important work that was inspired by that event. That's why it's good that we come together periodically in forums such as this to assess where we've been, where we are now, and where we need to go; to share information about what works and develop creative new ideas. I see it as my limited role here today to encourage you to re-examine your statutory duties and to assess the extent to which you are doing everything you can in your schools to assure as safe an environment as possible.

It's essential that as we continue to explore issues surrounding school safety we maintain perspective. Our efforts must be grounded in reality and not myth. But we must also recognize that, to some extent, the perceptions of our students and parents about school safety are themselves a reality to be dealt with.

Our schools in Colorado remain safe places. Only a small fraction of serious crimes occur at school. Students are twice as likely to be victimized at home as they are

at school and three times as likely to be victimized during the after school hours of 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. than they are during school hours.

But there is still much to be concerned about. Drug use by students, while lower than past decades, remains unacceptably high. Gang activities are of serious concern in many areas of Colorado. And bullying is a documented reality. Too many kids stay away from school because of bullies. And bullies and their victims are significantly more likely to commit crimes.

Colorado School Discipline Reports for the 2006-2007 school year reflect 132,343 school discipline incidents, 64,737 suspensions and 2,247 expulsions. The Safe2Tell hotline has generated about a thousand investigations since its inception in September of 2004 including assaults, bullying, child abuse, drugs and alcohol, fights, gangs, weapons, sexual assault, possible suicides and vandalism.

Surveys show that students and parents continue to have a high level of anxiety about possible violence at school and that perception extends to rural as well as urban schools.

So the challenge to ensure their physical and psychological safety is a real one and demands our utmost attention.

The U. S. Secret Service has done a study of school-based shootings and found ten common denominators that characterize such incidents.

1. Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
2. Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
3. Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
4. There is no accurate "profile" of students who engage in targeted school violence.
5. Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused concern or indicated a need for help. The Virginia Tech incident is yet another confirmation of this reality.
6. Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.
7. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
8. Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
9. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
10. Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most of the incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

The National School Safety Center has developed a checklist of 20 early warning signals concerning student behavior that should trigger prevention and intervention procedures. Some of these are that the student characteristically resorts to name calling, cursing, or abusive language; that they have been bullied or engage in bullying; that they appear depressed and have exhibited significant mood swings; they have threatened or attempted suicide; they have been truant, suspended or expelled.

As I indicated, in the years since Columbine we've studied school violence issues carefully, drafted recommendations and even passed laws requiring or encouraging schools to plan for emergencies and to engage in information sharing.

Whenever I speak to school officials about school safety concerns, I constantly encourage them to ask certain fundamental questions to determine if their school's in compliance with Colorado law and aware of the recommendations of the Columbine Review Commission and other school safety reports. The following questions are axiomatic:

1. Does your school have an emergency crisis plan?
2. Does your school have a threat assessment team and are they actively analyzing possible threats within the school community?
3. Are your school resource officers trained as first responders?
4. Do you promote an anonymous means for students to report tips on possible school violence?
5. Have you adopted a bullying prevention program?
6. Has your school entered into an information sharing agreement with law enforcement and other relevant agencies?

My guess is that your school districts have made considerable progress in carrying out your school safety responsibilities.

But I'm concerned that as time goes by there is a real possibility that we can become complacent. Let me share with you an experience I had.

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy I was appointed as a co-chairman of a national task force on school and campus safety formed by the National Association of Attorneys General. As part of that effort we reviewed voluminous documentation that had been generated in the eight years since Columbine. We conducted four national telephone conferences during which we heard testimony from twelve experts on school and campus safety. And while we found that a lot of progress had been made on a variety of fronts, there were also some disturbing realities. The most disturbing was that many emergency management plans were not being constantly reviewed and updated, and many were drawing dust on a shelf. And, most importantly, schools and colleges were not conducting periodic exercises, to include lockdown drills, to ensure understanding by faculty and students about what was expected of them in emergency situations. Schools that had developed communications systems were not consistently and adequately testing their capacity and effectiveness.

The bottom line is that schools and colleges were not practicing their emergency plans. And that's of great concern. Policies on a dusty shelf don't save lives. Knowing how to respond to the actual needs of students and possible threats to their safety is what's important. You need to know what resources are available to deal with substance abuse, mental health issues, bullying, and other threats of violence. You need to hear about creative solutions developed in some communities that have reduced levels of violence and enhanced school safety. And that's why we meet periodically in circumstances like this.

We need to constantly reevaluate and refocus on what we can do to promote the physical safety and psychological safety of students. The four components of school safety are preparedness, prevention, response and recovery.

The first key is preparedness. Assessing threats, PRACTICING safety plans, setting up incident command structures and information sharing agreements are some of the keys to being prepared.

Sharing information about high risk behaviors on a regular basis so coordinated interventions can be developed is absolutely critical.

The Attorney General's website has a template for information sharing agreements under its Safe Communities section. It is a long document (more than 60 pages) but is meant to be used as a cut and paste for different entities. A one-page checklist, also on the website, was developed as a quick way to review whether your jurisdiction is regularly sharing information.

The second component is prevention. Some examples of this are: dress codes to limit gang apparel; parent involvement in school programs and opening lines of communication; proper lighting; building access rules; and developing resources in law enforcement and community mental health and substance abuse treatment.

The third is response. The issues here include how a response is activated, who has the authority to make decisions, and what outside entities need to be notified. Dealing with the media and public information should be planned as part of the response, whether the incident is large (active shooter) or limited in scope (student dealing drugs at school).

The fourth component is recovery. Physical site restoration is part of this, as is support of students, parents, and community. If the safety issue is an individual behavior problem, how does that student return to class? Is the class prepared? Are the teachers prepared?

These are overwhelming issues for any single entity or individual to handle. The safety of our students requires many of us working together at every level. And that's why we meet periodically in circumstances like this.

Ladies and gentlemen, you're here because you have chosen careers centered around children and solving the problems that confront them. You are here because you recognize school safety is absolutely essential to creating an environment conducive to learning. And hopefully, you are here because you recognize that Colorado should be at the forefront of our nation's school safety efforts. Our state has endured dramatic and tragic incidents of school violence. We, more than anyone, should be willing to do what's necessary to lead the nation in finding creative solutions to improving student safety.

Thanks for being here and dedicating yourselves to that task.