LIFE-SAVING

AP Photo/Eric Gay

What have schools learned since Columbine about keeping students safe?

Not long ago, three teenage boys in New Bedford, Mass., a town about 50 miles south of Boston, devised a plan to conduct a violent rampage at their high school.

The boys plotted to kill as many "jocks, preps, thugs, and faculty" as they could with bombs and guns. They called themselves the Trench Coat Mafia, after their Columbine heroes, and wanted their murderous attack to be even deadlier than the 1999 massacre in Littleton, Colo.

But the attack never happened.

The plot was uncovered before it could be carried out, and the three teens were arrested just a few days after Thanksgiving. The foiled plot was seen as a victory in the world of school security: The district's security measures had helped avert a potential mass murder.

Finally, the lessons learned after Columbine were saving lives.

Why? How? Here?

The bloody massacre at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, was a wake-up call to the nation and the education community. It was the deadliest school shooting in history. Fifteen

LESSONS

BY LOTTIE L. JOINER

people were dead, including the troubled teen attackers. Middle-class suburban America was left with a sense of disbelief and a storm of unanswered questions. Why? How? Here?

The vicious attack made the nation's worst fears a reality. Youth violence was not just an urban problem, unique to the inner cities. It could happen in any school, in any part of the country. No one could say, "Not here; not us."

"Columbine was a point where many people's eyes were opened," says Joanne McDaniel, acting director of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in Raleigh, N.C. "It wasn't just a violent incident that had many people killed and wounded. When we peel away the layers, school climate was a critical factor in what was taking place in that school—how kids were treating each other."

It's been nearly three years since the violent rampage in Littleton, and schools are still trying to come to grips with the potential for terrible violence in their classrooms. What measures should be taken to prevent another Columbine? What lessons did we learn from that dreadful event that can help keep our children safe?

Schools are taking many different steps to prevent violence, but one constant remains: The Columbine calamity has made safety a requirement. If anything, the tragedy taught us that the potential always exists for another tragedy to occur—any day, anytime, in any town.

Foiling attacks

Nearly half a dozen murderous attacks have been foiled across the nation in recent years because of the lessons learned from Columbine. Last spring, for example, two young boys in Twentynine Palms, Calif., were arrested after police found a gun and a hit list of 16 students. School shootings were also averted in Fort Collins, Colo.; San Jose, Calif.; Hoyt, Kan.; and Elmira, N.Y. And elsewhere in the nation—in Alabama, Indiana, New Jersey, and North Carolina—officials stopped dozens of students from carrying out violent rampages.

In New Bedford, officials became aware of the plot against the high school after a young girl talked to a favorite teacher. The girl said she had overheard boys talking of a plan to bomb the school and shoot students. The teacher told a school officer. The week before, bomb-making materials had been discovered near the school after the landlord of a neighboring building alerted authorities. A letter found by the school janitor, which outlined plans for an attack, rounded out the evidence officials needed to arrest the teens. After searching the suspects' homes, police found shotgun shells, knives, and bomb-making instructions.

"Everyone played a significant role in this," says New Bedford mayor and school board chairman Frederick Kalisz Jr. "There were a number of players involved and a number of people looking at this situation. They listened and reported it. The system worked."

After Columbine, school administrators in New Bedford had attended violence-prevention and anti-bullying workshops. They also reviewed a two-year study of school shootings conducted by the U.S. Secret Service for the Department of Education. The study found that in 75 percent of 37 school shootings since 1974, attackers had told someone of their plans. The district established security measures around these findings.

Twelve full-time school resource officers were hired for the district's schools. Teachers were trained to recognize the signs of troubled youth and given communication and management tools. Crisis counselors were hired and a videocamera system installed.

"We recognized that as a system we had to make sure the infrastructure—hardware and security measures—were in place," says Kalisz. "You can no longer ignore what can potentially happen."

Since this past fall's attack was averted, the district has been re-examining its security plan, trying to avoid problems in the future. "We all are looking at what can be done to improve the situation," says Kalisz. "No one in the system feels that we have all the answers."

Safe havens

Victories like New Bedford's bear out the latest statistics, which show that school violence is actually decreasing. Still, worried parents and educators ask, "Are schools truly safe?"

Yes, says Kenneth S. Trump, president of the Cleveland-based National School Safety and Security Services. "The reality is most schools are safe," Trump says. "Nine out of 10 times when you have a threat, plot, or a potential incident, it will be unfounded and won't mature. The problem is that anybody can be number 10. Administrators have to take all the possible steps that they can to prevent an incident."

Immediately after Columbine, many school administrators rushed to obtain high-cost security equipment for their campuses. Metal detectors and video surveillance cameras were in-

Immediately following the April 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., the victims were memorialized with roses placed on a school fence. Since then, schools nationwide have responded to the tragedy with heightened attention to violence-prevention programs and increased security measures.

stalled, as were intercom systems and magnetic door locks.

In addition to high-tech strategies, schools have limited the number of entrances to campuses, searched backpacks and lockers, and provided identification badges for all students and staff. A few have even employed the services of bomb-sniffing dogs. Hotlines, lock-down drills, and campus police or school resource officers have become commonplace.

A year after Columbine, schools in California received a "toolbox kit" from the state that included an aerial photo of the school campus, maps and blueprints of the school, a master key, staff and student rosters, emergency phone lists, and emergency evacuation sites. One version of the toolbox is supposed to be kept on campus while other copies are shared with police and fire departments and other emergency agencies.

State legislatures have also gotten into the act, passing bills that make threats and violence against schools a felony. In Michigan, a mandatory 180-day expulsion is in place for students in the sixth grade or higher who make threats against classmates or school staff.

Some districts, however, have put safety on the back burner. And that attitude worries Russell Skiba, director of the Safe and Responsive Schools program based at Indiana University.

"Too many schools say, 'We don't have time to focus on school violence. We're so busy preparing for high-stakes testing,'" says Skiba. "That's a dangerous place to be right now. In schools that are more effective, there is no conflict between preparing for safety and solid instruction. Kids cannot learn if they don't feel safe."

Not by hardware alone

Despite the thousands—in some cases, millions—of dollars schools spent on high-tech security measures after Columbine, campus shootings have not stopped. In December 1999, a 13-year-old boy in Fort Gibson, Okla., took his father's 9mm handgun to school and shot five classmates. In March 2001, a 14-year-old girl in Williamsport, Pa., started shooting in the cafeteria of her private Catholic school, wounding a classmate. That same week, a Covington, Wash., teen brandished a gun around a schoolroom before being talked down by classmates.

And in Springfield, Mass., only 91 miles from New Bedford, a 17-year-old student was arrested in December for the fatal stabbing of a school counselor who had asked him to remove the hood of his jacket.

"Kids will always find a way to get around security," says Alan McEvoy, president of the National Safe Schools Coalition, a Florida-based volunteer organization. "There's a need for some of that [safety equipment] when there's a known pending threat. But as a routine of school, I don't think [it's] effective. The determined student finds a way."

In Palm Beach County, Fla., Nathaniel Brazill found a way in May 2000. The district's schools had numerous security measures in place, including full-time police officers, metal detectors, zero-tolerance policies, single entrances, video surveillance cameras, and a card-access system. But none of tthese measures stopped the seventh-grader from walking into his Lake Worth Middle School with a .25-caliber Raven semiautomatic and shooting his language arts teacher, Barry Grunow, to death.

"When Columbine occurred, I said that couldn't happen to my school," remembers Palm Beach Superintendent Arthur Johnson, who had been a principal for 25 years. But despite the district's precautions, he says the additional security didn't work.

"I don't think you can solve this problem with security measures alone," Johnson says. "It has to involve education, and it has to be early, long, and repeated."

McDaniel agrees. For too many years, she says, safety has been about buying equipment.

"We're recognizing it's just not enough," she says. "We have to move beyond the physical measures and look at the relationships and people who are in the schoolhouse every day."

Peter Blauvelt, president of the National Alliance of Safe Schools in Slanesville, W. Va., believes schools should do away with the technology and focus on relationships with students.

"I'm a believer in using technology in the proper setting, but the single most important thing schools can do is to start talking to kids," says Blauvelt. "In every single case kids have told someone, the adults didn't listen. My gracious, it's so easy."

An either/or mentality can be a detriment to school safety, says Trump of National School Safety and Security Services. Schools need both tighter security and more prevention.

"My philosophy is the middle of the road," says Trump. "Any type of equipment must be a supplement to, but not a substitute for, a more comprehensive school safety program. It's not a panacea."

No equipment required

The Grossmont Union School District in San Diego, Calif., didn't have metal detectors or surveillance cameras before Columbine and didn't see the need to put any in place afterward. Instead, the district placed part-time school resource officers, counselors, and violence-prevention programs in the schools.

"After Columbine, we began reviewing our emergency crisis plans and examined how we would respond to critical incidents," says Granger Ward, Grossmont's superintendent.

In March 2001, the district had to put its emergency plan into action twice, when two school shootings occurred within a month. Charles Andrew Williams, a 15-year-old freshman, entered Santana High School and opened fire in the boys' rest room, killing two students and injuring more than a dozen. About two weeks later, 18-year-old senior Jason Hoffman entered Granite Hills High School, just six miles from Santana, with a .22-caliber handgun and 12-gauge shotgun. Hoffman wounded five people—three students and two teachers—before being shot and wounded by a police officer assigned to the school.

Could the shootings have been avoided?

"That's a question all of us are asking," says Ward. "We

learned we can put in lots of measures to try and reduce the likelihood of critical incidents. But it would be the same as going to the grocery store and [the store] being held up. What could you have done?

"We had two criminal acts. We had done an incredible job of putting in measures. If there are people willing to do criminal acts in the community, there's nothing we can do to prevent it 100 percent."

After the shootings, Grossmont administrators reexamined their crisis plans. One of the first and most important steps was building on the relationship with local law enforcement. At the time of the Santana shooting, a part-time officer assigned to the school wasn't on site that day. But at Granite Hills, an officer was present and took the gunman down without injury to others.

Today, the district works with three different law enforcement departments to make sure every school has a full-time school resource officer. The district also established a Lessons Commission, made up of community leaders and law enforcement representatives, which recommended such measures as establishing an anonymous tip line for students and creating campus safety teams.

RETHINKING ZERO TOLERANCE AND PROFILING

A RASH OF on-campus shootings over the past decade has led schools to adopt a number of safety measures. The most visible—and extreme—responses are zero-tolerance policies and student profiling. These measures have lead to unintended consequences, and now educators and school safety experts are having second thoughts about both measures.

In New Jersey, for example, many schools retracted the state's zero-tolerance policy last year after nearly 50 kindergarten and elementary students were suspended, including one young boy who was sent home for threatening to shoot a wad of paper using a rubber band.

Zero-tolerance policies can contribute to school safety, says Ronald Stephens of the National Safe Schools Center in Westlake, Calif. The key is in "striking an appropriate balance in keeping schools safe and not being too draconian."

The policies can be helpful to school administrators, says Stephens, "but there needs to be some provision for discretion to fit all circumstances in all situations."

Russell Skiba, of the Safe and Responsible Schools Program at Indiana University, doesn't believe tough, quick-fix responses improve school safety. He recognizes that zero-tolerance policies have been adopted because of pressure to deal with school violence, but he says the policies have had a negative effect—especially on low-income or minority students, who seem to be over-represented in the percentage of students who get expelled or suspended.

The policies have "painted schools in a corner" and "taken human judgment out of decisions," adds Alan McEvoy, president of the National Safe Schools Coalition. "Zero tolerance means zero understanding. It is applied in irrational ways and creates a sense that the system is unjust."

The criticism has led some districts to reexamine their policies so administrators can have more discretion, says Joanne McDaniel of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in Raleigh, N.C.

"The goal of safety should be to secure the physical environment, without creating a prisonlike environment," she says.

Another anti-violence measure that is coming under scrutiny is student profiling, in which school officials use a checklist of characteristics associated with youth who have committed violent acts to gauge a student's potential for violence.

Peter Blauvelt of the National Alliance for Safe Schools says profiling caught on after a 1998 study by the National Association of School Psychologists analyzed school shooters and provided a list of known behaviors in the majority of cases. The characteristics were not meant to stigmatize or exclude kids, he says, but to identify those with special needs.

In 2000, however, an interim report by the U.S. Secret Service found "there is no accurate or useful profile of the school shooter." The report showed that student shooters ranged in age, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and academic achievement.

Stephens agrees that profiling is risky. His organization developed its own list of the top 20 characteristics of student shooters and learned that no foolproof profile exists.

"It's a very slippery slope," he says. "There is no system around that will predict with 100 percent accuracy whether a youngster will conduct an act of violence."

Student profiling misses some kids and labels others, Skiba says. He believes school staff should look at patterns of behavior instead of a profile.

"When we try to list two or three characteristics, it doesn't work. We lull ourselves into a false sense of security," says Skiba. "Sometimes the most serious threats are kids we never even thought of."

The bottom line, says Kenneth Trump of National School Safety and Security Services, is that educators need better training in assessing threats. And they need to rely on common sense.

"We have to know our kids," says Trump, who advises keeping an eye out for such things as an adverse change in behavior, rather than a list of characteristics. "We can't get locked into that checklist mentality—that happens a lot in education. We can't do that in school safety."—*L.L.J.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Center for the Prevention of School Violence
  http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv
- The National Alliance for Safe Schools
  http://www.safeschools.org
- National Association of School Resource Officers
  http://www.nasro.org/
- National Resource Center for Safe Schools
  http://www.safetyzone.org
- National School Safety and Security Services
  http://www.schoolsecurity.org
- National School Safety Center
  http://www.nssc1.org
- Safe and Drug Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education
  http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS/aboutsdf.html
- Safe and Responsible Schools, Indiana University
  http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/index.html
- Safe Schools Coalition
  http://www.ed.mtu.edu/safe
- Secret Service Safe School Initiative, U.S. Secret Service
  http://www.treas.gov/usss/ntac
- School Violence Resource Center
  http://www.svrc.net
- US Safe Schools
  http://www.ussafeschools.org

"Prevention is not something that is easily measurable," says Ward. "There is no one answer to safety. If you try to do that, you're missing the boat. You need to have a whole series of things."

The bare minimum

Experts might disagree about exactly what it takes to have a safe school, but the majority believe it is essential to put safety at the top of the educational agenda.

"School boards are responding to pressure to have accountability for academics. We have not as a nation taken the same approach when it comes to school safety and making sure our kids are safe," says Russell Skiba.

Safety experts say school leaders often think about safety and academics as separate endeavors. The challenge is to join the two so no one has to make a choice. Ronald Stephens, president of the National School Safety Center in Westlake, Calif., suggests making safety, along with academics, part of the school's mission.

"School boards should incorporate school safety into the education mission, develop policies and procedures that support safe schools, and make certain all classrooms have good two-way communication from the classroom to front office," says Stephens.

That's the easy part. Once a district has made a commitment to safety, what's next? Metal detectors or an anti-bullying curriculum? Or both?

Most safety experts agree a safe environment requires a combination of security equipment and prevention programs. A school's security plan, however, should be based on the individual school's needs after a long, thorough assessment.

"Each school will need to look at its own issues. Identify where you are now, where you want to be, and develop a plan dealing with the difference," says Stephens. "The strategies, techniques, and curriculum you employ should be directly related to an assessment of need."

McDaniel, of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, says schools should realize that safety is a process that requires infrastructure building, administrative support, and staff development. "You have to have a comprehensive strategy that is need based, information driven, and data based," she says.

A comprehensive strategy should definitely include a good crisis plan, the key to a successful school safety program, Trump believes.

"We're never going to be 100 percent successful, because we are dealing with human behavior. Sometimes something is going to fall through the cracks, and we're not going to be able to prevent it," says Trump. "We have to have some guidelines in place to effectively respond to those incidents that happen and manage them effectively so that we won't have further loss. We want everyone to go to school aware and prepared, but not scared."

Since Columbine, Trump says, educators have been forced to catch up with decades of neglect in crisis planning. School crisis plans used to focus on weather-related incidents, building problems, or extreme situations like suicide. Today, he says, schools have done a much better job of balancing the overall safety program with reasonable crisis planning.

But just because a school adopts a crisis plan doesn't mean the staff knows how to implement it. Many plans are "sitting on a shelf," says Trump, noting that all employees should know what the plan says as well as their roles in implementation.

Strategy and plans aside, New Bedford's Kalisz says schools should remember one important detail when it comes to crisis: It can happen to you.

"It can happen anywhere, and it can happen anytime," he says. "We must be vigilant about that."

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