Columbine’s 10th anniversary finds Lessons Learned

Substantial strides have been made in school security, but glaring gaps remain.

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP

WHEN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS HEAR that the 10th anniversary of the Columbine High School attack will arrive on April 20, 2009, most shake their heads in disbelief. They are amazed that 10 years have passed since this watershed event, which changed the landscape of K12 school safety.

Anniversaries typically mark a time of reflection. A decade later, what lessons have truly been learned from the Columbine attack? Did these lessons result in any substantial changes in the safety of our nation’s schools?

The State of School Security and Emergency Preparedness

The good news is that in general, our nation’s schools today have a higher level of awareness of safety issues and preparedness for emergencies than they did prior to April 1999.

Administrators and boards have reduced access to schools, implemented visitor management systems, improved communications capabilities, boosted the number of surveillance cameras, and taken security into account with new school design and remodeling. School leaders have also zeroed in on school climate improvements, engaged students in school safety programs, created threat assessment protocols, implemented new drills, exercised and tested emergency plans, trained teachers and support staff, and formed ongoing partnerships with first responders and other community partners.

The bad news is that much of the progress made in the months and early years following the Columbine incident has stalled and even slipped backward in recent years. Funding for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools state grant program, the COPS in Schools program that put police officers in schools, and even school emergency planning dollars have been dramatically scaled back.
Lessons Learned

or eliminated over the past decade.

School officials also face increasingly limited time for school safety efforts. The academic demands resulting from No Child Left Behind have left school administrators with less time for noninstructional activities, such as the delivery of prevention support services and staff training on school security and emergency preparedness issues.

The most challenging obstacle in many school communities is complacency. Time and distance from a major high-profile tragedy breeds complacency and fuels denial. Absent a major school shooting in the news or a politically hot school safety situation, it has become far too easy for day-to-day education activities to overshadow safety, security, and emergency preparedness planning.

The result is a mixed bag of many lessons learned and implemented, as well as many remaining gaps in security and emergency preparedness. How schools stack up in school safety best practices varies from district to district and from school to school within each district. It also varies over a period of time and with changes in school leadership and staff.

Security Lessons Learned

Schools around the nation have beefed up their security in a number of areas. Common strategies for improving physical security include:

• Reduced school access. Administrators struggle with maintaining a warm, welcoming and reasonably accessible school for legitimate users while reducing access to school facilities by those with ill intentions. School leaders have reduced the number of doors that can be opened from the outside during school hours, designated main entrances clearly marked by signage, replaced older doors and locks with newer door hardware and locking systems, and installed electronic access control devices such as proximity or swipe card readers. They have also trained students not to open doors for strangers and have trained staff to greet, challenge, and/or report strangers on campus.

• Visitor management systems. A growing number of schools are employing visitor management systems to identify and record visitors to schools. While some schools use relatively basic sign-in logs and visitor identification badges, others have invested in technology that allows the scanning of drivers’ licenses to check visitors against sexual offender databases and produce visitor identification cards.

• Surveillance cameras. The main entrance of many schools, in particular elementary schools, are now equipped with cameras and accompanying speakers and electronic door openers to better monitor the schools’ primary entrance points. Cameras often monitor entranceways, hallways, stairwells, and other common areas such as cafeterias and parking lots.

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• Communications enhancements. Improvements have been made to facilitate classroom-to-office communications, strengthen two-way radio communications capabilities among key administrators and staff, maintain public address systems and speakers, and expedite communications messages from schools to parents in an emergency. A number of schools have enhanced communications links between their schools and local law enforcement.

• Renovation and new school design. Many schools now have school renovation and new school construction projects reviewed by security experts. Lessons from the field of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) have been adapted to schools. Results include reconfigured main entrances that funnel visitors to and through the main office, improved lines-of-sight in hallways, and new washroom designs in elementary schools that feature washbasins positioned outside of the doors leading into separate toilet areas to enhance adult supervision capabilities. Enhanced lighting, intrusion detection systems, and other measures have also received closer attention by school districts in the post-Columbine era.

People will always be the weakest link in school security and emergency plans. The question is, how weak will we allow them to be?

Improved Preparedness

The attack at Columbine High School served as the impetus for improvements in school emergency planning nationwide. Emergency planning strategies include:

• Crisis teams and plans. Most schools have some type of written crisis plan and school safety/crisis team.

• Drills and exercises. Lockdown, evacuation, and shelter-in-place drills have joined traditional fire and tornado drills. First responders are given access to schools to conduct tactical training when school is not in session.

• Computerized floor plans and blueprints. Mapping system technology is being used for improved school and first-responder access in an emergency.

• Threat assessment training and protocols. Schools have created threat assessment teams and protocols, trained staff, and partnered with police to better evaluate threats.

• Training for professional development. Administrators, teachers and support staff have received professional development training on school security and emergency planning details.

• Relationships with community partners. Schools have strengthened proactive partnerships with police, fire, emergency medical services, emergency management agencies, mental health agencies, and other community partners.
Ten Years Post-Columbine Conversation with Cynthia Stevenson

BY ANGELA PASCOPELLA

IT’S 10 YEARS AFTER THE TRAGEDY AT COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL in the Jefferson County Public Schools (JeffCo) in Colorado. Two students fatally shot 12 students and a teacher and wounded 23 others before committing suicide on April 20, 1999. The district will sponsor on that day a ceremony that the victims’ parents are planning, a remembrance that is about them and their children.

In 2000, as a result of those attacks, the state of Colorado mandated every school to have a safety plan. At JeffCo, school staff is trained regularly on safety procedures. Staff and students practice evacuation drills. And schools try to minimize problems before they start with positive behavior and anti-bullying programs. Superintendent Cynthia Stevenson, who became schools chief in 2001 but has worked in the district for three decades, reflects on the 10 years since Columbine and the safety measures that have evolved in the district, which has 150 schools stretched over 750 square miles. DA first spoke with Stevenson in 2004, and she commented on the five-year anniversary of Columbine and what measures had been taken.

You’ve been in the JeffCo system for 34 years. Can you explain your feelings on that horrible day when you were deputy superintendent? As you might imagine, the horror of the day grew with each passing hour. My emotions began with disbelief and ended in despair. By the next day I knew that there was no time for despair so that emotion was replaced with incredible sadness for the families and for the entire district. We went home, immediately, to our families, and to our organizations. I simply put one foot in front of the other and did what needed to be done to keep JeffCo going.

When we spoke in 2004, you said that since the tragedy, JeffCo schools have detailed crisis plans, regular safety drills and strong relationships with local law enforcement. Has anything changed? We’ve implemented a new school safety plan this year. We want to improve and refine as you learn more and as the world changes. One of the examples is the random intruder. Five years ago, we didn’t have intruder crises and tragedies such as those in 2006 at the Amish school [West Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania] and Platt Canyon High School [in the Platt Canyon School District #1 in Colorado] where students were killed.

The school safety plan is quite extensive, and all schools have emergency response as part of those plans. The plans themselves differ from school to school. For example, depending on the layout of the buildings, they all have different evacuation points. If you have to evacuate a building, it’s sometimes just on to the playground. But sometimes you need to get kids off site. It might be a nearby church or other government building.

And as far as the relationships with law enforcement go, in middle and high schools, we have school resource officers who work with law enforcement. If a student is a threat, we join with our local law enforcement agency. When we do threat assessments, we determine how serious the threat is and if law enforcement needs to be involved. If we’re concerned over a custody fight, they will increase police patrols in the area.

Your policies stress respectful environments. Can you elaborate? This has to do with how, within a school, do we have an environment where everyone feels welcome. We are focused on developing cultural proficiency in all of our schools so that our kindness, understanding of diverse cultures and tolerance of differences is increased.

We’re expected to have norms and knowledge of different races and cultures and programs that welcome parents. And we have student programs that are research-based around conflict management and bullying. For several years, we’ve also run a student survey, Make Your Voice Heard, and ask kids, do you feel safe, secure and valued in your school building? It’s about improving student perceptions. Every school sets goals and strives to improve student feelings of safety and caring every year.

Any changes in staff and student safety training over the years? All staff members undergo yearly training in both crisis response and threat assessment. And we use more national FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] courses now. We have people trained in the Incident Command System [a standardized approach to disasters that integrates communication, personnel and procedures] and how to respond to a crisis. More than a few staff members and I have undergone the training. And we do table top training exercises for our safety and security teams in schools to simulate a crisis. Teams are comprised of seven to 10 teachers, principals, assistant principals and others, who are trained and understand the system. Staff members know their roles and are ready for crisis situations.

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Administrators work hard to improve school climate and culture, upgrade mental health support for students, encourage student reporting of safety concerns, and strengthen prevention and intervention resources to prevent crises.

Glaring Gaps

Even with all of the positive strides over the past decade, glaring gaps remain. Some of the more common gaps include:

• Staff, student, and community awareness. The first and best line of defense is always a well-trained, highly alert staff and student body. The time and funding for staff training have steadily decreased, particularly following the introduction of No Child Left Behind. People will always be the weakest link in school security and emergency plans. The question is, how weak will we allow them to be?

• Crisis plans on the shelf. Most schools have crisis plans, but many are outdated and collecting dust upon school shelves. Plans are still not being put together by diverse teams, nor are they reviewed and updated annually, which is a best practice.
Lessons Learned

- **Emergency plans with questionable content.** Many school plans reviewed by school safety consultants have questionable content. Schools typically know, for example, that parents and the media will add the greatest pressure in a school emergency response. Yet parent-student reunification and media management are often two underdeveloped areas in many crisis plans.

- **Exclusion of support staff in training and planning.** School support staff tend to be grossly undertrained and underutilized in school emergency planning. Food service employees, office support staff, day and evening custodians, and school bus drivers are often not included in faculty meetings, on crisis teams, and in drills and exercises. Yet these support staff groups can play critical roles in a school emergency.

- **Decreased funding for school violence prevention, security, and emergency planning.** Federal and state legislators rode the “school safety bandwagon” in the months following the Columbine incident, providing new laws and funding streams for school safety. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, most legislators jumped to the “homeland security bandwagon.”

  How quickly and effectively those gaps will be closed rests with the most valuable resource we have for school safety: our people. Future school safety progress lies in the hands of educators, students, parents, first responders and others who work in schools and/or with students.

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**Future Directions**

Schools in general are more secure and better prepared for emergencies today than they were prior to the Columbine attack in 1999. But glaring gaps in prevention, security, and preparedness remain.

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