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News

April 19, 2009

10 years after Columbine, are state, local schools safer?

By [Davin White](#)
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- On the 10th anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings, researchers argue that the motivations of two high school shooters had more to do with their mental makeup than bullying or violent video games.

In turn, some argue that school systems across the country are not equipped to prevent a repeat of Columbine, and the investment in surveillance cameras and metal detectors is futile.

Still, some local educators believe that the culture of schools has changed over 10 years and they do their best to prevent violence.

"We won't be a school that people say we don't try," said Riverside High School Principal Paula Potter. "And hopefully, everyone feels safe when they come here."

Potter hopes a multilayered approach helps prevent school violence.

In conjunction with the FBI, Riverside officials offer a nine-week program to freshmen. Guest speakers with the Air National Guard, Secret Service and other law enforcement agencies encourage students to follow the law so they don't jeopardize their future.

Last year, the school welcomed speakers with Rachel's Challenge, a nonprofit organization that travels across the country to share a message of acceptance inspired by Rachel Scott, who died at Columbine.

With an enrollment of about 1,300 students, the school needs more than just intermittent programs to curb violence. Riverside is one of many Kanawha County schools with a prevention resource officer, a uniformed sheriff's deputy meant to help deter violence and bad behavior.

Riverside students also are responsible to let an adult know if

something unusual is going on, or if a classmate's words or actions are

Superintendent Ron Duerring said each student has two designated teachers they can talk to if there's a problem -- beyond a prevention resource officer, guidance counselor or principal.

"If anyone knows what is going on with the kids, it will be another student," said Peter Langman, clinical director at KidsPeace, a child crisis center in Bethlehem, Pa.

On a national level, researchers with the California-based nonprofit Community Matters say there has been a failure to bring violence-prevention strategies and development of students' social-emotional skills into the classroom and into the larger culture of schools. Community Matters seeks to prevent school violence and bullying.

Funding available for these programs is inadequate and doled out unevenly across the country, according to a recent Community Matters report.

In Kanawha County, however, a partnership with the Prestera Center helps tackle children's mental health needs, Duerring said.

Workers at Prestera spend time with Tyler Middle School students, and also are involved with Adolescent Suicide Prevention and Early Intervention (ASPEN), a program housed at Prestera, he said.

It's not always easy to deal with a student's mental health issues, Potter said.

"It's a touchy situation if you're needing to talk with a student or parent about something that's going on," she said.

In cases of mental health, Riverside officials try not to make just frivolous cases and take copious notes when problems arise, she said.

"When there are issues we hold those meetings to talk about concerns," Potter said. "For the most part it really does work."

In some cases, Riverside officials tell students and parents about the

resources available for physical or mental health, she said. One unique service at Riverside is the on-campus Cabin Creek Health Center.

@bodsub1:A shooter's mind

@bod:Langman studied the minds of 10 school shooters in his book "Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters."

The school shooters he studied fell into one of three classifications.

Eric Harris, one of the teenagers behind the Columbine shootings, falls into the first category: The psychopathic school shooter.

This shooter lacks a conscience and doesn't really have empathy for others the way most people do, Langman said. They also are narcissistic and have no regard for rules.

"They also are sadistic. They get a thrill to hurt, torture and kill other living things," Langman said. "Where others would be horrified to do such things, they relish it."

The second category is psychotic school shooters, who don't tend to "live in the real world, at least not completely," he said. They hear voices and tend to have delusions that are very rigid, false beliefs, such as "God is persecuting them or monsters are out to get them," Langman said.

Dylan Klebold, the second Columbine shooter, falls into this category.

"He was the biggest surprise among the kids I studied. No one knew how disturbed his thoughts were."

Klebold was not schizophrenic, but he had some of the same disturbed and paranoid thoughts as people with the disease.

For both Harris and Klebold, the problem was not in the home.

Also, the perception that video games and bullying played a role in the Columbine shootings is a misperception, Langman said. According to recent media accounts and books, the FBI also discounted some of the myths behind the shooting.

Langman's third category is the traumatized school shooter, who grows up in an abusive home where at least one parent has a criminal history or a drug or alcohol problem.

Two out of three of these abused children have been also been

sexually abused at home, Langman said.

"These kids came from completely different backgrounds than the other two types," he said.

Across the nation's schools, there has been too much emphasis on an "outside-in" approach that focuses too heavily on security, crisis management and punishment, according to the Community Matters report.

"I would agree that schools need to be doing more to identify kids who are struggling psychologically and get them the help they need," Langman said. "We need more in the way of early identification."

The benefits of a guidance counselor or resource officer who understands mental health issues trump a need for armed security guards, metal detectors and surveillance cameras, he said.

Many shooters have rushed school entrances regardless of the security, Langman said. Klebold and Harris were caught on videotape and exchanged fire with an armed guard, he said.

School leaders should seek to strengthen relationships and empower young people to improve the school environment and change social norms so bullying and violence are not condoned, authors of the Community Matters report said.

@bodsub1:Prevention efforts in middle school

@bod:Melanie Vickers, assistant superintendent in charge of Kanawha County middle schools, said the state's new structure for middle schools lends itself to violence prevention.

"Middle schools are formed in teams and I like to call them families," said Vickers, who added that students' psychological and emotional needs are a priority.

Adult mentors now "adopt" middle school students more than ever before, she said. In the meantime, teachers sit down and discuss what strategies will benefit students the most, she said. At junior high schools -- a structure that's extinct in West Virginia -- it didn't work that way, said Vickers, who used to teach junior high students.

"I went in and closed my door and I never saw another adult [some days]," she said.

Mickey Blackwell, principal at Horace Mann Middle School, agrees

with Vickers.

"The number one way to prevent something like [Columbine] from happening is you have to build strong relationships with your kids," he said. "If there's a positive feeling of trust in the building, you're usually alerted to something before it happens."

Teachers and staff at Horace Mann also know many students' parents, stepparents, aunts, uncles and grandparents, who can help to quell problems before they grow.

"We do a million things to make sure one bad thing doesn't happen," Blackwell said. "A bad thing could happen anywhere, but I think schools are better prepared than others are."

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