



Posted on Sun, Apr. 19, 2009

Columbine's ghost lingers 10 years after school massacre

Strand districts say safety is paramount but money is tight

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Ten years ago, security cameras, metal detectors, in-class telephones and police officers in the hallways would all have seemed out of place in the average American high school.

Then, on April 20, 1999, the Columbine school shooting dramatically changed how administrators, parents and children thought about school safety.

The shooting galvanized schools along the Grand Strand and nationwide to retool their approach to school safety, which has led to heightened restrictions on entering schools, more police presence and emergency plans that make sure schools are ready for the unexpected.

"Now we have intruder alerts and shooter drills and building lockdowns and bomb threats. It's night and day compared to where we started," said Georgetown County School District Superintendent Randy Dozier. "It was unusual before to have a uniformed officer in a school building. Now you can't walk into a building; you have to buzz in. You're on video camera and you have to announce yourself. We have picture IDs and badges and crisis management plans, and school crisis plans."

In the years since Columbine, schools nationwide have boned up on security, from uniformed police to metal detectors.

Some experts say that these changes have improved school safety tenfold; others say that a deeper mentality change is needed to really prevent future incidents. And still there are those who worry the progress that has been made could be jeopardized by impending budget cuts.

Columbine was different

"It was devastating. It created a whole lot of fear, and I remember thinking for the first time that it could happen anywhere," said Mona Sarajian, president of the Carolina Forest High School Parent Teacher Student Organization.

Sarajian had a child in high school when the Columbine shootings occurred, and she has another child in high school now. Millions of people watched the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Co., unfold on television a decade ago this Monday, as Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot 38 people, eventually leaving 15 - including themselves - dead. It drove home for many, including Sarajian, that school safety could be an issue.

State and federal governments responded by hastening some existing efforts and shifting funding to national school safety organizations and school districts to bone up on security.

"There was [state] funding appropriated in the late '90s. There was legislation proposed and passed for funding school resource officers at high school and middle school levels, and that was backpacked into the general education fund budget," said Beth Mackinem, S.C. education associate with the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program.

Mackinem said all but two school districts in the state employ school resource officers. She said her program also provides money through a middle school program for counselors or resource officers at the district's discretion.

School districts are now also required to have policies in place to show they are making efforts to have a safe school climate, including procedures for bullying and reporting suspicious events.

In Horry County Schools, the changes have been similar to those in Georgetown, according to Director of Operations Bobby Nalley. He said the district has a safety and evacuation plan in place, as well as handheld metal detectors, school resource officers at every middle and high school, phones in most if not all classrooms, parking lot security, video cameras and new sign-in procedures to keep students safe. The high and middle schools were also equipped with free-standing metal detectors in September.

Rasheed McKnight, 13, and Jerra King, 13, seventh graders at Myrtle Beach Middle School, said the procedures definitely make them feel safe.

"There are metal detectors, and the principal and [school resource] officer walk through the hallways to make sure you're doing what you're supposed to," he said. "And if your parents come to pick you up, they have to have a driver's license."

King said she felt comfortable talking to the resource officer about concerns.

"He's really nice. I say 'Hi' to him sometimes when he's in the hallway," she said. "The metal detectors aren't used very often. They don't really bother me."

A change in attitude

Perhaps more important than the physical equipment schools have purchased is the attitude many districts are working to foster in students.

"One of the big things that I have noticed is that in most cases when a gun or weapon was found in a school, it was a student who went to a school resource officer or another adult to report it," said Jim Foster, spokesman for the S.C. Department of Education. "That's a huge shift of students taking personal responsibility for their own safety."

Dozier agreed, saying nearly all the incidents he has dealt with since becoming superintendent have been student reported.

"I want to compliment them for being aware. Most of the time when we question students about these things, they understand the seriousness of it," he said.

At Carolina Forest High School in Horry County, School Resource Officer Marcus Rhodes works to foster an open relationship with students.

"The safety of a school is in the hands of the people who walk the halls and attend the classes. We hope to be highly visible and available to our populations," Rhodes said. "Students by nature are wonderful people who want to live and go to school in a safe place. They understand that their participation in that safety is our most powerful weapon against incidents like Columbine."

Rhodes said he and the administration regularly remind students of their role in creating a safe school environment. He said adults in schools have a matching responsibility to listen to students and to take what they report seriously.

Rick Phillips, director of the nonprofit Community Matters, said he believes there needs to be a larger shift in attitude to keep schools safe. Santa Rosa, Calif.-based Community Matters issued a report card last week on school safety since Columbine. Phillips said the grade of a D+ was issued after reviews of practices at hundreds of schools across the country.

"You can stop students from bringing guns to school by putting up metal detectors, but that doesn't stop them from having weapons. They can bring prejudice, racism, neighborhood grudges as easily as any gun," he said. "In order to make schools really safe we have to empower students and equip them with the right tools. We have to help them feel like school is a community and not just an institution."

Mackinem said about 200 schools in South Carolina have been piloting a similar approach to safety called Positive Behavior Intervention and Support.

"You have to set the tone of your school, the tone that you don't tolerate harassment and negative behavior in our school," she said. "The program has very good success rates dealing with the emotional aspect of children's safety."

Safety funding issues

Phillips and Mackinem are worried about what funding cuts to education could mean for the progress and work on school safety.

The S.C. Department of Education and the S.C. Department of Mental Health have received deep cuts because of this year's state budget woes. If the cuts go any deeper, local mental health and education officials worry that it could impair services they can offer.

Last year, Georgetown County School District's budget was cut so deeply it had to reduce the number of mental health counselors from 19 to three.

"We pay for those three counselors who are in the schools, but that's all we could afford after the funding for our partnership with the district was eliminated," said Murry Chesson, director of the Waccamaw Center for Mental Health Services.

Chesson said having mental health counselors inside schools is pivotal to comfort for those seeking services and important to safety as well.

"Studies show that the earlier you start working with a child, the more effective the treatment will be," he said. "If there are more cuts to mental health, if there are more cuts to schools, we will have to look at reducing our on-site counseling services in Horry County as well."

Mackinem said she is worried that administrators for the Safe and Drug-Free School programs at the district level are being consolidated into other existing positions, or are being asked to take on additional positions to save money. The Community Matters survey also showed that less money is being provided to schools to deal with security, root causes of violence and to pay for preventive behavioral lessons.

In Georgetown County, Dozier said the district is seeing cutbacks in security as well.

"We spend about half a million dollars on security nowadays," he said. "We cut back on our budget, but we applied for some stimulus money for security. We had nine resources officers at one time, and we're down to seven. It's an investment, and we try our hardest to replace those officers when we can."

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