

Columbine Officers Under Fire

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Already under fire from parents of Columbine massacre victims, the county sheriff's office will likely take some more heat today — this time from above.

A governor's commission investigating the Columbine High School massacre is expected to release its report today — and word is it will be highly critical of local law enforcement officials.

"I think we'll be looking at a pretty harsh review of the police response to the shooting, mainly of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department," said a source who helped prepare the report. "Especially with so much criticism surrounding the teacher [Dave Sanders] who died and allegations that he could have been saved ... I think the panel is going to have a pretty scathing review of the Jefferson County Sheriff's department."

While details of the report have not yet been made public, there have been some pretty strong hints.

"We can't very well say this was a surprise that this happened," Columbine Review Commission head William Erickson said at the final meeting, held last month. "We had all this information, but nobody acted on it. ... For a long time, they were planning this attack. Harris' Web site was full of vicious threats. The materials there were copied and turned over to the sheriff but were not acted on."

The commission was assembled by Colorado Gov. Bill Owens to conduct an independent investigation of whether the massacre could have been prevented and determine how to prevent copycat attacks.

Erickson, a former chief justice of the Colorado Supreme Court, heads an eight-person panel consisting of legal, educational and law enforcement leaders. The panel was asked to investigate all the events leading up to and during the April

20, 1999, school shooting where Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 people before killing themselves.

Demand for Accountability

Parents and students have said there were rumors about Klebold and Harris planning an attack on the school — and police and school officials knew about it.

Under court order, sheriff's officials released 11,000 pages of documents related to the case in November. Among those documents: a copy of an English paper written by Klebold shortly before the attack, in which a man in a black trenchcoat executes school athletes.

According to school papers, the teacher confronted Klebold's parents, who apparently dismissed the essay as kid talk.

Last month, after parents' complained about substantial and purposeful omissions in the disclosed documents, a court ordered sheriff's officials to release more. Officials released a draft of a search warrant for Harris' home written a year before the attack. Investigators were hoping to link Harris to threats of an attack on his Web site and pipe bombs that had been set off in a nearby field.

But that search warrant was never carried out.

Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone refused to testify before the review commission — the panel did not have the power to compel sheriff's officials' testimony — and has refused to comment on the Columbine shooting because of pending lawsuits against his office. In its report, the commission is expected to urge sheriff's officials to open their files and tell the full story about the shooting.

"There never has been a full accounting of the shooting and given the public outcry, the commission will probably ask for a more detailed report on what happened during the shooting, why police responded the way they did," said the source. "There have been accusations that the sheriff's office compiled a detailed chronology of the shooting from beginning to end and then shredded the timeline."

Ongoing Lawsuits and Accusations

The Columbine Review Commission's report comes a month after 30 families settled negligence lawsuits against the parents of Klebold and Harris. In those lawsuits, the families claimed the parents of the shooters knew, or at least should have known, about the possibility that their sons would carry out the attack. Investigators found bomb-making materials and weapons in the bedrooms of the gunmen and uncovered a diary that revealed they had planned the rampage for at least a year. Investigators also found that Harris had maintained a hate Web site up until his death.

The settlements did not affect the lawsuits filed against the school and the department. In those lawsuits, parents of those killed or injured by the shooters contend that high school officials and the sheriff's department knew that Klebold and Harris were troubled and had made previous threats against students, yet chose to ignore the complaints.

Sanders' family also has a lawsuit pending the sheriff's department alleging that its negligence cost Sanders his life. SWAT teams took at least three hours to find Sanders after he was shot — approximately 2 ½ hours after Klebold and Harris committed suicide.

Jefferson County police contend that Sanders' injuries would have been fatal no matter when paramedics arrived. Officials have blamed the long rescue response on the chaos surrounding the shooting and many conflicting calls concerning the number of gunmen involved. The sheriff's department also noted it was afraid to send paramedics or the SWAT team in to find Sanders right away because of concerns about bombs and potential "booby traps" planted by the gunmen in and around the high school.