

# Columbine response at issue

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**March 3, 2001** - A key obstacle for police during the Columbine High shootings was law enforcement's philosophy against storming the school, the chairman of the Governor's Columbine Review Commission declared Friday.

"Unfortunately, the philosophy at the time was once you corraled the shooters and establish a perimeter, you wait until some time passed," chairman William Erickson, a retired Colorado Supreme Court chief justice, said during the panel's final meeting.

"There was no effort to confine (gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold) until they were long dead," Erickson said.

The result, he said, was that Harris and Klebold were able to kill 10 classmates in the school library and then commit suicide there. They had killed three others before entering the library.

One of those was teacher Dave Sanders. Erickson said SWAT teams didn't reach him until 3 p.m., about 3 hours after he was shot.

Erickson generally praised the officers who responded to the shootings. "Our effort is not to condemn anyone but find ways to prevent this from occurring again," he said.

But he had harsh words for Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone.

Erickson said Stone initially promised full cooperation with the commission, including an appearance before it.

But once he was named in a number of Columbine-related lawsuits, "he dried up as a source," Erickson said.

"He was the only person on the law enforcement side who failed to cooperate with us." Erickson called Harris and Klebold "masters of deceit" who fooled their parents, juvenile diversion officers and others.

Two months before the April 1999 massacre, the diversion officers had released them from a program with glowing reviews. They had broken into a van a year earlier.

"After going through the diversion program, they were extremely bitter, and left telltale signs as to what their plans were," Erickson said. But somehow their deadly plans went undetected.

"Did they pull the wool over our eyes?" Jefferson County prosecutor Kathy Sasak asked the commission. "Of course they did." But the diversion officers shouldn't be faulted, she said. "I can't tell you there were any red flags that said this was going to happen," Sasak said. But she added that changes have been made in the diversion program as a result of Columbine.

No longer are co-defendants such as Klebold and Harris permitted to meet with juvenile diversion officers together, as the two Columbine killers did.

Another post-Columbine change: Joe Schmollmoser, the security supervisor for Jefferson County schools at the time of Columbine, said he was forced to resign in August. Schmollmoser said it is crucial that there be a mandatory "crisis plan" in each school. He told the panel that historically "lip service" has been paid to the issue, but little action has been taken.

He said that as far as he knew, Columbine didn't have a "crisis plan" at the time of the rampage, although Jefferson County officials dispute that. Schmollmoser said that although he had proposed a systemwide crisis plan, only two district schools expressed interest in it.

He recommended the following:

- Mandatory procedures should be in place to investigate and report each threat of violence by a student or staff member.
- The school board and administrators should require principals to have issues of security and safety on their agendas for staff meetings on a regular basis.
- School districts employing security directors should have "an open and honest relationship with that person."

The review commission has until May 16 to release its final Columbine report. Gov. Bill Owens established the panel in the summer of 1999 to document the lessons learned from the tragedy, recommend ways to prevent similar tragedies, and chronicle the major events that led up to and occurred during and after the rampage. The commission also is charged with reviewing the police response, the procedures and techniques used by the SWAT teams at the scene, coordination among law enforcement agencies, and the ability of the responding agencies to communicate with each other.