

A Calm Year in the Schools Is Shattered

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The killings at a suburban Denver high school yesterday shattered what had been a relatively placid academic year in which school officials across the country, alarmed by a spate of killings the year before, moved aggressively to prevent repetition of school violence.

According to Education Department officials and other experts, the level of school violence and the number of victims has continued to decline as more school districts have instituted policies from putting more law enforcement officers inside the schools to encouraging students to inform school authorities about friends who may pose a threat to their classmates.

June Arnette, associate director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake, Calif., which monitors school violence from news accounts, said that before yesterday her group had identified nine school-related violent deaths (including three suicides) during the 1998-99 school year. She said there were 42 violent school deaths during the 1997-98 school year and 25 violent deaths the year before.

Bill Modzeleski, director of the Education Department's safe and drug-free schools program, said the safety center's figures are not comprehensive and that the real total of violent school deaths this school year may be higher. But Modzeleski confirmed that school violence is declining.

What prompted a new emphasis on preventing incidents such as yesterday's shooting rampage in Littleton, Colo., were the shooting deaths of 12 students and the wounding of 44 others in highly publicized school assaults in Pearl, Miss.; Paducah, Ky.; Jonesboro, Ark.; and Springfield, Ore., during the 1997-98 school year.

In response, Modzeleski said, "almost every school reassessed what they were doing and developed a plan. Many schools had no plan prior to last year. Schools that prior to last year said it's never going to happen here realized that it could. We've seen many more schools with a crisis plan."

Arnette said one clear reaction to last school year's shootings has been an upsurge in the number of schools that have installed telephone hot lines or "tip lines" and are



A student weeps amid the chaotic scene outside Columbine High School. Yesterday's shooting marked the first major violent incident at a school since the spate of school shootings during the 1997-98 academic year. (AP Photo/Rocky Mountain News, Cyrrus McCrimmon)

encouraging students to inform authorities if they know of a classmate who has threatened violence.

"It's getting kids to talk about what they know," Arnette said. "What happened last year was that the kids who did the shooting let somebody know what they were going to do and nobody believed it."

She said many schools are also increasing their "early warning" efforts by attempting to identify potentially violent students, putting more emphasis on conflict resolution programs and drafting detailed plans on how to deal with a student who threatens violence.

"Usually schools take more than one step," Arnette said. "I don't think anybody is looking for the silver bullet. I don't think they're looking for a quick fix. I think they have realized it will take putting school safety on the agenda and addressing it more comprehensively."

At President Clinton's directive, the Education and Justice departments issued a guide last year on how to identify potentially violent students and prevent them from acting. It was sent to every school in the country. Modzeleski said one major change this school year has been "better linkage" between the schools and mental health services in their communities to deal with problem students.

"There's more prevention, intervention and law enforcement," he said. "One thing we haven't seen is a rush toward more metal detectors and more security devices. I think there is a realization that safe schools come from a comprehensive effort by the whole community."

Kevin Dwyer, president-elect of the National Association of School Psychologists, said that while such efforts can reduce school violence, "we're not going to be able to catch every single youngster who has a problem and has access to weapons."

"Access to guns is a critical variable in this situation," he added. "You can't kill or wound 14 people with a knife."

"Every day that we don't have a shooting I feel quite relieved," Dwyer said.

And before yesterday, he added, the 1998-99 school year had been "a very good year."