

Brief: Teachers ignored warning signs

By Mike McPhee
Denver Post Staff Writer

Feb. 17, 2001 - Not only did the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office fail to investigate warning signs of the impending massacre at Columbine High School, but the teachers failed as well, according to a brief filed in federal court Friday.

Attorneys for the families of injured students Richard Castaldo, Lance Kirklin, Sean Graves and Mark Taylor argued that a special relationship between the school and the students required the school, and eventually the sheriff's office, to investigate early warning signs of impending violence.

The brief says these warning signs were "a blueprint and script for the attack," which occurred on April 20, 1999, and resulted in the death of 12 students, one teacher and the suicides of the two shooters. Another 26 were injured. The brief was filed to oppose a motion by the sheriff's office and school administration to dismiss the lawsuits against them.

"This is far worse than simple negligence," said attorney Steve Wahlberg, who represents the Kirklin family. He said circumstances show that this rises to a "callous indifference" and "reckless disregard" of the victims' rights.

Those signs included a "particularly vicious" composition written by gunman Dylan Klebold as an assignment in teacher Judy Kelly's class, the brief says. Kelly was shocked by the composition enough that she passed it on to assistant principal Peter Horvath and school counselor William Butts, who did nothing, according to the brief.

Also cited was a violent Web site designed by gunman Eric Harris that Randy and Judy Brown, parents of Columbine student Brooks Brown, allegedly brought to the attention of Sheriff John Stone's office. Klebold had shown the Web site to Brooks Brown, according to the brief. The Web site reportedly contained death threats, descriptions of pipe bombs exploding and the use of a sawed-off shotgun to kill people. The Browns were introduced to a member of the sheriff's bomb squad, but then nothing followed, they said.

"Was this referral to the bomb squad followed up?" Wahlberg asked. "It's disturbing if it was and nothing was done. It's also disturbing if it wasn't followed up." A third sign was a video made by Harris in teacher Garrett Tolocco's class that depicted revenge shootings of bullies and athletes, the brief said.

It cites a "copy cat" plot at a middle school in Fort Collins that was detected by school officials earlier this month. Two students have been charged with plotting to kill fellow students.

Oral arguments in defendants' request to dismiss the case will be given before U.S. District Chief Judge Lewis Babcock on April 27, more than two years after the shooting.