

# columbine

## Tales of bullying outlined

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**Dec. 2, 2000** - GOLDEN - Student "jocks" at Columbine High School were not disciplined following assaults, taunting and bullying, a small group of parents and students told an investigator.

The investigator, Regina Huerter, told the Governor's Columbine Review Commission on Friday that the parents also told her top-level school administrators failed to respond when contacted about the cases.

The commission, a blue-ribbon panel appointed by Gov. Bill Owens to make recommendations about school safety and other issues in the wake of the Columbine shootings, plans at least two more hearings.

An attorney for the Jefferson County school district said Huerter never asked Principal Frank DeAngelis about specific cases even though she interviewed him for three hours for her final report.

Given that, and the fact that administrators were named in the report while students and parents remained anonymous, school district attorney Bill Kowalski told the commission those school administrators will want to testify before the panel.

DeAngelis did not attend Friday's hearing and couldn't be reached for comment.

Teachers testified that they worried the investigator's report had the feel of a "witch hunt" to blame the school and bullying for the shootings on April 20, 1999.

Commission members said they don't see bullying as the cause of the shootings, merely a potential underlying problem in all schools that needs to be addressed.

Commissioner Robert Wintersmith also said that if DeAngelis had directly acknowledged that bullying had occurred at the school in his testimony, the commission would not have focused on it as much as it had.

Huerter, the director of the juvenile diversion program in the Denver district attorney's office, was hired by the commission to talk with parents and students who were afraid to testify publicly in front of the commission about bullying.

"What is not in doubt is that bullying occurred at Columbine, that in some instances the school administration reacted appropriately, and in other instances the school administration's reaction is unclear or altogether unknown," Huerter told the commission. Huerter acknowledged she, the parents or students who talked to her didn't always know what discipline was meted out because that information is kept private under federal education laws. She also found that few of the people she spoke with reported incidents to school officials.

"When there was a grave issue, there were rules enforced. There is a question about how much the administration knew was going on" in less serious cases, she said. "The policy (for discipline) is there. I'm not sure the practice follows those policies."

She also said bullying at Columbine was no different than at other schools, that it stemmed from one or two jocks and five or so of their "minions" beginning in 1996 and that there was

a distinction even by those bullied between specific jocks, who were seen as bullies, and athletes, who were students participating in sports.

Kowalski agreed that from 1996 and 1998 was "when it was well-acknowledged there was a notorious bully in the school." That bully left enough of a bad taste among the student body that younger students carried that experience with them through the rest of high school and continued to believe other jocks following him got away with wreaking havoc.

"There is a large rest of the story" about those cases, said Sally Blanchard, the school district's south area administrator. "I am limited (in what I can say). I'd love to say what happened."

Blanchard noted that Huerter's report was based on talking to 15 current and past students in a school population that amounted to more than 3,000 since 1996.

Huerter's report found:

- Killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were "often" harassed by the jocks because they were loners and didn't have the protection in numbers of the so-called Trench Coat Mafia, a group they didn't belong to.
- A jock who admitted ethnically intimidating a Jewish student continued to do so for a year and a half after the jock was arrested. The Jewish student said the school administration treated him like a liar when he reported the continuing torment. It was only resolved after the father forced a meeting with the jock and school administration, and he crafted an agreement between his son and the jock.
- School officials gave strong endorsements to a football player for admittance to a university even though he had a long history of harassing an ex-girlfriend, who had to obtain a restraining order against the boy in 1999. The university's president said he was told by Columbine staff that the restraining order was dropped because of a lack of evidence.

Blanchard said incidents involving that student were still under investigation and that the staff endorsements weren't "that glowing." Kowalski said the boy was never prosecuted.