

# **The Foundation for the Prevention of School Violence**

## **Keeping Our Students Safe**

**March 1, 2007**

### **Background**

On Thursday, March 1, 2007, the Foundation for the Prevention of School Violence presented a one-day symposium entitled, “Keeping our Students Safe”. The symposium was held on the Campus of Johnson & Wales University, Denver, Colorado. Several hundred school and youth safety experts from across Colorado joined together in discussing issues and best practices for keeping our students safe.

These discussions were groundbreaking in that this was the first time in Colorado that there was an open forum including participants from grade levels: K – 12; Colleges, Universities, School Safety Officers, Counselors, Law Enforcement Organizations to meet in one place and learn from each other.

There have been various other conferences on these issues, but they were held within separate geographic locations, and did not attempt to integrate all interesting parties. It was clear from the discussions that best practices in Colorado have existed for many years subsequent to the April 1999 attack at Columbine High School. Recent events of school violence at Platte Canyon High School brought a new dimension to safety issues, hostile acts by individual(s) not directly connected to the school community. Sheriff Fred Wegener, Park County Sheriff’s Office was the keynote speaker, and pointed out the need for preparedness and partnerships between law enforcement and educators. Other speakers, Bryan Krause, Principal of Platte Canyon High School outlined his cooperation with the Park County Sheriff’s Office and the readiness levels of his staff for a violent confrontation with a school setting. John Nicoletti, Ph.D. spoke to the group about identifying violent behavior and post traumatic stress syndrome. Discussions at the conference and afterwards have found many participants, school safety experts, parents, and the broader community of Colorado convinced that more than federal, state, or local guidelines are needed to keep our students safe. Participants opined that a proactive approach must be taken to prevent violence. There was some agreement that an internet web site of “best practices” is needed, and the Foundation is committed to that vision, to ensure that there is one central location for the gathering and distribution of needed information.

## **Break-Out Sessions**

After having the opportunity to hear various speakers, participants were broken into sections by interest, K – 6; Middle Schools; High Schools; Rural Schools; and Colleges and Universities. Each group was asked, “Tell me about Security in your School.”

All groups identified the following as major concerns:

### **School Systems and Security**

- Access Control
  - Each group identified this issue to be the number one issue for school safety.
    - Access to classrooms, school buildings, grounds, parking lots and surrounding property should be limited to those individuals who are directly involved with students and the school.
    - Visitors should and must check – in and be escorted throughout the premises.
    - Entrances and Exits should be monitored by school staff or at the very least, by some type of electronic surveillance.
    - Entry should be in the form of a double set of doors that could be monitored electronically and electronically opened from a safe location.
    - Visitor entrances should be clearly identified from the outside of the building and all visitors must use that single entrance and exit.
    - Visitors should be given identification that is clear and able to be seen at a distance – 45 feet. The identification should be color coded providing access to only those areas appropriate. For example, Blue identification may indicate classrooms in the “blue zone” or Green identification would permit visitors to be restricted to the “green zone – administration offices”.
      - The groups did not feel that these should be some type of universal grouping. However, they were clear that visitor identification should be clear from a distance and restricted to certain areas. Visitors should not be allowed to walk anywhere on the school property.
- Communication
  - Confusion with specific terminology
    - Individuals indicated that they were unsure of the appropriate terminology that should be used, they agreed that announcements such as, FIRE were clear, but felt that their schools were substitution “code words” for violent situations. It was the consensus of the groups that the best solution was to use language that was clear and concise.

- Collaboration
  - Training should be conducted with all agencies involved with school safety.
    - Drills and exercises for evacuations or sheltering in place should be held on a regular basis with all responding units, fire, police, and paramedics included in the drill.
    - Table top exercises should include responsible individuals from fire, police, paramedics, teachers, administrators and student (where appropriate).

### **School Responsibilities – Students, Staff, Teachers and Administrators**

- Notify up the chain of command – student to Teacher; Staff/Teacher to Administrator of unfamiliar individuals in the school, or individuals within the school property without proper identification.
- Challenge strangers in a non-threatening manner: “Can I help you?” “Can I direct you to the Administration Office?”
- Safety briefings should be conducted with the entire school population.
- Restrict entrance by any visitor to the “visitor’s entrance”. Do not allow someone within the school property through an “unauthorized” entrance. Do not allow individuals without proper access to “tailgate” through a door.
  - The groups felt that many individuals, staff, teachers and students, in an effort to be helpful, may allow a stranger access through an unauthorized entrance in the spirit of being polite. Cultural training for safety must be conducted to ensure visitors are ushered to the correct entrances.

### **Areas of Concern**

It was the consensus of most participants that they had a lack of knowledge in the following areas:

- Alternative methods of handling school safety issues.
- Identifying potential violent behavior through behavioral clues.
- Current policy within their organization for handling or responding to violent situations.
- Lack of understanding of the interactions necessary between police and school personnel.
  - What can the police do?
  - When can the police intervene?
  - How will the police respond?
  - Where will the police locate, if there is a need for intervention?
  - Who is responsible for initiating a police response?
- Better police and school relationships

## **Bridging the Gaps – Finding Solutions**

- All of the groups agreed that the first part of arriving at any solutions to preventing school violence is to admit that there is a problem, and begin to reduce the apathy within the community about school safety.
- Each school should conduct a safety audit and publish within the organization, at appropriate levels, needs, concerns, and recommendations.
- Each school must evaluate their cultural climate and determine if that climate adds to the possibility of violent acts within the school.
- It is not enough to have rules and policies if they are not followed and enforced.
- Develop a plan to collaborate with police and other entities that impact school safety and form an open dialogue between all parties
- Develop a proactive approach to school safety that includes the entire community, teachers, administrators, police, fire, health care, students and parents.
- If schools cannot afford to expend funds for safety concerns, reach out into the community to develop alternate streams of funding. Encourage local businesses to assist in development of school safety programs that are meaningful and appropriate.
- Use the resources that currently exist within schools and the community to make schools a safe environment for students, staff and teachers.
- Continue to hold state-wide symposiums to seek solutions and develop dialogues for the prevention of school violence.

## **Conclusions**

1. Education professional associations at the national and state levels for school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, and school staff should incorporate training on school violence prevention, security, and emergency planning in each annual conference agenda and in special workshops. While many associations have done a consistently good job at maintaining these topics on their programs, other offerings have been sporadic at best, especially in light of demands for sessions on improving test scores.<sup>1</sup>
2. Law enforcement professional associations should incorporate and maintain training on rapid response to active shooters, school emergency preparedness planning, and school – law enforcement partnerships as an ongoing part of their annual conference and workshop offerings. These programs were popular after Columbine but appear to have fallen to the wayside in recent years, particularly post – 9/11 and with funding shifts for terrorism and homeland security.<sup>2</sup>
3. Emergency management agency professional associations should include training components incorporating K-12 school emergency planning into overall community emergency management plans into their annual conferences and professional development workshops.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/white\\_house\\_school\\_safety.html](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/white_house_school_safety.html)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

4. Education, law enforcement, and emergency management associations should include articles at least once a year in their professional publications to help members stay updated on school violence prevention, safety, security, and emergency preparedness trends and best practices.<sup>4</sup>
5. Colleges and Universities should incorporate school safety training into undergraduate teaching training.<sup>5</sup>
6. Colleges and Universities should require school safety training for any graduate student seeking school administrator certification credentials.<sup>6</sup>

**The Foundation for the Prevention of School Violence (FPSV)** is a non-profit organization devoted to the research, and advancement of policies related to the prevention of school violence. The Foundation was formed in December of 2006, and has a threefold mission:

First to become known as the "Premier Resource" for the State of Colorado for the prevention of school violence by collecting research literature and resources on the causes and prevention of violence and provides direct information services to the public by offering topical searches on customized databases. Additionally, FPSV will provide an annual symposium to discuss, develop and further identify areas that will assist in the prevention of violence in our educational institutions.

Second, FPSV offers technical assistance for the evaluation and development of violence prevention programs.

Third, FPSV will maintain a basic research component through data analysis and other projects on the causes of school violence and the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.