

Lessons Learned from the Shootings at Columbine High School

By Sandra J. Austin
Past President, Colorado School Counselor Association,
Counselor, Green Mountain High School, Lakewood, Col.
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Screaming sirens. Hovering helicopters. Flashing lights. Yellow crime tape.

April 20, 1999, is a day that many Colorado educators will never forget. On that beautiful spring morning three days after prom, gunshots pierced the crisp spring air at Columbine High School while the students' anticipation of the last month of school came crashing down. By the end of the day, twelve students and a teacher were dead, 24 students had been physically injured, two gunmen (fellow students) had shot and killed themselves, hundreds of students and staff were directly impacted, and an entire community was traumatized. Many students had moved to Columbine High School to escape just such a possibility at their former schools. Many echoed, "I never thought this could happen at Columbine."

Columbine High School is a part of the suburban Jefferson County School District – the largest school district in Colorado with approximately 90,000 students. The district covers 786 square miles on the western perimeter of Denver. Columbine is located in the southern end of the district, nestled just below the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

At the time, the Columbine High School community consisted of a citizenry with upper middle class socioeconomic status. The demographics of the student body included 91 percent Anglos, 5 percent Hispanics, 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islanders, 1 percent African Americans, and ½ of 1 percent Native Americans. Education is important to the community; the school boasted a 92 percent graduation rate, a 2 percent dropout rate, and a 79 percent college-bound rate. A mobility rate of 6 percent and a "Free and Reduced Lunch" rate of 4 percent are other indications of the make-up of the community.¹

After the dust settled on that fateful day of April 20, 1999, school violence would never be viewed the same. The shootings at Columbine High School had taken on a different pattern from previous school shootings across the country. There were some valuable lessons learned that may help other schools should they face a similar crisis in the future. The key aspects that will be discussed in this paper are (1) the immediate response, and (2) the long-term impact. Much of the immediate response to the crisis unfolded beyond the view of the news cameras.

Immediate Response

Once the Jefferson County School District office received word of shots being fired at Columbine High School, communication was established with all the necessary entities. The district established a communication network to respond to incoming calls. While the world watched Columbine students running out of the building in single file lines with hands on their

heads and a student being pulled from the library window, the crisis response effort was underway at many locations in the surrounding area.

Teachers and other school staff members helped get students out of the building. Some made additional trips back inside the building to help more students before they were told they could not re-enter. In the initial stages of the crisis, students fled to neighboring Clement Park, the Columbine Public Library adjoining the park, neighborhood houses, or Leawood Elementary School. Traumatized parents swarmed the area trying to find their children, and emergency responders flocked to the scene to help.

After some of the Columbine staff ran with students to the Columbine Public Library, they helped students until late into the evening. Not having their purses, personal belongings, or access to their cars (because they were forced to flee their classes or offices with no advance warning and the parking lots had been blocked off), some staff members went across the street to a restaurant to comfort each other, call their families, and find rides home.

A law enforcement Command Center was established a few blocks away. A problem soon arose. Many law enforcement agencies arrived from numerous jurisdictions – city, county, state, and federal agencies. They had difficulty communicating with each other because they were all on different radio frequencies. The rush of local and national media overwhelmed the scene and introduced new problems. Reporters gave conflicting stories of the events occurring inside Columbine. In the meantime, all area schools were placed on lockdown.

The school district had to make many important decisions instantaneously. How could they account for all Columbine students, and get them to one location? The Columbine students who had scattered throughout the area were eventually directed or bussed to Leawood Elementary. The elementary students attending Leawood were taken into the cafeteria, and waited there until their parents arrived to take them home. The Columbine students gathered in the gymnasium at Leawood. As parents were united with their students, they were able to leave the premises. Lists of students sent to the hospital were posted on the walls. All the phones in the school were in continual use. Often cell phone frequencies jammed because of the volume of calls. As a result of the problems, within one day, Qwest provided many extra phones to support crisis responders.

In the meantime, the district also established communication with local restaurants, grocery stores, the Red Cross, and others for the provision of food and water at Leawood. They established gathering places for school staff and students, media updates, mental health services, public meetings, and mental health responders. Administrators met to consider school cancellations and safety searches of all the schools in the district. District officials also visited students in the hospitals.

As the day wore on, families of those students who had not reported to Leawood remained there waiting for their sons or daughters. Those families were briefed periodically by law enforcement officials and the District Attorney throughout the afternoon and evening on the status of the situation inside the school. They talked about the possibilities of fatalities and even the remote possibility that some students could still be hiding out in the school. By 8:30 p.m.

there were about 17 circles of families still waiting on word from their students. They were encouraged to go to their homes. Each family was offered the services of a victim advocate, who would stay with them through the night as they awaited notification from law enforcement officials regarding their own son or daughter.

The next day all schools in the district were closed. A crisis drop-in center was established at a local church, which was staffed with district and community mental health workers. District representatives connected with families of the victims. A district 24-hour Information Hotline was established and staffed with volunteers to provide information and dispel rumors. There was a meeting of district school principals to review law enforcement partnerships and to establish a daily leadership memo containing vital information. In addition, the decision was made to request all mental health professionals to remain in their own buildings except for a few called to the crisis drop-in center or to Columbine area schools. One central department was identified to receive hundreds of donations from individuals and groups.

The Columbine students and staff gathered together over the next few days for comfort, support, debriefings, and discussions about the facts and effects of the tragedy and plans for returning to school. Updates were given on injured students, funerals, memorial services, and available mental health and community services. Students and staff were informed of replacement procedures of their personal belongings – such as driver’s licenses, keys, insurance cards, prescriptions, and glasses – that had been left in backpacks, purses, briefcases, and cars. They were told that they would not be able to re-enter the school to retrieve such items until the investigations were concluded.

There was such a huge response from mental health workers outside the district volunteering to help, a protocol had to be established by the district on how to handle those offers. For several weeks, district leaders worked daily with crisis response organizations to establish refresher trainings, debriefing sessions, and mental health support throughout the county. County and School District officials hosted public meetings to answer community questions and concerns. They also established regular staff gatherings, district leader meetings, crisis responder meetings, and meetings with various agency partners to share information, get support, and plan the next steps in the crisis response. District officials also found it necessary to clarify command structures within the district and community.

Over the next couple weeks, the district enlisted community partners, parent groups, and student groups in planning appropriate responses to the tragedy. “Responding Rovers” – mental health crisis responders – were available to travel to a group gathering in a home or other location on an as-needed basis.

The Human Side of the Immediate Response

The human side of crisis response became evident in the natural responses of those involved. Some people fled for their lives and later felt guilty about not helping others escape the shooting rampage. Others stayed to help and lost their lives. The natural responses of all involved (the students, staff, parents, crisis responders, etc.) ranged from one extreme to the

other – from fight, to flight, to freeze. Many failed to understand that their reaction was not a conscious decision.

Another important aspect that was realized about the team effort in handling such a catastrophic crisis was described by Betsy Thompson, Student Services Director of Jefferson County Schools: “It was an exhausting process, and yet the power of people to come together and support one another in the deepest, dreariest days is absolutely incredible. The resiliency of the human spirit is second to none.”²

Brad Butts, the counseling department chairperson at Columbine at the time of the shootings, expressed what helped him get through the difficulty of the first couple days, “My family and church group got in touch with me. Their prayers and thoughts, and just knowing of their support really helped me...Everybody dealt with it differently. I think those who had families to go home to and support outside of school probably did a little better than those who didn’t, or than those with family problems.” Brad also stated that he was able to go for a bike ride the next morning after the shootings. He later learned about the importance of getting physical exercise within 48 hours of a tragedy to get rid of some of the toxins that build up in the body as a result of such an event.³

After enduring the tragedy, many students clung to each other and wanted to be together almost twenty-four hours a day. Yet, fearful parents wanted to be with their sons and daughters too – in realization that they could have lost their sons or daughters in the shootings. Many discussions and public forums ensued to help parents and children understand each other’s needs.

Lessons Learned About Immediate Crisis Response

As a result of the shootings, the district has implemented some changes in the crisis plans for schools. At the time, an emergency box had been located at Columbine for the administrators to take with them in case of an emergency. The box now includes an updated roster of all staff and students, blueprints of the school, and cell phones. Another concern during the crisis was that the fire alarms rang for up to three hours and the fire sprinkler system was on for that length of time too. Consideration is now being given to providing a method of shutting off alarms and sprinkler systems from outside the school instead of just within the school building.

Other changes in district crisis response efforts include having school and district Emergency Management Plans with ongoing training and practice, Mental Health Crisis Responders assigned in each building became a priority, representatives from each school were invited to serve on a Community Crisis Response Team, the Incident Command System now includes schools, and a Student Risk Assessment Process is in place in each school to address concerns of students who may be showing signs of at-risk behavior to self and others.

Betsy Thompson summarized some important factors to consider in the immediate crisis response:

- Settle Chain of Command protocols ahead of time.
- Our trauma membrane is intense (smell, sounds, sights) ...words sometimes don't work.

- Media can be a friend and a foe simultaneously.
- Crisis responders need to have the ability to live with ambiguity in a crisis.
- Be cautious of the “quick fix”.
- The informal support structures are as important as the formal support structures.
- Human bonds that form in a crisis are often long-lived.
- Be prepared for everyone’s agenda – elected officials, evangelists, impersonators, well-intended folks.
- Information is power.
- People need a sense of control.
- “Recovery is not a sprint; it’s a marathon.” Steve Seigel.
- Relationships are key!⁴

It also became evident that the effectiveness of the immediate crisis response plays a significant role in determining the long-term effects of a tragedy.

Long-Term Impact

The long-term impact of the tragedy was most vividly reflected in the plans for the Columbine students and staff to complete the last month of school at neighboring school, Chatfield High School. Coordination between the schools for athletics, activities, class schedule, facility use, etc., seemed an almost formidable task in the midst of the psychological aftermath from the shootings. However, staff and leaders in the Chatfield community were determined to help their comrades.

When classes resumed, the Columbine staff didn’t have their grade books or teaching materials. Students didn’t have their backpacks with class materials such as textbooks and notebooks. Grading for the semester became an issue. Since the faculty knew the students probably would not be able to finish the curriculum for each class, teachers were faced with whether they should attempt to take the grades from before the tragedy, or simply pass all students. Graduation became an issue too, and it was decided to allow all senior-status students to walk through the graduation ceremony. Those who lacked the necessary credits required to graduate made arrangements with the teachers for finishing the coursework.

Another psychological impact of the shootings was when the teachers faced their classrooms for the first time since April 20th. Understandably, some teachers struggled to face their classes again as a result of the absence of students who had been killed, were still in the hospital, etc. Many also had concerns about having the strength to teach again or about other issues or grief that could come flooding back in the midst of teaching a lesson. Counselors were available to assist teachers and students in classrooms. At the end of the year, some teachers chose early retirement, others chose to be transferred to other schools, while many remained at Columbine.

Some students were not able to return to Columbine, but chose home schooling as an option. Others did not go back to school in the spring, but returned the next fall. Still other students attended school part-time while spending the rest of the time at home with a homebound teacher. A handful of students transferred to another school.

The mental health load on the Columbine counselors was so heavy that a retired district counselor was brought in to help with credit and schedule issues. This allowed the Columbine counselors to be available to the students regarding mental health issues. Six additional counselors from the Jefferson Center for Mental Health were brought into the school for the remainder of the year after seeing tremendous needs of the students and staff. Extra mental health workers were hired at Columbine over the next couple years as the need arose. Another issue that had to be dealt with was providing space for the extra counselors (seven) in an area designed for a total of six counselors.

With the weight of the responsibility of managing such a crisis, the district had to rely on community partners or other agencies to take the lead in some matters involving a community memorial, money donations, and community mental health support services. A student community center was established as a place for students to gather. In preparation for the new school year, counselors were on hand throughout the summer to take students, families, and staff through the school building. For many it was particularly traumatic in that it was their first time back in Columbine since the shootings.

The district implemented an immediate and longitudinal study and follow-up services to meet individual needs, and built ongoing working relationships with parents and agency representatives within the community. Community partners played a key role in minimizing the long-term impact also. The Colorado Organization of Victims Assistance and many local, state, and federal agencies provided help in various ways. A mandatory Clinical Consultation process was instituted, requiring district school counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers to work with clinical experts from the surrounding mental health communities. The long-term impact of the tragedy at Columbine had spread to all areas of the community and district.

The Human Side of the Long-Term Impact

One of the most important factors in dealing with the long-term impact of the shootings was discovering the key to helping people learn how to take care of themselves and to ask for what they needed. For the Columbine counselors, Brad Butts stated that the relationships the counselors had with each other before the shootings was what helped them survive the aftermath. The strength of Columbine's counseling department can be an example of the importance of teamwork and its value in a crisis situation. "It's very important to keep working on and building the counseling department team. Some counseling departments in the same situation probably would have been in a world of hurt if they hadn't been working closely together beforehand, staying in touch with each other, respecting each other, and gaining from each other. So I guess it's kind of a preventive thing, but making sure that the counseling team or family is pretty supportive would be a real key."⁵

Another lesson, according to Brad, was the necessity for staff to seek therapy. Some staff members received help for their mental health needs in the summer after the shootings, but many did not. Those who did not go through counseling suffered in many ways in the following years. Brad also expressed the importance of taking time to rejuvenate oneself in whatever form was necessary. Those staff members who did not take time to rest and relax during the summer after

the tragedy became weary by the middle of the next year.⁶ Often staff members were so concerned about meeting the needs of the students that they neglected to realize their own needs. In order to be the most effective in one's work with young people, Brad's words are an important reminder, not just in times of crisis, but at all times.

Many students and staff who were at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, are still feeling the long-term effects four years later. The lessons learned from the shootings could fill volumes. The most important learning that can be gained from the tragedy is the importance of working together in a united effort to meet the needs of students, families, and communities under the most horrific of circumstances. Betsy Thompson summarizes the crisis response efforts as follows: "The most important learning for all of us as we've responded to the Columbine shootings is that the power of relationships is second to none. Whether it's the relationships with our community partners, the relationships that counselors had with students, the relationships that staff had with one another – the power of relationships is really a key to healing and recovery."⁷

Relationships are also important in a global sense. In the midst of the tragedy that took the lives of twelve students and a teacher at Columbine High School, the school and community is healing, in part, because of the outpouring of love and support as America wrapped its arms around a wounded community in a blanket of warmth and support that transcended race, creed, or color. There is healing power in relationships. For example, the paramedic who bandaged the wounds of a child; an administrator who visited a student in the hospital; a counselor who comforted a grieving parent; a parent who thanked a teacher for saving her son's life; a high school on the east coast that sent notes to students at Columbine; a business that sent gifts to a hurting community; a restaurant that donated food on the day of the tragedy -- all played a part in the healing process for the Columbine community. There is no healing element like that of one heart reaching out to another. It can heal a heart in ways that no bandage or ointment could ever heal. We really do need each other!

Notes

1. Interview with Betsy Thompson, Director of Student Services, Jefferson County School District. June 12, 2002. Lakewood, Colorado.
2. *Lessons Learned from the Shootings at Columbine High School*. Excerpt from Presentation by Betsy Thompson and Sandy Austin to the American School Counselor Association Conference. Miami, FL. July 2, 2002.
3. Phone Interview with Brad Butts, Counseling Department Chair at Columbine High School. August 16, 1999.
4. *Lessons Learned from the Shootings at Columbine High School*. Excerpt from Presentation by Betsy Thompson and Sandy Austin to the American School Counselor Association Conference. Miami, FL. July 2, 2002.
5. Phone Interview with Brad Butts, Counseling Department Chair at Columbine High School. August 16, 1999.
6. Ibid.
7. *Lessons Learned from the Shootings at Columbine High School*. Excerpt from Presentation by Betsy Thompson and Sandy Austin to the American School Counselor Association Conference. Miami, FL. July 2, 2002.

About the Author

Sandy Austin is currently a counselor at Green Mountain High School in Lakewood, Colorado in the Jefferson County School District – the district that includes Columbine High School. All school counselors, social workers, and psychologists in the district were called to the scene on April 20, 1999 as word spread about the shootings. Sandy counseled Columbine students, parents, and staff that day and for a week afterwards. She was on call for the rest of the school year to counsel at Columbine related activities, and she counseled in the Columbine area two days a week in the summer (on a contract basis with Jefferson Center for Mental Health) helping students and parents in a drop-in counseling setting. Ms. Austin holds a Masters Degree in Counseling, and is Past-President of the Colorado School Counselor Association. Sandy is the author of *Angry Teens and the Parents Who Love Them* and *Focus on Your Future: Career/College Planning for High School Students and Their Parents*.

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