

EDITOR'S NOTE

Photo by Kat Nyberg



This past summer I attended the Washington State K–20 School Safety Forum, a groundbreaking conference that brought together representatives from K–12 and higher education, both public and private, to talk about issues of school safety, violence prevention, and emergency preparedness. The conference took place almost exactly two months after the Virginia Tech shooting, and that horrific event gave urgency and an emotional edge to the proceedings.

Many of the speakers at the conference also mentioned Columbine, and spoke of the fact that, like it or not, everyone involved in education, from superintendents to bus drivers, has been forced to add safety and security issues to an already full plate of responsibilities. As Craig Apperson, director of the Washington State School Safety Center and host of the conference, said in his welcoming speech, “You didn’t get into education with the idea that you would be dealing with these kinds of [safety] issues, but that’s the reality.”

When *Northwest Education* last explored the issue of school safety in the spring of 1999 that shift in reality was well underway. Most of the highly publicized school shootings of the late 1990s had already happened. One story spoke of the “soul searching of parents, teachers, and other professionals in the wake of recent school shootings around the country—shootings that in the Northwest region alone have left eight dead and close to 30 injured.”

A few weeks after that issue of the magazine was mailed, the Columbine shooting took our public soul searching to a whole new level. As Jeff Sprague, a University of Oregon professor and nationally recognized expert in school safety has written, the late 1990s school shootings, and Columbine in particular, “changed the landscape of school security and destroyed, perhaps forever, the sense of relative safety that students, families, and educators [had] traditionally held about the school process and the physical setting in which it occurs ... school settings were no longer regarded by our society as exclusively safe havens in which students are free to develop academically and socially, unburdened by concern for their personal safety.”

According to U.S. Department of Justice data, as well as several research studies, schools are still the safest place for children to be. In fact, many school safety indicators have not

changed significantly in decades. And yet, Sprague’s description of a kind of lost innocence rings true. The defining question, it seems, is not “How safe are we?” but, “How safe do we feel?” And the answer, in this era of terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina-type disasters, and continued school shootings, is obviously, “Not very.”

This issue of *Northwest Education* explores school safety from this post-Columbine, post-9/11 vantage point. As a regional magazine, we concentrate on how efforts to improve school safety have played out in the Northwest. And yet, the federal role cannot be ignored. As Sprague notes, “The shock, grief, and outrage that followed the tragedy of Columbine galvanized the [federal] government into taking a series of dramatic actions geared toward improving school safety.”

Those efforts have included unprecedented collaborations between the U.S. Department of Education and both the U.S. Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as programs such as Safe Schools/Healthy Students, which has awarded more than 250 school safety grants since the late 1990s.

In October 2003, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools created the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center and began administering a discretionary grant program to help school districts develop comprehensive emergency response plans. In addition, Title IV of the No Child Left Behind Act has led to several changes in school safety policy, including a uniform management and reporting system to collect information on school safety and drug use among students. Title IV also provides formula grants that have helped districts implement school safety practices based on principles of effectiveness—an improvement over many of the draconian “zero tolerance” policies first implemented in the aftermath of Columbine.

In this issue of *Northwest Education* you will find programs directly inspired by those federal efforts, such as Oregon’s Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment program, and others that began as district- or county-level responses to the traumatic events of the late 1990s. We also profile county-wide emergency response planning, school-based support programs, and the aftermath of a racially based incident that could well have resulted in violence, but didn’t. The perspective of students involved in that incident is one example of a positive, encouraging vein in what can be a disquieting subject to explore.

—Bracken Reed, reedb@nwrel.org