



The Main Event Remembering Columbine

“ Danger comes in many shapes and forms in schools: public humiliation, racism, peer contempt and rejection, teacher disrespect, and school failure. Each represents a real and present danger to certain students. ”

—William K. Preble

“Revolution of the Dispossessed”

Sometimes we can learn most about school just by talking and listening to the words of students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. Columbine, a subject that has been examined endlessly by educators ever since it happened, doesn't offer any immediate answers to the confusion it stirred throughout the country. What caused those boys to freak out? Did it have anything to do with the school, or were those kids “just evil?” What mistakes did

the administrators make, and what could they have done to understand what was happening inside that school?

The State of Colorado's investigation into the Columbine shootings revealed a complex web of factors believed to have contributed to the decision by two boys to murder their teachers and classmates. Some theories focused on the well documented cruelty the boys experienced, others emphasized the boys' obsession with guns and violent video games like Doom, and oth-

ers emphasized their desire for fame and notoriety. Of all the things that have come out of the investigations of the shootings, I believe that two perspectives—one offered by a Columbine football player, and the other by a parent of a child who was murdered by Klebold and Harris—

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Students evacuating Columbine High School on Tuesday, April 20, 1999.

Town Square By Dr. William Preble

For the past decade, schools across the nation have been fixated on testing and meeting seemingly endless numbers of standards under No Child Left Behind. Where has this effort gotten us? Have our schools been somehow transformed and become discernibly better? Has the quality of teaching improved? Has the mission been accomplished?

I have spent much of the past decade teaching,

working with administrators, teaching teachers, and training the next generation of new teachers both as a professor and as a consultant. What seems clear to me is that, as the state and federal educational regulators have turned up the heat on schools and pushed for national standards and widespread testing, a number of other unanticipated, but understandable, things have happened.

Music, art, social studies, physical education, and applied vocational programs--typically powerful outlets for creativity, student engagement, peer interaction, and success (for many students) are shrinking.

With high stakes testing there is more pressure on students, teachers and principals. With this pressure comes stress. Classes have become longer, breaks have become fewer, and times for

“Student Interaction” have been lost.

There is no more going outside, no more ecology unit, no career days, ropes courses or field days. Time for social studies and diversity training has disappeared along with holiday concerts, and pep rallies. Students are in a sense being robbed of the heart and soul of their school experiences.

We all know that reading, writing, and arithmetic are important, but you cannot teach in a vacuum. Extra curricular experiences teach students important things too.

They teach students that

the best academic students might not always be best at everything. Some of the “worst” students can do amazing things. Students need the chance to explore their differences and expand their tolerance.

Perhaps taking a little pressure off would free up time to ensure that No Child, even disturbed individuals like Klebold and Harris, gets left behind.

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In Remembrance:

Cassie Rene Bernal
Steven Robert Curnow
Corey Tyler Depooter
Kelly Ann Fleming
Eric Harris*
Matthew Joseph Kechter
Dylan Klebold*
Daniel Conner Mauser
Daniel Lee Rohrbough
William “Dave” Sanders
Rachel Joy Scott
Isiah Eamon Shoels
John Robert Tomlin
Lauren Dawn Townsend
Kyle Albert Velasquez

These people all died a senseless death at a suburban high school. Asterisks denote the killers.

Street Talk: Real Life in America



DYLAN KLEBOLD



ERIC HARRIS



On a sunny Tuesday morning in April of 1999, two disturbed high school students convened in the parking lot of Columbine High School to enact their plan to kill 250 students. In less than a few hours, 15 students were dead and more than 25 injured in a murder/suicide that shocked the nation. What drove these kids to kill has been studied over and over. Whether they were victims of bullying who had enough or psychopathic killers, the legacy of Columbine and the challenge to everyone who works in education is to never let this happen again.

The Main Event

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by Klebold and Harris—illustrate the fundamental differences of opinion on the issue. Both positions are worth considering if we hope to understand Columbine and avoid future episodes of school violence.

Evan Todd, a 255 pound lineman on the Columbine football team who was injured in the shootings, attributed the shootings to the deranged nature of Klebold and Harris. He thought that too much attention had been focused on the jocks harassing the boys. He said, “It’s not just the jocks... the whole school’s disgusted with them. If you want to get rid of somebody, usually you tease ‘em. So the whole school would call them homos and when they did something sick, we’d tell them, ‘You’re sick and that’s wrong.’” (Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, *The Columbine Tapes*)

Brian Rohrbough, father of one of the victims, offers a different perspective. Brian lays the blame squarely on the school and the unhealthy culture that was allowed to flourish there. He charges, “Jocks

could get away with anything. If they wanted to punch a kid in the mouth, and walk away, they could. Had I known this my son wouldn’t have been there. They did nothing to protect students from each other.” (Andrew Goldstein, *The Columbine Tapes*)

Klebold and Harris said in the secret videotapes they had made on the days leading up to the shootings that they, “were going to kick start a revolution of the dispossessed.” Their obscene gesture to the world, they hoped, would embolden others who were routinely marginalized by their peers and treated with contempt by their schools. They hoped that movies would be made about their massacre and that their story of outrage would capture the national spotlight. They believed that by committing the most hideous act imaginable—the killing and bombing of over 250 students and

teachers was their stated goal—they would incite others to follow suit and take revenge on a system that they viewed as fundamentally flawed.

Whether the system is truly flawed or the boys were simply acting on mental illness, an outsider can never fully understand the true reasons behind Columbine. We can only listen to the people who were present and learn what lessons we can. Certainly, both Evan Todd and Brian Rohrbough have strong opinions about the situation based on their perception of the school and the boys. While it’s unlikely that either one is completely correct, their perspectives give us a spectrum within which we can measure our own ideas. Perhaps the entire situation was ironically summarized by Evan Todd when he said, “Columbine is a clean, good place... except for those rejects.”

In the months and years since Columbine, it would appear that this revolution may indeed be spreading. Shootings, or attempted school shootings and bombings have occurred in Michigan, New Mexico, Lake Worth, California – all within 24 months of the Columbine massacre. In the last year there have been other shootings and many more attempts (we can only hope) stopped through awareness and zero tolerance policies. Based on the response from both media and students, it seems clear that Klebold and Harris were successful in getting the word out about their “cause”. As we reflect on the events in Littleton, Colorado eight years ago, we need to remember that the type of events that led to this violence still continue in American schools today.

CORNER FACT

Respectful teaching is a powerful tool for school improvement and can have dramatic and lasting effects on school climate, peer relations and respect, and student motivation and success. More powerful than metal detectors, faster than a hundred test prep workshops, respectful teaching can create safe, academically sound, respectful, schools.



Student Lounge Ben's Story

"I was sent to the principal for supposedly threatening a girl. I was immediately suspended and required to see a shrink before I could come back to school. The principal wouldn't even listen to me. I kept trying to tell him, 'It wasn't me, it really wasn't.... The girl has been calling me names, names like 'loser and retard'. I kept telling her to stop it when she didn't stop I started to get mad'.... 'Leave me alone or else' I told her ... and the girl ran to the teacher and said that I had threatened her. The principal said to me, 'For all I know you might be the next Columbine shooter. You'll never come back to this school if I have anything to say about it.' I'd never do that. But after that, I kind of understood how those guys at Columbine must of felt."

Data Points Youth Friendly Schools

When schools engage young people as partners in the process of educational leadership and school improvement, everyone leads and learns together. That's the philosophy behind Youth Friendly Schools.

Our work at Main Street Academix focuses on involving students in order to gain insights into educational systems. We assemble broad-based youth leadership teams to send the message that every child is capable and an undeniable expert on his/her own school experiences.

Youth Friendly Schools and their enlightened adult leaders follow four principles of effective leadership and advocacy:

Leaders are aware of the feelings of the people who work and learn in their organizations. Who knows more about a school's learning climate and how young people feel about their positive and negative school experiences than students?

Leaders know about the quality and efficacy of the interpersonal relationships that exist inside their schools. Students can help adults better understand the health of the interpersonal culture inside schools (peer to peer and adult to student).

Leaders are responsible to produce objective, measurable outcomes. Students can become partners in the battle for the bottom line... whether it is improving attendance, improving discipline, higher achievement, or saving the school money... when students feel they are part of the problem-solving team, they are powerful, motivated allies.

Leaders are committed to social equality, social justice and the engagement of ALL kinds of students as leaders. Popularity contests among the most successful athletes and students are not what effective team leadership is about. The perspectives of students with different academic, grade-level, social, racial, and learning-style backgrounds and experiences are vital to understanding schools as complex systems.

To learn more about Youth Friendly Schools, contact us at Main Street Academix.