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Columbine 10 years later: Lessons learned

By Patrick Fiel

Ten years ago, the name of a suburban-Denver high school, Columbine, became synonymous with school shootings—a crisis that continues to afflict society today.

Although at the time it was not the most deadly of campus shootings—a 1966 shooting at the University of Texas, Austin left 16 dead and 31 wounded—this event seared itself into our collective consciences as we struggled to understand how and why two teenagers were able to kill 15 people (including themselves) and injure another 24 students and teachers.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of that day, it is appropriate to review what happened and what we have learned since 1999 to help prevent future school shootings.

Late on the morning of April 20, 1999, the students—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—carried two propane bombs into Columbine High School's cafeteria. Then they left and took up separate positions in the student parking lot, where they had clear views of the school's main exits. Heavily armed, they hoped the exploding bombs would soon force an evacuation allowing them to fire at students and faculty as they exited the building.

At about 11:20 a.m., when the bombs failed to detonate, Harris and Klebold grabbed their collection of shotguns, carbines and pipe bombs and headed for the main building. On their way, they killed and wounded several students outdoors. Once inside the main building, they spent nearly an hour roaming hallways, classrooms, the library and the cafeteria, killing and wounding students and teachers before finally taking their own lives. Unaware of the number of gunmen or their location, officers from the local sheriff's department remained outside throughout the entire shooting spree. SWAT teams waited for more than an hour after the gunmen had killed themselves before finally entering the building.

Almost immediately after the tragedy, mental health professionals descended on the campus in an attempt to determine what had turned Harris and Klebold into raging killers. Maybe they were desensitized to violence due to their choice of video games, music and movies or they may have been depressed from being bullied by the school jocks. But since they left behind little rationale for the shootings, we likely will never know exactly what motivated them.

That is not to say that we should minimize trying to identify and intervene with troubled students before they snap.

But security professionals have to look toward emergency plans and the latest technological tools that may not totally stop, but will help limit the incredible damage caused by school shooters.

Columbine had video surveillance cameras throughout its campus. After the shootings, law enforcement officials were able to piece together much of what happened by reviewing tape from the system's videocassette recorders. That information proved useful in a forensic sense.

Technology has matured since 1999. Fortunately, today's digital video systems can be accessed remotely via the Internet to provide law enforcement with a real time view into a school. That information may have made it possible for the officers at Columbine to know how many shooters were involved, their locations and the weapons they were firing. With that knowledge, officers could have entered the building sooner, isolated the shooters and begun removing the wounded.

Another advantage we have today is video analytics. Analytics may have automatically evaluated information from cameras monitoring the student parking lot. When Harris and Klebold were detected moving—at a time when all students should have been in class—school officials could have received an alarm. That might have provided enough of a warning for them to prevent the killers from entering the building.

• **Today, no school should be without a digital video surveillance system.** Digital cameras provide extra “eyes” and remote-monitoring capabilities that are a tremendous security advantage. Video analytics are an option that should be seriously considered.

Some of Columbine's wounded and frightened students and teachers remained in the school building for more than three hours after the shooters committed suicide. An emergency notification system, available today, could have provided those trapped with silent text message updates via their cell phones. Students and teachers still ambulatory could have been advised when it was safe to leave. Also, such a system could update worried parents about where to gather for periodic briefings from authorities.

• **Today, no school should be without an emergency notification system.** The cost of this computer-based technology is very modest and can be used for many other purposes such as reminders of open houses, parent-teacher conferences and school closures.

When any school room is not being used it should be kept locked. Columbine's cafeteria was wide open, though not yet in use, when Harris and Klebold planted their defective bombs. Authorities estimate that had those two 20-pound propane bombs exploded, they would have brought the library, located directly above, crashing down. A card reader would have given only authorized employees entry to the cafeteria until it was time to open for the school's first lunch group.

• **Today, no school should be without an access control system.** It can protect entry to critical areas such as audio-visual, computer and science labs, music rooms and athletic facilities. The likely reduction in theft and vandalism alone may more than pay for the system.

Unfortunately, Columbine's emergency plan was not able to handle such a serious crisis. A school resource officer was not assigned to the campus, so by the time the first sheriff's deputy arrived at the school there were already two dead and five wounded. The assignment of a student resource officer would have placed an armed and trained law enforcement professional inside the school building at the moment the shootings began. A well thought-out and practiced emergency plan, coordinated with local law enforcement, can provide structure and help save lives during a crisis.

• **Today, no school should be without a detailed and practiced emergency plan.** Also, all schools should request that their local law enforcement department assign a school resource officer to each campus.

From what I know, Columbine was probably as well—or perhaps better—prepared as many schools in 1999. There was no reason for administrators to think that the events of that day could happen there. But they did, just as fatal school shootings have since occurred at an Amish school in rural Pennsylvania, a high school in downtown Cleveland and Virginia Tech

University in Blacksburg, Va., among more than 30 other major school shootings following Columbine.

• **Today, no school can take the attitude that “it can't happen here.”** It can. Work with a professional to complete a campus risk assessment to identify weaknesses in the security plan and then take action to remedy them. Also do not accept the argument that there is no room within tight budgets for adequate security. There are many government grants available at both the state and federal levels.

Short of turning our school campuses into prisons, we can never guarantee that there will not be a repeat of Columbine. But by taking advantage of readily available technology, working closely with local law enforcement and preparing and practicing crisis plans with rescuers, it is possible to limit and contain damage from troubled young people with guns.

Our schools are places of learning and both students and teachers need to feel safe while on campus. It is the job of security professionals to do our best to create a genuine feeling of safety.

We will never forget April 20, 1999, and Columbine Senior High School. My thoughts and prayers are with the families, relatives and friends that were affected then and still today.

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