

## **LOOKING BACK: LOOKING FORWARD – WHAT EVERY ADMINISTRATOR NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE CHALLENGE OF BEHAVIOR IN SCHOOLS**

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In the novel entitled “Jewel” by Bret Lott and throughout the novel, the author constantly referenced events as being before the novel’s pivotal event, which, in this case, was the birth of a child with Down’s syndrome into the family. The word before always appeared like this: “Before”. It was capitalized to visually represent the demarcation; the division of time into before and after the event. It helped signify the awareness that nothing would ever be the same again.

Schools, districts and communities where violence in the form of school shootings has occurred, often experience those shooting in the same way. Time is forever divided into before and after. That was true of the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999. That change is still being felt even today. This fall the Columbine Memorial was dedicated. As beautiful as the dedication and the memorial was, everyone was reminded one again that life as they had known it had changed forever.

Looking back may prove instructive for responding to the challenge of behavior in schools today. What kind of a school district was Jefferson County Schools? In 1999, Jeffco served 89,000 students who lived in the seven municipalities and large unincorporated areas that constitute Jefferson County and wraps around Denver on the western side of the city. There were approximately 154 schools which feed into the eighteen high schools. The school district

was celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary that year and the community was very involved in designing the celebration activities.

This “good” school district enjoyed not only strong academic programming, but equally outstanding violence prevention efforts facilitated by the District’s Safe & Drug Free program. Schools could select one of four different implementation plans, but all schools were required to address the issue of safe schools. Following is a listing of the menu of offerings in 1999: Conflict Resolution Training for elementary students, Conflict Mediation Training for middle and high schools, Second Step Violence Prevention Training for preschool, elementary and middle schools, Bully Prevention Workshop, Improvisational Theatre Training, Student Assistance Program (SAP) Orientation, Adult Character Education Training, HS & MS Character Education Training, Tobacco Free Teens, Media Messages, Assets developing with help of parents and the Search Institute Questionnaire.

Columbine High School took part in these violence prevention efforts. The school enjoyed the following enviable statistics for its 1,965 Students:

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|--|-------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Graduation Rate:      | 92.6% |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dropout Rate:         | 1.9%  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Free & Reduced Lunch: | 2.1%  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility:             | 6.0%  |

It is fair to say that Columbine High School was a good school in a good district in a good neighborhood. The district had a structure to ensure that all schools were involved in safe-

schools efforts. Most of the kinds of programming that research has indicated contribute to a safe, violence-free school were offered. And still.....April 20<sup>th</sup> occurred.

In the immediate “After”, the school, the district and the community came together as never before. There was no one who wasn’t affected. Mental health agency referrals increased dramatically statewide. Together, everyone experienced horror, shock, loss of innocence, heightened emotional needs and hyper-vigilance. There was a stunning need on the part of the larger community to give and/or assist. Some time later, everyone began to be ready to learn from the tragedy. The shock and horror began to dissipate and people started thoughtfully addressing the question, “Why Columbine?” Persons charged with responsibility for violence prevention and students’ social/emotional growth in Jefferson County identified ten lessons from their experience that invite school administrator to reflect on their own situation.

**Lesson 1: “There is no inoculation”.** One of the biggest struggles for parents and school administrators was to accept that the tragedy had actually happened and at their school. None of the assumed predictors of this kind of horror were present. It was a suburban community populated with predominately two parent families who took their responsibility to be involved in their children’s schooling seriously. The feeling of loss-of-control was very strong. None of the stereotypes of “good” that could hold off “evil” had held up. None of the preventative measures believed to ensure safety when put in place had demonstrated that they were fail-proof. In essence, all of the beliefs about how to inoculate themselves and their children against danger had not worked. They experienced a painful death of innocence. They now knew; it could happen anywhere and nothing has a 100% guarantee. One of the symptoms of this was an immediate

hyper-vigilance on the part of everyone. School staffs immediately reported any comments or gestures that might be vaguely construed to have violent tendencies. Few were willing to allow students to work through the sort of playground misunderstandings that the week before would not have even registered as being of concern. Predictably, the fear and confusion adults were experiencing quickly communicated itself to the students who were already confused and frightened.

What are the implications for school administrators? Do all of the things best-practices encourage to keep schools safe: Complete emergency response planning, develop school policies and understand legal considerations, foster school/law enforcement partnerships, establish a threat assessment process, assemble go-boxes, focus on school/community partnerships, complete a district-wide needs assessment and develop a comprehensive plan including strategies and programs. These activities are important and non-negotiable and ensure that schools and districts are prepared. After those elements are in place it is helpful to remember that when people act from fear, they almost always create more fear. The delicate balancing act for administrators is to act as if students are safe, but prepare as if they aren't.

**Lesson 2:** “**Take a different slant**”. All parents ask the same three questions: “Is my child safe? Is my child growing academically? Is my child growing socially?” With current pressures to improve students’ academic performance, the task of taking on the additional challenge of ensuring students are growing socially seems daunting indeed. Fortunately, new unpublished research from the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (MCREL) confirms that behavior and academic achievement are not competitive issues for school principals. MCREL compared 49 High

performing/High need schools with 27 Low performing/High needs matched schools. Schools were rated on four variables: School environment, Professional community, Leadership and Instruction. School environment had the largest effect size of 0.67, far above the second highest variable of Instruction with an effect size of 0.34. The School Environment variable was in turn divided into four variables. Those were: Parent involvement at 0.18, Academic press for achievement at 0.26, Assessment & monitoring at 0.02 and Safe and Orderly Climate at 0.48. In summary, the school environment, specifically a safe and orderly environment, was the most critical variable between high-performing and low-performing schools in the study. This study provides documentation for what many educators have intuitively felt: teaching students social skills that contribute to the school environment impacts students' academic learning. School administrators would do well to set two expectations with their staffs. First, everyone is responsible for teaching both behavior and academics. Second, together we will intentionally create environments where students are safe and are taught pro-social behaviors.

**Lesson 3: “Getting on the same page”** or agreeing on a shared goal when teaching behavior.

The first step an administrator to take in creating a safe environment where pro-social skills are taught is to lead the staff in reaching agreement on a shared goal when teaching behavior. This can be difficult because the students' behaviors are so frustrating it is often difficult for educators to move out of “controlling” behaviors to the more pro-active stance of “teaching” behaviors.

The difficulty in moving to teaching behaviors is compounded by confusion on exactly what teaching behavior entails. Often teachers confuse telling students to do something with teaching them how to handle a given situation.

The second step is for the administrator to lead the staff in a discussion about what the staff is trying to accomplish when they are teaching students behavior. Once teachers have that understanding, they can more easily integrate into their daily interactions with students. A suggested goal when teaching behavior is “To provide externally the control or direction students appear to lack internally, while systematically increasing their capacity for internal directedness”. This developmental approach is helpful for teachers in gauging how much they should do and how much they should ask the student to do; in deciding on which behaviors to focus on and in what ways.

**Lesson 4:** “Cover the Waterfront” or be systematic and systemic when responding to behavior. As in responding to most things, dealing effectively with behavior will be done much more effectively if it is done in a comprehensive and organized manner. Administrators can take a comprehensive approach to behavior by shifting the focus to all of the behaviors of all of the students rather than just those troubling behaviors of students who trouble us. One of the lessons of Columbine is that educators typically attend only to disruptive or physically aggressive behaviors. It is equally critical that there is attention paid to behaviors that are disrespectful, socially immature or mean.

Administrators are critical in ensuring that teaching behaviors is approached in an organized manner. One of the best ways to handle problem behaviors is to never allow them to reach the stage of becoming a problem. In other words, a preventative approach will pay many dividends in time, energy and effectiveness. Three tier models of thinking and organizing schools’

resources work well for this approach when they are built on data-driven decisions and include an effective decision-making process to group and regroup students by need.

**Lesson 5: “Creating a Caring Community”** or getting serious about building a strong foundation in Tier One. There is much talk about the culture of a school and usually that is approached as a given; as something organic that just is and takes different forms in different schools. The single most important lesson from Columbine is that all educators must accept the responsibility and take intentional steps to create a caring community which includes all of the students and all of the adults in their school. Efforts to create a caring community have a direct correlation with preventing more serious behavior problems and have the additional benefit of impacting students’ learning. If administrators wonder where to start in addressing behavior, this is the place. Create a caring community in your school.

There are many definitions of community, but most include some form of four attributes. These include: 1.) Membership which occurs when people feel emotionally secure, personally invested & have a sense of belonging. 2. Influence: people must feel they have influence over what the group does. 3.) People are rewarded for participating. This is fundamental for maintaining community. 4.) There is a shared emotional connection. This is a critical feature necessary for people to experience true community. These attributes are instructive for administrators committed to creating a sense of community. There are three elements which contribute significantly to a sense of community for students. They are: 1.) An orderly, predictable environment 2.) Emotional safety and 3.) Pro-social skills and interactions.

The majority of behavior problems in the classroom are caused by the failure of students to follow procedures. Typically, the teacher has not thought out what happens in the classroom and what procedures are needed. Therefore the students have not been trained to follow the procedures. It does not come as a surprise then that such teachers would spend minimum time managing the classroom. As a result, students do not experience an orderly, predictable environment. Teachers should have procedures that address: entering the classroom, what to do when they are tardy, leaving the classroom, asking a question, when they need a pencil or paper, sharpening pencils, turning in papers, making up homework, giving attention to the teacher, when they are absent, working in groups, the fire alarm sounds, when to listen, when to ask a question, when their work is done, when they are unprepared and turning in homework. This is a daunting list, but one that administrators can use as they facilitate teachers development of their own classroom procedures. After procedures have been developed, students must be taught and LEARN the expected behaviors and procedures. This occurs through a three step procedure: 1.) EXPLAIN. State, explain, model, and demonstrate the procedure. 2.) REHEARSE. Rehearse and practice the procedure under your supervision. 3.) REINFORCE. Re-teach, rehearse, practice, and reinforce the classroom procedure until it becomes a student habit or routine.

Emotional safety is a much harder element for principals to observe. That does not change the fact that students need to know that no one in their school community, student or staff, will be allowed to bully them. Students are being bullied when another student or several other students: say mean and hurtful things to them or make fun of them, ignore or exclude them from their group of friend or leave them out on purpose or hit, kick, push, shove or are physically cruel, tell

lies, spread false rumors about them or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike them. If these things happen repeatedly, it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend him or herself. Administrators need to ask the question, “What are the conditions that allow bullying behaviors to occur?” and then set out to systematically address them. If the adults in the school community are not in a healthy relationship with one another and with the students, then school conditions will allow bullying to occur. There are a number of excellent bully-proofing programs available.

Pro-social skills and interactions are most powerfully taught through modeling, long recognized as the most potent form of instruction. There are a number of social skills curriculums that administrators may want to consider, especially if their school has a large number of under-socialized students. There used to be an assumption that lack of socialization skills was most common in disadvantaged students. Many administrators report this is no longer the case. Their experience suggests that even students from more advantaged homes are simply not taught a number of these skills. However, daily interactions between staff and students will continue to be the most powerful tool because it models. There are strategies for adults to use to communicate respect, teach credibility and getting students to talk.

**Lesson 6: “Group By Need”** or targeting more intense needs at Tier 2. Sometimes students need short term, more focused instruction on certain topics or behaviors. Administrators are encouraged to enlist the assistance and expertise of their school psychologist, social worker or counselor in developing and delivering these services. They may include groups for children on the topics of divorce, assertiveness, eating disorders, etc. Administrators may want to consider

their current discipline procedures. Are those procedures ones that teach or are a natural consequence of the specific student behavior? If not, are there other options. Discipline procedures have the potential to be a powerful teaching tool.

**Lesson 7: “Zeroing in”** or looking carefully at the motivating needs of individual students. At tier three, there will be a very small number of students whose needs will require an Outcome Analysis or Functional Behavioral Assessment in order to appropriately program for them. Administrators will want to consult with their school psychologist or behavior specialist to accomplish this. The Outcome Analysis is a strategy that allows professionals to determine a student’s primary motivating needs by observing the student’s behavior and then hypothesizing the student’s primary motivating need which is referred to as the student’s theme. Possible outcomes include power/control, protection/escape/avoidance, attention, acceptance/affiliation, expression of self, gratitude or justice/revenge. Once the student’s theme outcome is identified, an individual plan will include strategies for arranging the student’s environment so that the student can more directly access their intended outcome in socially acceptable ways and then teaching the student identified replacement behaviors. The administrator’s primary task is to work with all staff to implement the plan after it is designed.

**Lesson 8: “It ain’t for sissies”** or realize that you are in for Second-order change.

Implementing the Lessons from Columbine will mean asking your staff to create a caring community where students are in a safe, predictable school environment and know that people genuinely care about them and where behavior is seen as a teaching activity that is designed to be delivered across various levels of support for *ALL* students, not just those with behavior

problems. That is a BIG change. Administrators will want to thoughtfully approach such a change.

Recent research has indicated that change is not simply change. It can be first-order or second-order change. First-order change is incremental and typically thought of as “the next most obvious step for a school. It fine tunes the system through a series of small steps that do not depart radically from the past. Second-order change, on the other hand, is definitely NOT incremental. It is a dramatic departure from the expected, both in terms of defining the problem and finding a solution. Second-order change is a deep change which alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting. There are definite leadership challenges of second-order change. Research by Marzano, Waters & McNulty have identified seven of the 21 key responsibilities that are critical to second-order change. More importantly: four of the 21 are negatively affected by second-order change. Those four responsibilities are: Culture, Communication, Order and Input.

**Lesson 9: “Courage to Lead”** or the importance of leadership. Many administrators will be able to identify with Margaret Wheatley’s comment, “I think the greatest source of courage is to realize that if we don’t act, nothing will change for the better.” She further suggests that “Courage comes from the old French word for heart (cuer). We develop courage for those things that speak to our heart. Our courage grows for things that affect us deeply, things that open our hearts. Once our heart is engaged, it is easy to be brave.” As was discussed in Lesson 8, this change will be difficult and will demand courage of its administrators to both initiate and to keep its momentum.

Administrators may want to consider using conversations as a way to begin this important second-order change. Conversations as a strategy have the advantage of utilizing many of the attributes discussed earlier. In effect, they become an experience in being a caring community. Wheatley recommends agreeing on her suggested six principles before having deeper conversations.

**Lesson 10:** “Walk your talk” or the power of modeling what you want in others.

Administrators typically do not see themselves as a powerful tool in creating the school they envision. The reality, however, is that the strongest form of instruction is modeling whether one is dealing with children or adults. This means that the way administrators do their job and the way they talk to people has as much, if not more impact any other staff development.

There are a number of new leadership books currently addressing this issue. Pagano & Pagano write about the concept of Transparent Leadership. They include the following nine behaviors as ways of building credibility: Being overwhelmingly honest, gathering intelligence, being composed, letting your guard down, keeping promises, properly handling mistakes, delivering bad news well, avoiding destructive comments and showing others that you care.

How can we respond to the Lessons of Columbine? Creating a caring community where students can grow and learn both academically and socially is nothing less than a gift to the future and a blessing to all involved in its creation.

## Resources

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