



NEWS BRIEF

Center for the Prevention of School Violence
North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF COLUMBINE: TERRORISM AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE STAKED IN COMMON GROUND

Much like the terrorist act which occurred as schools opened across the United States in Fall, 2001, the act of school violence experienced by Columbine High School in Colorado has had a lasting impact on schools and communities. Similarities between terrorism and school violence do not end with their lasting impacts, however, as they share commonalities which stake them in common ground.

The most obvious commonality is that both terrorism and school violence incidents take many forms. As we have learned over the past year, terrorism can range from the most targeted type of violent act to acts which attempt to undermine our psyche, values, and way of life. So too do acts of school violence. While many people use the Columbine incident as definitive of what school violence is, those who best understand what school violence is know that it includes any act that disrupts the educational mission or safe and secure climate of a school. To prevent both terrorism and school violence from occurring, an understanding of the many ways in which they manifest must be present.

A second commonality is that both incidents of terrorism and school violence are somewhat predictable. Both types of incidents typically have “warning signs” of their occurrence. One of the lasting lessons of Columbine is that we need to know our youth so that we are able to identify signs of possible violent intent. The obligation of society with both terrorism and school violence is to be skilled at recognizing warning signs and at responding to them with appropriate actions to prevent violence from happening.

A lack of concern about consequences is the third commonality which links terrorism and school violence. Terrorists and those who have been responsible for school violence incidents appear to have little regard for the lives of those they target. Much like what has been learned about the terrorists responsible for the September 11th incident, the shooters at Columbine were motivated at least in part by a hatred of those around them. Although sometimes a sense of pessimism may characterize attempts that are directed at ridding the world of hatred, efforts must be made to reduce hatred and enhance acceptance of those who are different or have different beliefs.

Forever impacting a sense of security, the feeling that “it can’t happen here,” is shared by terrorism and school violence. Both September 11th and Columbine changed the United States. While the impact of the former is still relatively fresh in our minds and hearts, the latter, more distant in time, lingers with impacts in schools across the country. The vital lesson to take from both is the unfortunate fact that, indeed, terrorism and school violence “can happen here.”

A final commonality which brings together terrorism and school violence involves how we handle such incidents. What we have learned from our experiences is that we must act to prevent terrorism and school violence incidents when possible, intervene when such incidents are likely to occur, and respond quickly and with a sustained vigilance when they do occur. Only through such comprehensiveness will we be able to continue to live freely in our society and to educate our children and youth in schools that are safe and secure, free of fear and conducive to learning.