

What Can the Schools Do?

Metal detectors, mesh book bags, armed police—should kids have to attend prisons? Here's what some schools have done to prevent violence on campus

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, opened fire on classmates and teachers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. When the terror ended, the gunmen had killed themselves along with 12 students and a teacher.

By JOHN CLOUD

AFTER THE WORST SCHOOL MASSACRE IN THIS country's history, there must be something we can do. Right? If crime in the classroom is an epidemic, it's like tuberculosis—one we basically control, with a few flare-ups every once in a while that beat the inoculation. Overall, school violence is not going up. Just 10 of every 1,000 students were the victims of serious violent crime at school in 1996. And while that's 10 too many, more than twice that number (26) were victims off campus. After the shootings that occurred in the 1997-98 school year, many districts tightened security. It's having an effect, according to the National School Safety Center: there were 42 deaths in the 1997-98 academic year, and just nine—before Littleton—this school year.

What has increased over the past five years is the multiple-victim, video-game-like rampages that led up to the Littleton abomination. They are the Ebola virus of schools—horribly bloody, yes, but perhaps so determined that we can't devise general means to stop them. On Saturday, authorities in Texas announced that five 14-year-old boys had been charged with plotting a murderous assault on their junior high school. Since Littleton, dozens of copycat threats have popped up around the country. There are two categories

of dealing with them: first, nurture more; second, crack down. The latter is embraced by security experts and frightened school employees. For these folks, even zero tolerance is somehow too much; they want lock-downs and detector dogs and strapped rent-a-cops to be a regular feature of school life. (President Clinton also said the Federal Government would provide more money for schools to hire police. For the record, however, Columbine High School's armed cop couldn't do much to stop the shooters.)

Most schools blend the two approaches, to the extent that they can afford it. Trumbull High School in tony Trumbull, Conn., can afford a lot. The school has an armed, uniformed police officer at the entrance, and an 11-member team of counselors watches for warning signs and deals with problem kids. There are two guards inside, these in plainclothes; one of them, John Kichinko, wears Winnie-the-Pooh ties to keep kids at ease.

Across the nation, the most common violence-prevention measures are the cheapest—and the easiest for a couple of well-armed outcasts to blast past. According to a study published last year in the journal *Urban Education*, the direct-prevention plan most commonly reported by school administrators is to place teachers in hallways. Next come alternative schools, which lump the troubled kids together under one (ideally sturdy) roof; and finally, visitor registration.

The stark limits of such measures became clear after Jonesboro and Springfield and the rest, and many schools have added paranoia to their prevention plans. All bomb threats, at one time sifted for credibility, are taken seriously at most schools.

3.5 Hours the typical adolescent spends alone today

11 Fewer hours children spend with parents each week, compared with the 1960s

721% Increase in number of minutes evening news spent covering homicide, 1993-96

After East Montpelier, Vt., canceled school seven times because of bomb threats, officials instituted a new policy: classes move outside when threats are called in, and trucks haul in lunch and Porta Potties.

Schools everywhere are experimenting with security measures developed in juvenile jails.

Unmanned metal detectors—around which students can pass weapons—are out, and random checks with wand detectors are in. Urged on by the President, many schools have adopted uniforms—or at least require tucked-in shirts, which can't hide pistols. Some districts have purchased surveillance cameras or fancy fire alarms that guard against pranks.

But critics complain that such measures erase whatever fragile trust exists between students and administrators, making it less likely for kids to offer information about students on the edge. (Even at touchy-feely Trumbull, sophomore Mike Schubert notes the dangers: "You want to keep your mouth shut, or you might end up dead somewhere.") What's more, the high-tech gizmos probably couldn't have prevented any of the shootings of the past two years.

Real prevention is much harder; it means addressing the underlying causes of violence. The boys involved in last year's shootings shared three traits: they were estranged from family and classmates (in some cases owing to poorly treated mental illness); they had immersed themselves in a violent entertainment subculture; and they had ready access to guns.

So does anything work? Sort of. Dedicated mentors can make a difference, and—though they sound hopelessly mushy—programs that help bullies deal with frustration have been shown to re-



duce school violence. Schools that try very hard to connect to families and communities can find potentially destructive students earlier. Not surprisingly, the districts that have had the most success are the ones with schools in or near big cities, which have had to combat violence the longest. Five

years ago, DeKalb County officials in Georgia were finding so many weapons on campus that they began a campaign to alert parents.

"We spoke at churches, community groups—and we stressed gun responsibility," says Garry McGiboney, who heads the system's disciplinary tribunal. "We'd tell them, 'If you think your kids don't know you have a gun, you're kidding yourself. Or if you think they don't know where that gun is, you're also kidding yourself.'"

DeKalb officials urge kids to warn them about troubled classmates, and a civic group gives \$100 rewards for students who tattle on weapons violators. Counselors look for bullies; dogs hunt for guns. DeKalb has this success to report: five years ago, it confiscated 76 weapons; this year, it confiscated "only" eight.

That may be the best schools can do. "The society outside our schools today means the unbelievable availability of weapons and the reinforcement of the violence culture by the media," says Jose Garcia, principal of a Florida middle school that had a fatal shooting in 1997. "No principal can shut that out of a school. Nobody can." ■

Questions

1. What steps can schools take in an effort to prevent violence on campus?
2. What deeper social issues underlie the problem of campus violence?

<p>8000 Murders a child has seen in all media by the end of elementary school</p>	<p>300% Increase in teen suicide since the 1960s</p>	<p>1000% Increase in depression among children since the 1950s</p>
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