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The Aftermath of Columbine on Student Writing

*Your tragedy, though it is unique in its magnitude, is, as you know
so well, not an isolated event.*

—President Bill Clinton

Addressing Columbine High School, May 20, 1999

A Brief History of School Violence

Without newsworthy school violence incidents, student violent writing would probably not be as concerning to educators as it currently is. After all, for most students, school is the safest place to be during the day. School violence has been documented since around 1927 when a disgruntled taxpayer planted dynamite at a Michigan school killing 38 students, 2 teachers, the school superintendent, and the village postmaster (*USA School Violence Statistics*, n.d.). Since then, educators have seen the culmination of widely publicized school shootings such as those in Littleton, Colorado; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Virginia Tech University; and Texas A&M University.

Violence is not absent in today's schools. While the rate of serious violent crimes in public school has actually dropped over the last decade, students still face personal danger while attending school

(Department of Justice, cited in National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In a 2003 survey, 17% of high school students had carried a weapon to school during the 30 days preceding the survey (Grunbaum et al., 2004). In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education presented a set of findings from a random school survey that nearly half of the surveyed schools reported at least one student threat of physical attack without a weapon. Thirty-nine percent of surveyed middle schools reported that student bullying occurred at school at least once a week. While the actual numbers of violent incidents or widely publicized events might be decreasing, the rate of students reporting bullying, harassment, and emotional threats has been on the increase. The U.S. Department of Education noted,

Highly publicized school shootings have created uncertainty about the security of this country's schools and generated a fear that an attack might occur in any school, in any community. Increased national attention to the problem of school violence has prompted educators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, and parents to press for answers to two central questions: "Could we have known that these attacks were being planned?" and if so, "What could we have done to prevent these attacks from occurring?" (Fein et al., 2002, p. 3)

So while the overall numbers seem promising, as long as students face danger at school, educators will be questioning whether violence prevention methods are actually effective in practice.

The Columbine and Jonesboro Shootings: Writings as a Pretext for Violence

The 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, left 15 people dead, 23 students wounded, and a nation of school administrators wondering "How can I prevent the same thing from happening at my school?" The images were gruesome and played out on live national TV—aerial footage of students running from the school building, hands in the air, some badly wounded, some left to die on the sidewalk surrounding the school. During that event, two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, had walked into their school dressed in trench coats and shooting anyone in their path.

Documents released by Jefferson County authorities nearly four years after the shooting provided a shocking glimpse into the writings of Harris and Klebold. Dylan Klebold was a vivid writer and journaler. He began a personal journal nearly two years before the shooting titled "Existences: A Virtual Book." He wrote often of lost love, disappointment, and suicidal tendencies. Around February 1999, Klebold wrote a short story for English class revolving around an angry man in black methodically killing "preps." He stated, "If I could face an emotion of god, it would have looked like the man. I not only saw in his face but also felt emanating from him power, complacency, closure, and godliness. The man smiled, and in that instant, through no endeavor of my own, I understood his actions" (Cullen, 2009, p. 307). The story ended with the impact of the murder on the man left behind.

This story left Klebold's English teacher in confusion as to how to approach the content of the writing. The teacher, Judy Kelly, spoke with Klebold who told her it was "just a story." Kelly then contacted Klebold's parents who noted how hard kids are to understand sometimes. Kelly then contacted the school counselor who heard a similar defense from Klebold. After the shooting occurred, a classmate of Klebold's commented on the class stating, "It's a creative writing class. You write about what you want. Shakespeare wrote all about death" (Cullen, 2009, p. 308).

Eric Harris had received positive teacher comments about his graphic violent writing. In 1997, Harris began to notice school shootings in the news and wrote a paper for English class in which he wrote, "It is just as easy to bring a loaded handgun to school as it is to bring a calculator." His teacher's response was, "Thorough and logical. Nice job." In 1999 Harris wrote an essay for English class titled "Is Murder or Breaking the Law Ever Justified?" The same year he wrote a paper for government class wherein he admitted he was a felon and how a night in jail had made him a changed man. It ended, "I guess it was a worthwhile punishment after all." The teacher responded, "Wow, what a way to learn a lesson. I agree that night was punishment enough for you. Still, I am proud of you and the way you have reacted . . . You have really learned from this and it has changed the way you think . . . I would trust you in a heartbeat. Thanks for letting me read this and for being in my class." In another class writing where Harris was to respond to a Shakespeare reading, he wrote about how he idolized a character that would not be taken without a struggle.

One document, a 13-page essay written by Klebold the fall before the shootings took place, explored Klebold's explorations into the beliefs of Charles Manson and his theory that he had the right to kill people that had corrupted the Earth and "dumped him" (Ingold & Pankratz, 2003). He also wrote about the movie *Natural Born Killers*, stating that the movie portrayed two characters that "defy society and get lost in their own little world, killing and robbing whomever they came across" (p. A-01). Eric Harris wrote a fiction piece about an alien attack that killed his Marine buddies. He used phrases such as "Bullet shells sprinkled the floor, on top of a carpet of blood," and "Arms, legs, and heads were tossed about as if a small child turned on a blender with no lid in the middle of a room" (p. A-01). While such writing was dark and violent, the part that troubled many school administrators was the positive response of the teachers who had read the writings. One teacher offered "Your paper is very good" to Klebold and "Yours is a unique approach and your writing works in a gruesome way" to Harris (p. A-01, see also Brooke, 1999).

This type of situation cannot only be found in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings. In March 1998, two middle school students in Jonesboro, Arkansas, shot and killed four students and one teacher. The boys, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, had arranged a plan wherein Golden asked to be excused from his class, pulled a fire alarm, and ran into the woods outside the school to join Johnson. While students exited the building because of the sounding fire alarm, Johnson and Golden opened fire. A 1999 newspaper article detailed the regret an English teacher felt after the Jonesboro shooting. As a result of a minor incident at school involving an altercation over a hat he was prohibited from wearing to school, one of the shooters had been assigned to write an essay for English class about why he was assigned in-school suspension for the incident. The essay, written about 14 months prior to the shootings, expressed the student's desire to shoot "squirrels," referring to teachers and students. Even though the shooting occurred over a year after the essay was written, the teacher noted her guilt about not knowing what the essay truly foretold and noted the importance for English teachers to pay attention to warning signs in student writing (Heard, 1999).

School administrators, then, were in a bind. Did these writings really foretell events about to occur at Columbine High or were the writings merely adolescent experiments in thought construction and creativity? Were all writings of a similar nature signs of impending violent acts? Is it a school's duty to start suppressing types or styles of student writing?

The Columbine Effect

School administrators could not sit idly back and ignore the content of student writings after the Columbine shootings. As a result a new term—*Columbine effect*—emerged in literature detailing the litigation spawned by the Columbine shootings. Calvert and Richards (2003) wrote:

Quite simply, the events at Columbine gave high school administrators all the reasons—legitimate or illegitimate—they needed to trounce the First Amendment rights of public school students in the name of preventing violence. The first wave of censorship cases that swelled up in the year immediately following Columbine is now well documented. But the fear of Columbine-like violence that gave rise to that wave has not subsided in the years since. As the *Washington Post* observed in December 2002, many school administrators across the country “are still on edge since the tragedy at Columbine High School.” (p. 1091)

Columbine was in the back of everyone’s minds, including those of judges deciding the fate of student First Amendment privileges in public schools. One judge wrote about his support for a student expulsion based on the content of a student’s summer writings from home wherein he described his desire to rape, sodomize, and murder a fellow classmate. After the writing was unknowingly taken from the student and found on school grounds, the judge wrote his support for the student’s expulsion by stating, “we find it untenable in the wake of Columbine and Jonesboro that any reasonable school official who came into possession of J.M.’s letter would not have taken some action based on its violent and disturbing content” (*Doe v. Pulaski County Special School District*, 2002, Footnote 4, p. 626). Basically, this court was saying that it would have been irresponsible, knowing what had gone on at Columbine and Jonesboro, to not take action against the student.

Another court wrote about a student’s expulsion based on the content of a website created at home. The court held that the website was an interference with the work of the school and went on to state, “We too appreciate that in schools today violence is unfortunately too common and the horrific events at Columbine High School, Colorado, remain fresh in the country’s mind” (*J.S. v. Bethlehem Area School District*, 2002, p. 659). Again, an example of a court acknowledging current events—that in light of the current events, administrators had every right to be leery of the intent of student writing.

Calvert and Richards (2003) wrote an article titled, “Columbine fallout: The long-term effects on free expression take hold in public schools.” The authors stated that the events at Columbine “gave high school administrators all the reasons—legitimate or illegitimate—they needed to trounce the First Amendment rights of public school students in the name of preventing violence” (p. 1090). The authors traced a growing trend of post-Columbine cases in which schools were prevailing in their attempts to suppress student expression. Reviewing cases from 2002 to 2003, the authors concluded that school administrators were frequently using the “true threat” exception to the First Amendment as the primary way of suppressing student expression. That is, administrators were eager to deem a student’s expression as “threatening” in order to implement student discipline for the content of the expression. The authors noted, “Disputes that once would have been settled by a call home to parents now end up in court due to overzealous school officials who have exploited the tragedy at Columbine to squelch speech they find disagreeable” (p. 1139).

The Aftermath of Columbine on the Student Writer

As newsworthy as Columbine proved to be, so do the disciplinary tales of public school students attending school in the post-Columbine era. These events serve as specific examples of students who were often writing within the confines of the directions provided by teachers in school and were disciplined for the content of their writings. While certainly not representative of every school or every school administrator, the events are cautionary tales of how the writing landscape has changed for students in the past few years.

Boston, Massachusetts

In 2000, a high school student in Boston, Massachusetts, was suspended for his response to a class assignment to “write a horror story about a mysterious person.” (Boston Schools Drop, 2000). The instructor of the course told students that no subject was off-limits. One student, Charles Carithers, wrote a story in which the main character attacked his high school English teacher with a chain saw. At the end of the story readers learn that the narrator’s aunt, not the English teacher, was the person who died in the story. Carithers’s English teacher reported the content of the essay to school administrators who promptly suspended him for three days.

Cary, Illinois

In 2007, an 18-year-old student was arrested in Cary, Illinois, based on the content of his writing for an English assignment. This straight-A student was basically told that no topic was off limits and students were not to judge or censor their writing process. The student wrote an essay titled "Blood, Sex, and Booze" where he insinuated his teacher could inspire one to commit a school shooting (Swedberg & Olson, 2007). The English teacher reported the issue to school administrators who then notified the police. The student was arrested and charged with two counts of disorderly conduct, which were later dropped. The student was eventually allowed to return to school but suffered losing his recruit status to the U.S. Marine Corps because of the charges filed against him (Attorney: Teen Who Wrote, 2007).

West Warwick, Rhode Island

The U.S. Secret Service investigated a seventh-grade student after he penned a classroom assignment to write about his perfect day. His "perfect day" included harming the president, Oprah, and various corporate executives. The student was interrogated by the U.S. Secret Service—quite a task for a seventh grader (Secret Service Investigates, 2006).

Prosser, Washington

A high school student was questioned by the U.S. Secret Service for drawings he completed as part of an art class assignment. The drawings included depictions of the president's head on a stick and one of the president characterized as the devil launching a missile. The art teacher turned the drawings over to the school administrators who then contacted law enforcement authorities. The student was disciplined but not suspended for his drawings (Secret Service Questions, 2004).

Johnston, Rhode Island

An 11th grade honors student was suspended indefinitely based on the content of an extra credit journal he kept for his Honors English class. The student, Matthew Parent, was instructed to use the journal to express his ideas and engage in freewriting. Parent wrote a violent piece where he wrote, "They fear I'll kill them. They know I have no limits, no remorse, and nothing to lose." The teacher turned

the writings over to the school counselor, who then contacted a psychologist. The student was suspended indefinitely and was determined to be homicidal and suicidal. Legal wrangling went on and eventually the school reinstated Parent without forcing a psychological evaluation to be completed (Rhode Island School Settles, 2001).

Summary

Students across the nation are still living with the aftermath of Columbine. Judges give weight to administrators making difficult disciplinary decisions in light of the Columbine aura. My experience as a classroom teacher highlighted this problem: Teachers in all curricular areas are attempting to teach writing skills using sound methodology and students are sometimes responding with violent content. Because of heightened publicity about school violence, administrators are on guard and swift to react to violent content. However, students who face discipline for the content of their writings, as either a class assignment or random writing within the school, can sue alleging a violation of First Amendment rights. Administrators and teachers are caught in the crossfire: suppress all student violent writing in the hope of preventing school violence or allow it with the goal of creating better writers? It is not only important for school administrators to know the basic legal principles guiding student writing scenarios but also to understand the moral and philosophical reasoning presented in prominent case law as to why the content of student writing should be a primary concern within schools today.

Practical Applications for Teachers and Administrators

For K–6 Schools

- Participate in a violence prevention curriculum; this may be a one-time investment. For a lower cost, perhaps partner with your local law enforcement to form a partnership violence prevention program.
- Help students feel safe in school by having high staff visibility throughout the building at all times.
- Appoint a school counselor or other trusted staff member as a safe person to talk to about violent events students may have witnessed at home or elsewhere.

- Acknowledge that violent writing is not a high school-only problem. Address this with your staff members.
- Allow students multiple writing opportunities throughout your curriculum to practice formulating appropriate brainstorming protocol.
- Host essay contests and other positive events to reward productive, positive writing.
- Begin discussing student violent writing with parents and community members. Provide some warning signs that younger students might show in their writings.

For 7–12 Schools

- Don't obsess about school violence events when they occur or are highly publicized in the news. If possible, refrain from changing school policies or procedures that are simply a result of fear from publicized school violence events.
- Participate in school violence prevention programs or partner with your local law enforcement to provide school violence prevention curriculum.
- Create a hotline for students to anonymously report potentially violent behavior.
- Acknowledge that violent intentions are often expressed in writing. Communicate with your staff, parents, and students that all written threats or statements will be taken seriously.
- Never joke about school violence.
- Pay attention to school violence events that occur throughout the nation. Use each as a learning moment: Study the student pattern, the administrative response, and the potential implications for your school community. Discuss this with your school attorney.

Questions to Consider

1. How has school violence affected your community or school?
2. What are violence statistics in your community and within your school? How do these statistics influence how you lead your school? Who can you contact in your community or school district to learn more specifics about school violence statistics?
3. Are your teachers and staff members prepared to work with students who might face violence outside of school?

4. What inservice opportunities are available for your school faculty to learn more about working with students with violent backgrounds?
5. How do you communicate with parents and stakeholders about any violence that occurs within your school?