On April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students walked into their school midday and killed 12 students and one teacher. Twenty-one other students were injured. All that had been normal came to an abrupt end. Education leaders in Jefferson County, Colorado, quickly realized they were laying the groundwork for a new normal.

As one of those leaders, I well remember that day. After 27 years as a Jeffco classroom teacher, I had begun the 1998–99 school year as the freshly elected full-time president of our local teachers union, the Jefferson County Education Association (JCEA). As such, I spent the bulk of my time with Jeffco’s teachers, support personnel, board of education members, district-level administrators, parent organizations, and local business and community groups. In other words, I was one adult working with, and learning from, other adults who shared the common goal of making our already successful school district even better.

Colorado’s Jefferson County Public Schools, west of Denver, had long enjoyed its reputation as a nationally renowned large suburban school district. Most of our students graduated, went directly to college or work, and by all accounts built healthy, productive middle-class lives. Despite intermittent struggles with statewide school funding policies and occasional ideological skirmishes amongst our local board members, Jeffco had maintained its standing as a lighthouse district.

With a renewed commitment to continuous improvement, our collective leaders group had unveiled a new strategic

Lessons Learned from Columbine

We are never more in danger than when we think ourselves secure, nor in reality, more secure than when we seem to be most in danger.

—William Cowper
plan for the district earlier in the year aimed at further increasing student achievement and community support. It had been 17 years since local voters had passed a mil levy increase, which made it necessary and urgent to form productive relationships and new revenue solutions. The district’s Anchor Group—which comprised employee association leaders, the local board, superintendent, and other key administrators—was formed as part of that strategic plan. To guide plan implementation, we conducted surveys and community gatherings and learned that public support was growing, as was confidence in the district’s direction and its leaders.

On the morning of April 20, 1999, we gathered to celebrate local agencies and individuals who had gone above and beyond to foster community spirit and care for people in need. The Good News Breakfast, an annual Jefferson County event, came as a welcome respite before we were to resume intense 11th-hour contract negotiations. Because the Anchor Group had worked hard to build positive working relationships, I was optimistic we would reach a settlement, despite ongoing budget shortfalls and a few persistent policy language disagreements.

On that fateful Tuesday, we had only one significant contract article to address before facing the inevitable discussion about money. We signed off on “Student Discipline and Teacher Protection” at 11:05 a.m. Sixteen minutes later, at 11:21, the shooting began at Columbine High School.

Within minutes of the first live televised report at 11:30, both negotiations teams and our respective staff members were called to the central administration building for the first of dozens of crisis organizing and response meetings. Joining us were the other members of the Anchor Group and the leaders of the district’s communications, risk management, security, mental health, counseling, and academic offices, as well as the PTA.

The purpose of this first gathering was to provide real-time status reports from district administrators on the scene. I remember struggling to make sense of their abrupt, disjointed words through the static of walkie-talkies, the constant, jarring blare of fire alarms, and multiple helicopters hovering overhead. I imagined all those frightened students and teachers having to endure that cruel sensory assault firsthand. That’s when I shed my first tears.

By this time, all the schools in the Columbine area of Littleton, Colorado, had been put on lockdown, and communication to all district schools was under way. As Columbine High School students were evacuated, they were directed to a nearby elementary school, and a quickly established family reunification protocol was put in motion. The decision was made to close all 147 Jeffco schools for the remainder of the week. A lengthy list of tasks had already surfaced, and the appropriate individuals or group representatives either volunteered or were assigned to each task. Hanging in the air were two unspoken questions desperate for answers: Why did this happen? How could it happen here?

My assignment, along with JCEA Executive Director Jim Hodges, was to call the homes of all 110 Columbine High School staff members. It was a brutal task. I grew up in Jefferson County, attended and graduated from Jeffco schools, and had taught in them for 27 years. Among the Columbine teaching staff were some of my own high school friends and neighbors, former colleagues, and dozens of association members I knew well. Jim had also spent most of his teaching career in Jefferson County, with many of those years at Columbine. We helped keep each other’s emotions in check, at least until the phone calls were completed.

I put off making the last call on my list until it could no longer be avoided. The only name left to contact was Columbine science teacher Dick Will. Dick and my husband had been college roommates, and both Dick and his wife Jacque had been my teaching colleagues for over 25 years. The four of us remain close friends. When I connected with Jacque, at 7:30 p.m., she told me that Dick was among the last to be rescued, nearly five hours after the mêlée began, and that he had escaped injury and was on his way home. Dick had kept his entire class of students safe even as bullets sprayed the windows near the ceiling of his classroom.

When the response team reassembled at nearly 10 p.m., we received word that Dave Sanders, a beloved Columbine teacher and coach, had died from gunshots he took while ushering students to safety. By that time, we also had confirmation that all other staff survivors had arrived at home. We agreed to reconvene at 6:00 a.m. each day for the rest of that week.

My assignment was to call the homes of all 110 Columbine High School staff members. It was a brutal task.
We walked into the Good News Breakfast that morning under a sunny blue sky. We drove home shortly after midnight through a wet spring snowfall. It seemed as if Colorado’s typically unpredictable weather spirits were crying along with us.

**In the Aftermath**

At 8 a.m. the next morning, Jim Hodges and I walked into a church a few blocks from Columbine High School. We were there at the personal request of the principal to simply be with the teachers when they reconvened as a group. There was no structured agenda; there was no expected outcome. There was quiet and heartbeat, shock and confusion, frustration and anger, random sobs and silent tears, self-examination and guilt, fear and worry, and love for one another. There was one brief emotional exchange about missed warning signs and bullying, another about ideological conflicts that had been brewing in the area. Of course, there was no discussion whatsoever about the impact of social media, cell phones, or any other postmillennial technology. This gathering was simply the educator’s heart on full display. My takeaway was that dedicated attention to the emotional needs of the adults would be a critical step in the entire community’s recovery and healing.

In the first terrible week following the shooting, the countless memorial services and funerals began amid an ensuing media circus. Even then, none of us grasped how many lives had been affected and forever changed.

After a couple of days, I lost track of the phone calls I received at work and at home. Some concerned last-minute changes to the crisis team’s meeting schedule or requests to speak at hastily arranged press conferences. Some were from local, state, or national media outlets. Some involved rumor control and problematic communication gaps within the community. Several colleagues from Colorado and across the country reached out to convey their sympathy and resolve to make sure it never happened again, at any school.

The calls that hit closest to home were from Jeffco’s teachers and longtime allies. Their calls came at all hours of the day and night. Some people just needed an ear. Others needed to vent their general frustration with the superintendent, the local board, high school administrators, law enforcement tactics, the student dress code, the lack of discipline, dangerously loose gun policies, the divide between various student groups, or the parents of the two shooters. Several teachers who were not able to sleep related their nightmares and lack of confidence in knowing which nooks and crannies in their schools would be safe to hide in.

Particularly poignant was a conversation I had with Janet Bingham, then a Rocky Mountain News reporter who had been covering Jefferson County Schools for years. Standing in the empty parking lot of the church following the Columbine staff gathering, we shared off-the-record reflections. Bingham expressed her personal concerns as the mother of two teenage children and the challenge of maintaining objectivity in order to do her job. Shortly before the first anniversary of the shooting, I learned that the Bingham family had taken an extended hiatus to Africa to work on humanitarian projects in local villages.

Another realization came about a week after the shooting. A small team of staff from the National Education Association (NEA) and the Colorado Education Association (CEA) had arrived to help us facilitate our overall response and communication plans. One part of our daily routine at the JCEA office was to gather for a check-in/mutual support session, which lasted as long as needed. One morning, as I was leaving the daily update meeting at the district’s central offices, the president of the Jeffco board...
of education took me aside and quietly asked if he could join our session. He told all of us later how much he appreciated this needed relief in a familiar, no-pressure atmosphere. Up to that point, there had been no opportunity for school board members to debrief, either individually or as a group.

In addition to keeping the delicate emotional state of the Columbine family in mind, there was a long, complex list of logistical details. The school’s interior was in ruins. The building and everything within its perimeter had been cordoned off and declared a crime scene. Neither students nor staff members were allowed access to their cars or any personal belongings left in or around the school. It was several weeks before the police investigation was complete and the most damaged areas of the building were cleaned, or razed, to an acceptable degree. Only then was permission to reenter granted.

District and school staff were pressed to make urgent decisions in a number of areas:

- where to hold classes when the Columbine students and teachers returned;
- what to do about instructional materials that could be off-limits for weeks;
- what to “teach” the first day back, the second day, and every day after that;
- what to do if a student, or a teacher, experienced emotional upset and needed immediate support; and
- what to do about interrupted grading cycles, AP tests, graduation activities, sports matches, and more.

Because of the supportive, trusting atmosphere throughout the community, all of these challenges were met with little disruption. A nearby Jeffco high school temporarily instituted a partial-day schedule to accommodate the Columbine students’ use of the building for the other part of the day. Teachers districtwide stepped up to donate textbooks and other teaching materials. NEA and the Jefferson Center for Mental Health provided “first day back” lesson plans, customized for elementary and secondary students. The staff of the district’s Employee Assistance Program and all school counselors and social workers were available around the clock to help students and staff through the rough moments. One overall priority was to make the last month of the school year as normal as possible for Columbine’s students. Because of the collaborative efforts of district officials and the school’s parent community, only minor changes were made to Columbine’s graduation, testing, and activity schedules.

Meanwhile, both the JCEA office and the school district were overcome by a heavy influx of mail and packages. Within the first 24 hours after the shooting, our office received letters, faxes, and emails from Maine to Washington, Israel to Russia. Throughout the next several days, individual students and parents sent cards, posters, poems, and letters. Families and student bodies sent signed banners, flower wreaths, and crates full of teddy bears, in hopes that we would deliver them to the memorial site, which had been set up in the park bordering the grounds of Columbine. Because of the volume of items and the worldwide scope of the postmarks, centrally located warehouse space was made available to sort, store, and disburse items, and a system was set up to screen them for security purposes.

Over the subsequent weeks and months, there were cards and letters from individuals, organizations, and community groups, which often included monetary donations. The district and JCEA immediately established separate funds for specific purposes. To this day, the Jeffco Schools Foundation’s Columbine Memorial Scholarship Fund and JCEA’s Christa McAuliffe/Dave Sanders Excellence Fund support continuing education for Jeffco students and teachers, respectively.

Surviving Columbine students and staff returned to their repaired, renovated building in the fall of 1999, steadfastly determined to restore their school’s reputation of excellence. Since then, Columbine graduates have carried that spirit of strength and unity with them into adulthood. For all of us in Jefferson County, they continue to be a source of inspiration and a beacon of promise for a better future.

Sharing Our Experience

*The past is behind, learn from it. The future is ahead, prepare for it. The present is here, live it.*

—Thomas S. Monson

The Columbine tragedy and its aftermath consumed most of my term as JCEA president, and it has continued to be a central part of my
A strong, effective system grounded in strong, trusting relationships is the linchpin of school violence prevention, response, and recovery.

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