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Diocesan schools review plans; stress value of life

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

There's a sadly familiar ring to a letter that diocesan Catholic schools sent to parents March 8:

"This week we have once again seen a senseless act of violence in school, resulting in the needless loss of life in a San Diego area high school," it stated. "Yesterday, this disturbing trend erupted in a Catholic junior-senior high school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where one student shot and injured another student at school."

In May 1999 the schools superintendent, Timothy Dwyer, sent a similar letter after the tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado, where two students committed suicide after shooting and killing a teacher and 12 students, and wounding 23 others.

Both letters noted that diocesan Catholic schools have emergency plans. Both encouraged family, students and faculty to be alert to any behavior perhaps signifying dangerous consequences.

"Sadly, no school is immune to individual acts of violence," Dwyer stated in his March 8 letter.

Although that letter did not mention another incident in Elmira, educators were well aware of a close call at Southside High School Feb. 14. A student was said to have taken a gun and bombs to school, but then wrote notes to classmates who alerted authorities, and he was arrested.

"That situation was handled beautifully from the very beginning," said Sister Mary Walter Hickey, RSM, principal of Notre



Dame High School in Elmira, which is not far from Southside and just 75 miles from Williamsport.

"I think it's important we understand nobody's immune from this and we have to be always ready," she said.

After Columbine, she said, administrators talked in classrooms about possible scenarios, "and we plan to do that again." Such talks address what to watch out for, to do for one another, and "review that we are truly Gospel people and need to care for everyone. I think you have to be really careful how you treat everyone."

At Holy Family Junior High School in Elmira, teachers not only held departmental meetings on March 16, a professional development day. They also took time to practice communicating by foghorn.

"You have to think about things that can go wrong with your plan," said the principal, Elizabeth Berliner, who noted the

school's public-address system couldn't be used in an emergency if electricity went out, but a foghorn could be. "We went to our rooms and all could hear it," she said.

The drill was part of reviewing the school's emergency management plans and the recent school violence in general.

"People wanted to spend time on this," Berliner said. "I said, 'We'll find time.'"

Experts debate what motivates a child to violence, she noted. "They name all these things, but they are present in so many students: unhappiness, family problems, saying they don't like themselves. They all go through it. It's hard to know where they are going with it."

While Holy Family teachers talked with students about the school shootings, she said, the subject also came up in her office. One student concerned that a certain student seemed to "need a boost," brought up reports that the Williamsport student who shot another had felt bad about herself.

"It is certainly on the kids' minds," Berliner said.

In January, Berliner shared her school's emergency plan with other principals at a diocesan-sponsored conference. Holy Family has had the benefit of a good emergency plan distributed by Chemung County 10 years ago. Also, the school is adapting a state safety plan.

"Williamsport and California call the question of can this happen in one of our schools," commented Sister Patricia Carroll, SSJ, the diocese's assistant superintendent for professional development. "The answer is yes it can, but when it happens we

are prepared and ready to move. There are administrative procedures in place to address when something happens."

Sister Carroll has been working to train schools under the New York State Police Safe Schools Effective Response Program, with guidelines just issued last fall. The guidelines suggest public and private schools work in partnership, and cover numerous situations including how to respond to a person with weapons and to bomb threats. If public school students need to be bused to a Catholic school, or private students to a public school, the schools will be ready under the guidelines.

"What this is doing is taking many different procedures and putting them into a comprehensive plan," Sister Carroll said. "I think the goal is a very good goal."

Under the guidelines, the schools will begin fingerprinting new employees next fall, she noted. Many schools are working on code language to inform faculty immediately of a danger. High schools, as well, are expected to work with the state plan.

At St. Ambrose School in Irondequoit, a parents' committee developed a list of 10 parents who could drop everything and get to the school in an emergency, Sister Carroll said. By working with administration, the parents then could free teachers for crisis management.

"I thought that was an excellent idea," she said.

Years ago, noted Sister Carroll, a child's passing a note joking about a bomb was often seen as just that — a joke. "But today it can't be a joke," she said.

Violence

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dividual difficulties of our era," he said, "but their students are exposed to more resources to cope with life's difficulties."

Sister Shaughnessy added that she has found Catholic school teachers tend to be more willing to report kids who give warning signs.

"Forget confidentiality!" she advises teachers. "My cardinal rule is to take every comment seriously."

That message also comes through in "The Safe School Initiative," issued last fall by the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington and the National Institute of Justice.

The organizations began to take a close

er look at school violence after the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School that killed 13 people. The study examined 37 school shootings that have taken place since 1974 and looked for patterns.

But the study found no single profile of a school shooter, since all the attackers have ranged in age, ethnic background and family situations, and varied from the isolated to the popular student.

But what does stand out, glaringly, is that in more than three-fourths of the shootings studied, the attacker had told someone, and often more than one person, what he planned to do in advance.

Such was the case with Charles "Andy" Williams, who allegedly shot fellow students at Santana High School March 5. According to news accounts, he told at least 20 other students and an adult of his intentions.

"People didn't take him seriously," Sister Shaughnessy said.

The Secret Service study also points out that in more than two-thirds of the shootings, the attackers felt bullied.

Judy Gibbons, a psychology professor at St. Louis University and interim chair of the school's psychology department, told CNS that there are methods that work to reduce bullying in schools.

"It's a new way to learn," she said of anti-bullying programs. "Instead of competing, kids work together in groups and reduce their biases to each other."

Being picked on was something that friends said happened to Williams in California. It may also have been a factor in the Bishop Neumann shooting where the alleged shooter, Elizabeth Bush, reportedly had clashes with students who were picking on some of the school outcasts.

Bush's lawyer said in a March 8 interview with Reuters that his client is "someone who has vehemently championed the cause of the underdog," and had recently confronted students over what she felt was their mistreatment of an Asian student.

The Colorado Legislature is working on a bill that would require the state's school districts to implement some kind of anti-bullying plan.

But programs and legislation will not provide the ultimate answers, said Alan Demmitt, associate professor of counselor education at the University of Dayton.

He said the school shootings in early March did not serve as a "wake-up call" because they've been happening far too frequently.

"It's a continual problem," he said, "and we still haven't figured out how to respond."

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