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## Columbine 20th anniversary: Tragedy altered security procedures

Columbine High School doesn't look like it did 20 years ago. Then again, most schools in the country don't.



Sara Hertwig

John McDonald, the executive director of Jeffco Public Schools' school safety department, works with community partners to create safe environments in the district.

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Main entrances often have cameras and intercoms to buzz in visitors, and a security desk sits just inside the door. Many now have school resource officers.

John McDonald, the executive director of Jeffco Public Schools' school safety department, recalled how seeing a police car in front of a school 20 years ago was a source of drama and concern for parents and students alike. Now, it's a normal and sometimes welcome sight.

Since 1999, things have changed drastically when it comes to school safety.

"Columbine is our history; it's not our legacy," McDonald said. "... The stuff that we're doing today, every piece of it, has a component that leads back to 1999. What happened then is still relevant today."

In addition to Jeffco's schools, the district's safety department looks different as well. There's a full-time threat assessment team that evaluates both internal and external threats, including more than 750

threats this school year. There's also Safe2Tell for students to anonymously report unsafe behavior, and schools regularly conduct lockdown drills.

"We're not scared to have the conversation (with students) about what to do when you're on fire," he said. "We shouldn't be scared to have the conversation about what to do when you're under fire."

Another fundamental component to this effort, McDonald said, is reinforcing the connection between schools and local law enforcement. That way, neither is in its own silo, and information is continually shared.

Jeff Pierson, Jeffco's director of safe school environment who was a high school principal, explained how he and his SRO communicated daily. Because of their partnership, he said, they were able to stay ahead of the game and manage situations from both the law enforcement and the school's lenses.

Now, there are even more community partners who work with Jeffco's school security department, including the "I Love You Guys" Foundation and the Frank DeAngelis Community Safety Center.

"You can never forget those partners," McDonald said.

Yet, Pierson said, the security department still focuses on the educational environment of the schools and tries to minimize the effect on learning.

McDonald described this as "emergency prepared, not emergency scared." He said some students already have trauma in their lives, and his team needs to be cognizant of that.

Still, Pierson and McDonald said that Safe2Tell's usage has exponentially grown since its introduction, showing that students want to ensure their schools are safe.

"We've created a culture and environment where (school safety) is part of their everyday life," Pierson said.

While it has evolved since 1999, McDonald said that the story of school safety is still being written.

"We've never forgotten the lessons learned (from Columbine). ... In this department, we are the ones holding the line, remembering what

this is all about each and every day," he said. "... There's nothing that motivates you better than talking to those parents who lost kids. It causes me to recommit myself to this work every day that I'm with them because we just can't go back to that era."

Contact reporter Corinne Westeman at 303-567-4491 or [cwesteman@evergreenco.com](mailto:cwesteman@evergreenco.com), and follow her on Twitter [@cwesteman](https://twitter.com/cwesteman).

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Didn't play arcade games or pinball

Played. Spent about \$1-2 weekly.

Played all the time. There was no limit to the quarters in my pocket.

