

'We Are Not Immune'

Although school violence is unlikely, Idaho can't ignore the possibility.

By Bob Evancho

In general, schools are safe places. But the specter of school violence has reared its ugly head in Idaho in the past two years.

The presumption "it can't happen here" doesn't cut it anymore. If kids in other parts of the United States can be gunned down by their fellow students in school hallways, cafeterias and classrooms, then Idahoans can't blithely assume that their schools are completely safe from this new brand of terror that has stunned the nation.

Sorrowfully, inexorably, the list grows: Pearl, Paducah, Jonesboro, Springfield, Littleton, Conyers, Fort Gibson. Twenty-five students killed and nearly 90 wounded by gun-wielding classmates in those seven towns between October 1997 and December 1999.

To be sure, the chances that such a calamity could occur in Idaho — or anywhere else — are infinitesimal. As Kevin

Dwyer, president of the National Association of School Psychologists, states, "Statistically, you have a chance of 1 in 2 million of being a victim of homicide in school."

And despite the repeated images of past tragedies, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley also reminds us that school violence involving guns is rare. "New data indicate that violence among young people is on a downward trend and that the number of students being expelled from school for carrying a firearm decreased by one-third from the 1996-97 to the 1997-98 school year," he stated in a *Washington Post* article last summer.

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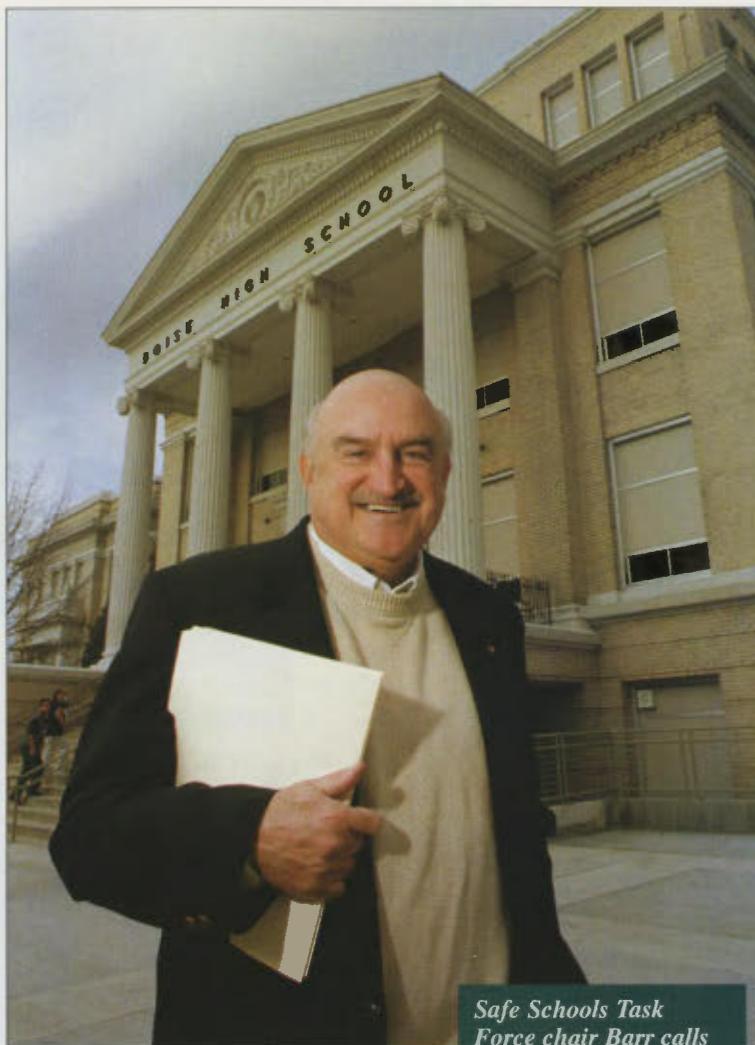
- In November 1999, white and Hispanic students scuffled at Nampa's Skyview High School following an assembly on — ironically — racial tolerance. According to news reports, a guest speaker urged the students to "openly express their feelings," which led to name-calling, racial epithets and threats between the two groups. Police were called to the scene, and more than 30 students were suspended.

- In April 1999, just four days before the killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., a 15-year-old boy brought a shotgun into Notus Junior/Senior High School and fired two shots. No one was injured.

- Between April 19-27, 1999, in the wake of the shootings in Notus and Littleton, approximately 16 students in the Boise School District were suspended for making threats to bring a gun to school or saying they intended to kill or injure another student.

- In April 1998, a 14-year-old boy brandished a .45-caliber pistol in a Pocatello junior high school and took 25 fellow students and his principal hostage. One shot was fired before the culprit was apprehended following a five-hour standoff. There were no injuries.

Although these episodes pale in comparison with the senseless tragedies elsewhere, they pose disturbing questions for Idaho's parents, political leaders, educators and law-enforcement officials: Were these acts of violence merely isolated incidents, or are they dis-



Safe Schools Task Force chair Barr calls the recent rash of school shootings a "cultural Pearl Harbor."

turbing signs of adolescent rage that have the potential to manifest themselves in the worst way imaginable, as they have at other schools?

Some say these questions are being asked because the media have exaggerated and overdramatized the issue of school violence. Others, such as Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, aren't willing to chance it.

Last summer, in response to these spasms of violence, Kempthorne named a Safe

comes to dealing with teens who could be ticking time bombs.

"We've got some pretty good predictive profiles from the American Psychological Association about early warning signs," says Barr. "The most important thing teachers can do is to be aware of aberrant behavior that could spell trouble. They need to watch for kids who bully, taunt and intimidate other students."

Barr says that another potential problem is racial strife, such as what occurred at Skyview. "Our task force hasn't dealt to any great extent with racial problems," Barr says. "But it makes sense that teachers need to be more conscious of ethnic differences. We'll probably have to revisit that issue."

Teachers also need to be wary of mannerisms by their students that may indicate an interest or involvement in gangs, says Boise police officer Jeff Basterrechea, a member of the department's Gang Unit. Although the Boise School District has a zero-tolerance poli-

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cy toward gangs, a teen-ager's possible link to such a group can still manifest itself at school in clothing, behavior, body language and even doodlings on homework papers, says Basterrechea, a 1984 Boise State criminal justice administration graduate.

"If principals or vice principals are made aware of students trying to emulate gang behavior in their schools, they contact us or go to their SRO (school resource officer)," he says. "We then sit down with the student and his parents. Through this kind of intervention, we find we are often able to nip it in the bud."

Basterrechea notes, however, that a student who brings a gun to school is more likely to be a mentally disturbed loner than a gang member. "I don't think you can call any of the previous [school] shootings gang-related except for Columbine, where the shooters had white supremacist beliefs," he says. "I don't think you can stop a kid from shooting. What you have to do is recognize signs of kids under stress and kids with mental problems before it happens. And that falls back on parents and teachers."

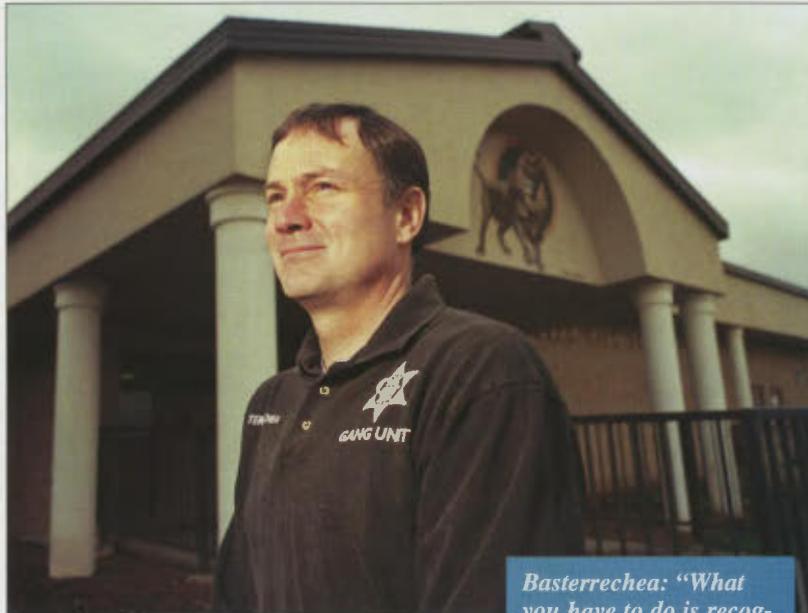
But identifying young people prone to violence is an inexact science. How can teachers, principals and counselors differentiate between an impudent, aggressive teen-ager who talks a good game about guns and mayhem and one who is actually edging toward violence?

"You can't always tell the difference, and that makes it scary," admits Sandy Rumpel, supervisor for counselors, social workers and nurses in the Boise School District. "Some kids need to show off and get attention, and sometimes it's done in a negative way."

The fear caused by all of this has created a new level of vigilance in America's schools, including Boise's.

"Even before Notus and Columbine, we had established a districtwide safety committee consisting of law-enforcement officials, emergency personnel from Ada County and representatives from all our schools," says Dan Hollar, the district's public information officer.

According to Hollar, the committee has reviewed the district's emergency response guidelines, provided emergency training for 500 district employees, and established a school safety hotline (1-800-7-8-CRIME) to call to report threats and potentially dangerous situations. (The state of Idaho



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also has installed a hotline: 1-800-4-1-VOICE, extension 359.)

To thwart potentially violent episodes within its buildings, the Boise School District also provides its teachers with workshops on subjects such as crisis intervention and conflict resolution. Rumpel says such training is necessary in this day and age, but the key to addressing and stemming violence in our schools, she adds, is for teachers to foster an atmosphere in which all students feel connected to their schools so that no young person feels left out or isolated.

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One way is to help students identify their assets and then turn those strengths into a positive experience through school organizations or extracurricular activities. "Kids need to feel that they belong," Rumpel says. "When they have that feeling, there's less of a chance for violence or disturbances."

Barr agrees. "The world of teaching is more challenging than ever," he says. "Surveys from across the country indicate that kids want positive relationships with

teachers. They like to know that there is at least one adult who cares for them, is concerned about them, and wants to help them. Research shows that a positive relationship between a teacher and a student is going to be more powerful and have more of an impact than anything that child will learn. It will lead the student toward a better academic performance and better behavior."

Unfortunately, all the preventative measures, educational efforts and good intentions in the world can't build an imaginary, bulletproof shield around our schools. And while the horrifying possibility of a schoolhouse assault is extremely remote, the thought can't help but creep into the fragile psyches of many of today's teens — especially when it comes on the heels of yet another shooting.

Speaking a few days after the December school shooting in Fort Gibson, Okla., the two students on Idaho's Safe Schools Task Force acknowledge that each burst of gunfire tends to make our schools seem a little more vulnerable. But Katie Rutan and Matt Oppenheimer, both 17, refuse to let these shooting sprees change the way they go about their lives.

"It seems we talk about [school shootings] only after one has happened," says Rutan, a senior at Kuna High School. "I think some kids are very fearful that someone is going to come into school with a gun and start randomly shooting. But other than that, we go along with our normal days at school. Our high school years are supposed to be some of the best years of our lives, and if we go around living in fear, those years are going to be wasted."

"I can't speak for everyone, but I'm not personally scared; I don't walk into school thinking someone is going to pull out a gun," says Oppenheimer, president of the junior class at Boise High School. "I guess deep down, there is that idea that it could happen. But I'd say the majority of the students here don't think about it on a day-to-day basis."

Perhaps Oppenheimer and his fellow teens won't have to think about it much longer. Perhaps Fort Gibson was the last. Just maybe Littleton and the other places will recede into the backs of their young minds.

Maybe. □