

# Amid Fears of Copycats, Schools Gird for Security

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Schools around the country were on alert Monday after the second hostage taking, and third homicide case, in less than a week in a school.

The killings in Nickel Mines, Pa., with at least four students dead, occurred five days after a man took over a classroom here in Colorado and killed one teenage hostage and himself as the police closed in.

On Friday in Wisconsin, a student fatally shot a principal. Two schools in the Las Vegas region were locked down on Monday after witnesses reported seeing an armed person on the grounds.

Some school administrators and security experts said that they were worried about a new pattern of violence for which schools were not well prepared-- outside adults with grudges or suicidal urges entering schools -- and that news coverage could inspire more crimes.

Others said those factors did not matter because vigilance, pre-emption and resources would be the same either way.

"We're always worried about copycats," said Michael Nicosia, the superintendent of the Columbia Falls School District in northwestern Montana, which has five schools and 2,500 students.

Mr. Nicosia, echoing other school officials, said that systems and procedures were in place to head off or respond to attacks or other incidents but that building up those systems in response to events elsewhere was not an option.

"We have a resource officer who's been circulating more than he has been," Mr. Nicosia said. "But for the most part, there really are not resources available to upscale the program."

Psychologists and scholars of the news media said that although copycat events were always possible, the likelihood of one school attack leading to another was probably a bit less than it was a few years ago.

Some experts said they were not sure that the copycat phenomenon was real.

Psychological training and increased security that many schools instituted after the killing of 13 people in 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado have given teachers and principals new tools and insights to spot potential trouble, the experts said. News organizations, some scholars say, have recently given somewhat less prominence to school violence as it has become less novel, a trend that could also reduce the likelihood of mimic attacks.

School officials said the existence of a new pattern did not matter. Educators watch more closely the comings and goings in a school, they said, and they do the best they can.

"It raises everybody's awareness and reminds everyone to be vigilant, to never assume your school is going to be safe," said Mike Vaughn, a spokesman for the Chicago Public School System.

Mr. Vaughn said that each of the 625 schools in his district had metal detectors, that 70 had full-time uniformed police officers and that the rest had off-duty police or security officers.

"Continual high alert is a good way to describe it," he said.

How the shootings affect schoolchildren and how they learn about them is much less certain or controlled, news media experts and psychologists said.

Channels of information that barely existed as recently as the Columbine shootings, like blogs, chat rooms and instant messaging, have become increasingly important to how students perceive their world.

“If I were a school administrator, I would want to be talking to students about where they’re getting their information and trying to provide them with a reality check,” said Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute, a training center for journalists in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Ms. McBride said rumor, opinion and misconception, all common on Web sites that are popular with students, could make schools feel less safe than they really were.

“It’s completely wild how they’re consuming news compared to a generation before them,” she said. “It wouldn’t surprise me that reporting of school shootings would have an effect on children. But it would take a pretty savvy adult to figure out what that effect is.”

The chief of the Spring Branch Independent School District Police Department in Houston, Chuck Brawner, said heightened security had made school a different experience for all students, even without the anxiety raised by new attacks.

“When I first started with the school district in 1986,” Chief Brawner said, “it was pretty laid back and the times were easy.”

Heightened concern about gangs, guns and violence changed that in the early 1990’s, long before Columbine, he said, adding: “It’s unfortunate for the students who have to go to school in this environment, but they adapt. We have to be very diligent.”

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