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Remembering Columbine

Superintendent Jane Hammond's tales of tragedy and healing

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The Columbine Tragedy TEN YEARS LATER

The superintendent at the center looks back and ahead, sharing stories of tragedy and healing

BY JANE HAMMOND

Some tragedies are so emblazoned in our minds that years later we can recall where we were when we first heard the news. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the Challenger explosion, and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks are among these events. And so is the Columbine tragedy of April 20, 1999.

As President Bill Clinton said at the time, “The tragedy has pierced the hearts of all Americans.” One reason this tragedy had such an impact was that people around the world watched live on television as students and staff ran barefoot out of the school and as student Patrick Ireland was pulled from the second-story library window.

There were numerous school shootings prior to the Columbine tragedy; yet it became a pivotal event in the history of school violence that touched the hearts and minds of Americans — an event that changed attitudes and perceptions about our young people and safety in our schools. Columbine came to represent school tragedy and has been referenced in all subsequent school shootings.

The tragedy has been the subject of documentaries, movies, and fiction and non-fiction books.

Even now, 10 years later, Principal Frank DeAngelis and other school district leaders frequently consult with schools and colleges victimized by violent acts, speak at symposia on school safety and help college students with research papers.

The Columbine community remembers the tragedy through personal experiences and a memorial built in Clement Park, which is adjacent to the high school. The memorial, dedicated on Sept. 21, 2007, includes the inner Ring of Remembrance, a wall of stone with the etched quotes of family and friends, honoring each of the deceased. The outer Ring of Healing, composed of native Colorado stone, is engraved with the experiences and words of the community — teachers, students, injured students, family members and community leaders.

The stories of the tragedy and our healing are as diverse as the people who experienced it. While reflecting on my own experiences, I asked some of my closest colleagues how they saw their roles at the time of the tragedy and



A memorial recognizing the Columbine victims, consisting of an inner Ring of Remembrance and an outer Ring of Healing, was dedicated in September 2007.

how it has affected them personally and professionally in the decade since. This story focuses on Jefferson County Colo., Public Schools leaders who were forever changed by the events of April 20, 1999.

Shock to the System

Almost two years before the tragedy, I had been hired as superintendent in Jefferson County to bring 144 relatively autonomous schools into one high-performing school district. The goal was to increase student achievement in a community with high standards and expectations.

During my first two years, we developed a strategic plan with the participation of hundreds of staff members, parents and community members. The plan included a cycle of continuous improvement to shape a culture of high performance. We established the Anchor Group,

composed of employee association leaders, the board of education and cabinet members, to lead effective implementation of our strategic plan.

Through the community involvement and joint planning, we were building public support. Surveys showed our community had confidence the district was moving in the right direction.

The Columbine tragedy struck like a bolt of lightning out of a blue and sunny sky, leaving shock and disbelief. Staff, parents and students were shaken to the core. From that terrible April day until Columbine High School reopened for the new school year in August, about half of my time was consumed by the tragedy and its aftermath.

When the tragedy occurred, the community expected me to be the public face of the school district. On the afternoon of April 20, we held a press conference, and

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after I spoke, someone walked up to me and said, “We need your strength.” It sounded right to me, and I committed to that responsibility.

A Day of Infamy

As superintendent, my role spanned the gamut, from close and personal events, like attending victims’ funerals, to the worldwide arena, acknowledging the powerful international response to the tragedy. I was involved in planning memorial events; providing the support systems needed by community, parents and schools; working with other community leaders, including religious leaders; and designing better safety systems for the district.

At the same time, I felt it was critical to keep our focus on continuous improvement and student achievement. We couldn’t use the tragedy as a reason to fall behind in our efforts to become a high-performing district.

One of the most challenging jobs was working with the parents, each of whom expressed the loss in a unique way. When it came time to repair Columbine High School, the parents made it clear to me that they didn’t want anyone to re-enter the school library, where most of the

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victims were killed. We respected their wishes and tore out the old library to create a cafeteria with a two-story atrium. The ceiling is a mural of Colorado aspen and evergreen trees.

There was so much to do that I depended heavily on my leadership team. Barb Monseu, an assistant superintendent in charge of the Columbine area, became point person for the district.

“I worked to support those most directly impacted, determining what services were needed for students and staff,” Monseu recalls. She remembers dealing with the friends of the two murderers. These friends met in a separate room during an all-school gathering because they were afraid to be with the rest of the student body. These students were offered home schooling and other options to finish school.

“We had to balance the needs of victims’ families with those of everyone else,” adds Monseu. “We had to be strong enough to focus on taking care of kids returning to school as well as being sensitive to the families of victims.”

The number of agencies Monseu consulted was mind-boggling. The school district had to work with the Colorado Department of Education to get a waiver on the number of required school days and the College Board to reschedule ACT and SAT exams that spring.

Then there was law enforcement. “From an administrator’s point of view, you are caught in an awkward position,” Monseu says. “As administrator, you normally have position power. However, once there’s a crime scene, law enforcement takes over. But the community still comes to you for information. You are trying to get information from law enforcement so you can do your job, and law enforcement is trying to protect information so they can do theirs.”

Debby Oberbeck was vice president of the school board at the time. “I defined my role as bringing continuity and consistency to the community. At the time of the tragedy, I spent about 18 hours a day with community members. Parents wanted to know what we were doing to make their children’s schools safe. People were trying to make sense of what they were seeing in the media,” she recalls.

“The Anchor Group, where we had built trust and strong relationships among the board, superintendent and employee associations, was one of the things that had a significant impact,” adds Oberbeck. The afternoon of the tragedy, the Anchor Group members worked as a part of the leadership team. “It was natural for us to work in a collaborative way since the relationships were strong enough to move together through the chaos and then to regroup and lead.”

The media relations aspect of the tragedy was all-consuming, with daily requests for interviews or information that numbered in the hundreds from more than 750 media outlets from across the state, nation and world, according to Rick Kaufman, who had joined the school system only eight months earlier as executive director of communications.

“I was responsible for managing the communications (internal and external), serving as counsel to the superintendent and school board and coordinating media relations efforts, as well as special memorials and events, such as President Clinton’s visit,” he says.

Frank DeAngelis, who had been employed at Columbine since 1979 and served as principal since 1997, was in the eye of the storm. When the attack started, he was in his office meeting with a teacher. His secretary burst in, yelling, “There’s gunfire in the hallway.” DeAngelis ran into the main hall and confronted a war zone. The door behind him was shattered by gunfire as a gunman walked toward him down the long hall.

DeAngelis heard voices of girls in a side hall and rushed down it, unlocking the small gym, corralling the girls into it and locking the door behind them. DeAngelis raced in and out of the building twice to rescue students until law enforcement prevented him from re-entering. He stood outside the school for hours, working with officers at the command center, drawing a diagram of school entrances, and comforting panicked students, staff and parents. “This can’t be happening at Columbine,” he kept repeating.

DeAngelis was in shock at the carnage. He learned that night that his best friend, teacher Dave Sanders, had



Frank DeAngelis has stayed on as principal at Columbine High School a decade after the mass shooting inside the school.

been shot. But DeAngelis barely had time to grieve as he worked up to 12-15 hours a day, six days a week. He met with staff and families the morning after the tragedy and every day thereafter, providing updates and comfort.

The media attention was intense, and DeAngelis found he had to defend himself, his staff and his school as people looked for someone or something to blame.

Continuing Impact

The tragedy at Columbine High School will always be a defining moment in the lives of those of us who had a leadership role in Jefferson County Schools in April 1999. As I looked back on the tragedy with my colleagues, I realized we were personally affected in profound ways.

For me, the experience at Columbine has helped put life in perspective. I don’t sweat the small stuff. When something bad happens, and people seem overly concerned, I often think, Did anyone die? I have learned to

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weigh all circumstances against the Columbine tragedy and use my experiences to help others manage difficult situations for the best possible outcome.

Oberbeck, the former school board officer, says she learned to be “a much better listener to people who are afraid and angry. I became a calmer person, less reactive and more skilled at being reflective.

“I was a trained airplane pilot, and the training taught me to stay calm. That was good preparation for the chaos that followed the tragedy. The calmer I was, the better I could hear and understand others,” she adds.

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Jane Hammond (left) was superintendent in Jefferson County, Colo., in April 1999.

Monseu discovered the tragedy “built on the skills that I was developing as an administrator. It made me a better leader and listener. I learned that I had the ability to deal with the issues and be steady, to not panic and move through the situation. I depended on the strength of an inner circle of colleagues because I knew I couldn’t do it on my own.”

DeAngelis, as the school principal, found the constant bombardment of others’ demands took a personal toll. At the end of those 15-hour days, he didn’t want to talk to anyone at home, instead retreating to his basement for time alone. He grew apart from his family and divorced in 2002 after 17 years of marriage. He began counseling shortly after the tragedy on the advice of a family friend, and he continues to seek the help of a counselor.

“I learned I had to take care of myself mentally and physically. I now work out every morning at 5 a.m.,” he says.

Current Paths

Significant agreement exists among us about the lessons we learned: (1) Values and faith have guided us; (2) life is about relationships; (3) systems are critical to strong districts that emphasize student achievement and well-being; and (4) safety includes prevention, intervention and response. (See related story, page 16.) These lessons have influenced the paths we have followed.

Ten years after the tragedy, of the five of us, only DeAngelis remains in the Jefferson County Public Schools system. He continues at Columbine High School, where he worked as a teacher for 17 years and the last 12 years as principal. However, 75 percent of his staff members at the time have now left, including the remainder of the administrative team and the office staff. Seventeen teachers at Columbine are former students, and three were students there when the tragedy occurred.

“Those of us who decided to go back are facing the same environment we faced that day for 180 days a year, seven

“For me, the experience at Columbine has helped put life in perspective.”

to eight hours a day. It’s a constant reminder,” he says.

DeAngelis draws strength from the students at his school. “I deliberately make contact with all kids in my school. After the tragedy, I started spending one to two hours in classrooms every day, and I do lunch duty daily,” he adds.

Having worked since the age of 14, DeAngelis worries about what he will do in retirement someday. He recently promised parents of 8th graders that he would be around to hand out high school diplomas to their kids, a vow that will keep him at Columbine until at least May 2012.

Many of us have consulted with school districts and colleges around the country after shootings on their campuses. Following a shooting at Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colo., DeAngelis took his entire staff to share a meal, gifts and experiences with the Platte Canyon staff. The two school communities formed a strong bond, and there is now an annual event, Emily’s Parade, in honor of the student shot in Bailey.

Monseu has helped facilitate conferences around the country and became involved in critical incident planning as a board member of the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis. She worked in New York for the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma six months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, developing relationships with journalists, community groups and school administrators. She left the school district for a job as an investment banker in public finance, a position she held at Stifel Nicolaus for five years. Today she is on what she describes as a “self-funded sabbatical.”

Kaufman is now the executive director of community relations for Bloomington, Minn., Public Schools, a suburban Minneapolis district. He also serves as the district’s emergency management coordinator. He is a frequent workshop presenter and trainer on crisis management and communication.

“I made a commitment to work with others — schools, communities, law enforcement, emergency management and the federal government — to become a better student of crisis intervention, prevention and response and to be flat-out better prepared. It is a commitment I made to myself and my Creator, to better this world in one small way, and to do it in memory of Dave Sanders and the students who were murdered and injured,” Kaufman adds.

Oberbeck, through her experience in community building, formed the PeaceKeepers in Westminster, Colo., and works with school districts across the country to help employee associations, boards of education and school district leaders build strong partnerships.

Moving On

I left the Jefferson County Public Schools in 2002. Over

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Combating Hatred That Grows From Student Alienation

BY TERRANCE L. FURIN

Hatred that grows from student alienation takes many different forms. Sometimes it is expressed with quiet stubbornness. Other times it is seen in open acts of defiance. Often it lies hidden within individuals until it is triggered and erupts in violence.

Jane Hammond’s article, “The Columbine Tragedy 10 Years Later,” describes some of the lasting impact that one such raging act has embedded on America’s memory.

No school is immune to the tragedy that hit the affluent suburb of Littleton, Colo., in 1999. Other nationally prominent shootings occurring after Columbine took place in such diverse places as Red Lake High School on Minnesota’s Chipewewa reservation (2005) and an inner-city Cleveland charter school called Success Tech (2007).

“Meade is a school that has a soul, one that honors all students. Its example presents challenges for all educators.”

Stories about these tragedies attempt to explain the student killers’ violent behavior by probing their cultural, social and psychological lives. What they seldom probe in any substantive way is the possibility that a major contributing factor may be the schools themselves.

Factory Mentality

The philosophy that guides most schools today is based on an outworn factory model, not unlike that pictured by Charlie Chaplin in his 1936 classic movie *Modern Times*. In his depiction of the Electro Steel Co., power flows from autocrats at the top to dominate totally those below. Chaplin plays the part of a hapless assembly-line worker who, having little control over his mindless duties, eventually turns violent and loses his sanity.

Competition and efficiency are the fuels that energize a system such as this — one that must have winners and losers. Over time the losers become alienated and learn to hate the system and the people who are part of it.

The analogy between Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and the educational philosophy that dominates our nation’s schools through the No

Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is clear. Teachers are considered assembly-line workers implementing an outsider’s concepts of the right curriculum and the correct ways of teaching it. Failure to meet prescribed yearly progress can have dire consequences for students, teachers and principals.

Honoring Students

John Dewey presents a sharp alternative to the factory mentality of No Child Left Behind. His philosophy minimizes alienation by honoring all students. In his 1902 work *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey wrote: “The child is the starting point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard.”

This philosophy is a reverse of the traditional organizational chart that places the board of education and superintendent at the top with the teacher and student at the bottom. Replacing it is a series of concentric circles putting the student and teacher in the center with power flowing outward from them.

An excellent example of this philosophy in action can be found at Meade Elementary School, located in one of the most distressed areas of Philadelphia. Principal Frank Murphy, working democratically with teachers, has turned a dreary, 1930s elementary school into an oasis of learning. Evidence everywhere suggests this school not only welcomes but nourishes all of its students.

A once-dismal entrance lobby is now filled with carts of books, several fish tanks and rocking chairs for students or parents to use while waiting for appointments. Formerly barren hallway walls are covered with proudly displayed student work. One recent interdisciplinary project inspired excited students to create an Amazon rainforest stretching down the main hallway. The school’s computer teacher has turned a dark third-floor corner into a Japanese garden. Specially trained teachers provide individual attention for students needing help in reading. This reading recovery is done in comfortable private areas where the atmosphere is enhanced with classical background music and a plate of cookies on the table.

The results are impressive. At Meade, all students are winners who genuinely seem to like school.

Many failing Philadelphia schools have been

taken over by outside managers or reconstituted by the school district because of persistently low achievement. This is not true of Meade. In fact, the school exceeds expectations on districtwide standardized tests and has been allowed to keep many of its unique arrangements while other schools in the district have been forced to standardize their practices based on centralized models.

Meade is a school that has a soul, one that honors all students. Its example presents challenges for all educators.

The Task Ahead

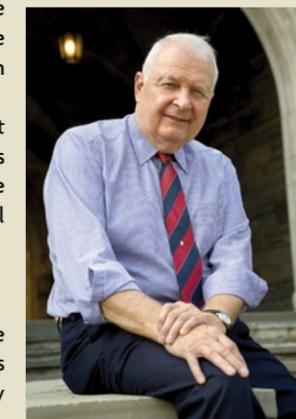
The power to change education philosophies is within the hands of every teacher and education leader. These are the professionals who society charges with educating tomorrow’s citizens.

Changing philosophies in such a dramatic way is not easy and demands brave and creative educators. Acting this way, they can become what is often referred to as transformational leaders.

Transformational leaders are those who have the ability to form communities of learners who regularly discuss and aspire to fulfill the highest democratic ideals, such as those found in our Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, the Four Freedoms presented by Franklin Roosevelt and the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Such communities are symbiotic in that the leader and other members of the community become one. Often an elevating metamorphosis occurs. Through this, schools develop their souls. The challenge for every superintendent and every other administrator is to become such a leader. In this way, schools can become places where all students are honored and hatred that grows from alienation can be minimized or even eliminated.

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Terrance Furin

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the last six years I have had the opportunity to work as a consultant in long-term relationships with school districts across the country on district transformation and improvement. I work closely with superintendents and their senior leadership teams and have helped them to establish a district cycle of improvement that results in more effective programs to improve the lives of the children they serve.

I strongly believe that well-organized school districts with effective and efficient processes are not only safer places for children and the community, but also are places that can survive challenges if, God forbid, they come.

While we have moved on with our lives and careers, we can never completely move away from the tragedy. This tragedy belongs to all who have been affected by it. Many lives have been changed — from the students who were injured to the parents who lost children, the first responders, mental health workers, staff members, police officers, school districts and people across the country who were particularly touched.

There is tenderness about the Columbine tragedy that connects people. To this day, people come up to me to say that their hearts, love and prayers were with us during that terrible time.

“I strongly believe that well-organized school districts with effective and efficient processes are not only safer places for children and the community, but also are places that can survive challenges ...”

Kaufman, the communications director a decade ago, put it this way: “I have a special place in my heart for those I worked with at [Jefferson County] and the volunteers who came to help because, collectively, we were able to do our part to help put shattered lives, a school and a community back together.” ■

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Four Enduring Lessons Learned From Tragedy

In interviewing several of the central figures who had been affiliated with the Jefferson County Public Schools 10 years after the Columbine tragedy, I have developed the following four enduring lessons that all of us have learned through the passage of time.

▶ **In times of tragedy, we search for a strong belief or value system to guide us.**

When I talked to my colleagues, I learned we relied on the healing nature of faith.

“I was grateful to have my faith during the tragedy, and being able to pray gave me strength,” former school board member Debby Oberbeck says.

“The tragedy strengthened my faith in people and our Creator. I saw far more good in people than the destruction we had to overcome,” says Rick Kaufman, who was the executive director of communications.

“My faith is stronger now than ever,” says Frank DeAngelis, then and now the principal at Columbine High. “Early on, when I was being judged, I realized that I cannot truly be judged on earth. This helped me to move on as a stronger person.”

▶ **We can’t wait until bad things happen to develop relationships of trust.**

Because of the strong internal relationships in the school district’s Anchor Group and strong community relationships with county leaders through our master planning committee, I was able to call on and count on my colleagues during the tragedy. For example, community leaders helped decide how to distribute donated funds to local orga-

nizations to best meet the needs of the victims and their families.

“The Anchor Group was deeply bonded, and those relationships paid off in the work of the district after the tragedy,” Oberbeck says.

“I learned there is a need to have a core set of colleagues that you can depend on to build up your strength,” said Barb Monseu, who was assistant superintendent at the time.

▶ **Strong systems can result in increased student achievement.**

The Columbine experience caused me to make a deeper commitment to a district improvement cycle where we can focus on student achievement even during times of significant challenges. By institutionalizing continuous improvement, we can reach the goal of providing a safe education where all children can be successful.

After the tragedy, we were able to continue our work on curriculum, standards and professional development because we had the essential district improvement systems in place.

▶ **Safety means prevention, intervention and crisis response.**

The Columbine tragedy galvanized the country around safety with a new focus on prevention and intervention in addition to response. We learned the importance of developing a systemic safety plan with thoughtful input of parents, staff members and the community.

When effectively implemented, the safety plan shifts focus from perfunctory responsibilities to processes where students and staff members know their roles and how they contribute to the safety of the school.

— Jane Hammond