

Prepared Remarks
Columbine Shooting 20th Anniversary:
Uniting to Prevent School Violence Symposium
April 16, 2019

Thank you for today's invitation. To each of you who lost a loved one that day, twenty years ago—a daughter, a son, a student, a teacher, a teammate, I cannot imagine the pain you felt that day, or the pain you still feel today. Our hearts are with you.

At the time, the Columbine school shooting was the deadliest in American history. Unfortunately, during these two decades, our state and nation have been rocked by tragedies like Virginia Tech in 2007, Sandy Hook in 2012, Arapahoe High School in 2013, to Parkland in 2018. Twenty years ago, we often asked “how could this ever have happened?” Today, we find ourselves too often suffering new grief as we ask: “where will it happen next?” As Attorney General, I believe, and as a parent I know, that this is unacceptable. We have to do better. Our sons and daughters deserve it.

Yet even as we have suffered, we have learned. Over the past twenty years, thanks to the tireless work of educators, experts and law-enforcement officers, and students themselves, we have adopted measures and have continued to build upon them so that we will save lives. But no one measure, no one law, and no one change, is enough. School-related violence is a complex problem, and it is one that demands a comprehensive solution.

Here in Colorado, we are putting such a solution in place. So today, I want to talk to you about the state of progress in implementing better safety protocols, about our Department's collaboration with leaders in the field of school violence to re-release the Colorado Attorney General's School Safety Guide, and about some best practices that we will be supporting as an Office.

First, where are we today:

The foundation of school safety rests in creating cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support. Since 2000, many of our Colorado schools have deployed a tool designed by the University of Colorado's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence School Climate Survey, to help our schools evaluate their climate and culture. This tool then guides schools in implementing policies that foster a safe school environment.

Many of our high schools gauge their students' mental and physical health using the Colorado Healthy Kids Survey, which was designed to collect student data related to suicide risks, bullying, mental health, tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, and school and community support.

While many of our schools report that they have entered into verbal agreements to share pertinent information with law enforcement, few schools have reported entering into formal Interagency Information Sharing Agreements with local law enforcement agencies, mental health service providers, social services agencies, and the criminal justice system,

as recommended by the Columbine Review Commission and our Office. This is obviously an area where there is room for improvement.

I am pleased to report that all of our Colorado schools are participants in our Office's Safe2Tell program. Developed after the Columbine shooting, Safe2Tell is an anonymous reporting system that allows our students, parents, and faculty to report anything that concerns or threatens them, others, or communities. Our Office has conducted 140 separate Safe2Tell trainings across our state this school-year alone.

Finally, approximately 80 percent of our schools throughout the State have developed and implemented the recommended Standard Response Protocol in the event of an emergency and continually train their students and faculty on that protocol.

These are important first steps, but more remains to be done to make sure that school is safe for every child and every teacher. With this in mind, our Office is taking the step of re-releasing the 2019 Colorado Attorney General's School Safety Guide and to a broader audience. The Safety Guide is aimed at providing information on the best practices and evidence-based programs for promoting safety and preventing violence in Colorado schools. The key here is: evidence-based. We are committed to following the data, and to giving educators and others tools that will work in the real world.

I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Goodrum, Dr. Beverly Kingston, and Bill Woodward of the University of Northern Colorado and the University of Colorado Boulder for applying their considerable knowledge, expertise, and effort to take this idea and bring it to life.

At its core, this guide codifies a number of concepts that are proven to make our schools safer. These include measures like completing school safety audits, helping to build a climate of trust and emotional support in schools, training teachers to know the signs of when students are under potentially dangerous stress, and creating a positive school climate.

These measures also include promoting programs like Safe2Tell, which has become a national model. Research shows that while there is no single "profile" of a student who engages in targeted school violence, most attackers demonstrated some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated a need for help. Those behaviors may include drug or alcohol abuse, self-harm, or feelings of being bullied, persecuted, or injured by others. The problem is that these behaviors have, in the past, gone unreported because of what researchers refer to as the "code of silence," where students see concerning behaviors but do not feel comfortable reporting it. Safe2Tell provides an effective mechanism where students can report those concerns anonymously, thus breaking the code of silence.

In the last school year alone, Safe2Tell received 16,000 reports, 2,786 of which were potential suicide attempts, 1,831 of which were instances of drug abuse, 1,641 were to report instances of bullying, and 692 that were planned school attacks.¹ And the effectiveness of this system is clear and the response is swift. For example, a tip was

¹ COLO. OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GEN., DATA2REPORT 1-2 (2018), <https://safe2tell.org/sites/default/files/u18/Data2Report%20PDF%20SY%202017-2018.pdf>.

received regarding a student bullying other students. An investigation was conducted and the bullying was verified. The parents of the student responsible for the bullying were notified and interventions were quickly taken to prevent further harassment. Another tip was received regarding suicide and potential attacks on others. Within 15 minutes of receiving the tip, police investigated and determined that a student was suffering from an adverse reaction to prescribed medication and the student received the medical attention he or she needed. Finally, a tip was received regarding a threat to commit school shooting. Within 18 minutes, school leadership was able to identify the potential threat and intervene, and an arrest was made that evening by police. We strongly encourage our schools to provide students and staff with annual training on how and when to use Safe2Tell to report a concern.

I also want to say that in the coming year, I plan to work with leaders around the State to discuss how we can take on this crisis, and how we can do more to keep our kids safe. I look forward to those discussions and to learning what else our Office can do to support local law enforcement, school leaders, and others.

As Coloradans, we are collaborative by nature. In the face of our greatest tragedies, we come together to make things better. Together, we can transform Colorado from a state that has experienced one of the most harrowing and tragic school shootings in the history of the United States to a shining example of how a community, school, and its students and faculty can unite and work towards a common goal of eliminating violence in our schools. Thank you.