

In Lockdown, Fear Pervaded Classrooms

WASHINGTON POST

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By Brigid Schulte

Washington Post Staff Writer

For three weeks, hundreds of thousands of children throughout the Washington region remained cloistered inside, behind closed and locked doors, as an unpredictable sniper in their midst killed 10 and wounded three others, including a 13-year-old boy, in what came to seem like a reign of terror.

And in a terrifying postscript to police, the sniper made clear that children were a target. "Your children are not safe anywhere at anytime," he wrote.

Lockdown. Code Blue. Code Red. For weeks, the blinds were drawn or covered with dark paper. Children were not allowed outside to play. Teachers, terrified and exhausted, guarded locked doors and raced back and forth from buses and parking lots to schools, using their own bodies to shield children from potential sniper fire.

Susan Boehm, an art teacher at Aspen Hill's Argyle Middle School, close to several of the sniper shootings, said the stress inside the buildings was intense.

"The staff and children never knew what kind of day would unfold. We had to stay away from windows, do without normal routines and schedules and even hold off such obvious needs as going to the bathroom and eating," Boehm wrote in a letter to The Washington Post. "At any moment we might be forced to turn out lights and huddle in the back of the room, on the floor (many in a fetal position), as our only defense from killers that may have gotten into our school."

Portable classrooms at many schools were closed and children were taught inside crowded buildings, in the all-purpose room, the media center or the gym. Students in some schools began to call lunch in the classrooms "room service."

Parents showed up by the hundreds, walking children to school, volunteering in cramped, jumpy classrooms, serving as crossing guards and posting themselves as lookouts on corners.

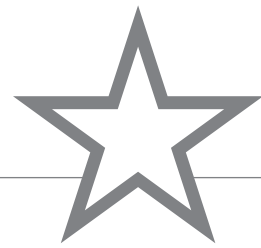
In the Aspen Hill section of Montgomery County, where the sniper killed six, schools were sometimes only half full. On the day that bus driver Conrad E. Johnson was gunned down, more than 90 percent of the children attending some Aspen Hill schools stayed home.

Some of the youngest children had no idea what was going on. "Code Blue means it's dark outside," said one kindergartner at Bel Pre Elementary School. Others, especially those in middle school, were acutely aware of the danger.

"One can only imagine the terror of those children who may have actually lived this experience, coming from other countries to escape this kind of life," Boehm said. "The stress level of children increased acting-out behaviors. Withdrawal and clinging to adults multiplied tenfold."

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She asked her students, some of whom speak little English, to write or draw how they felt. The response was terrifying in its power and anger. Some student papers were laced with curse words.

“I am scared for my parents to go to work because I am afraid to lose them,” one student wrote. “Adults cannot hide the truth from us because we have enough common sense to know we are no longer safe in this community. Life has become a struggle.”

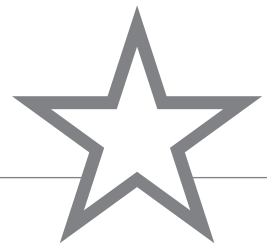
Students drew simple line drawings of tears, TV cameras and guns. Enormous guns.

“Yesterday another person was killed by the sniper Boom Boom guys. I don’t understand why he/she/they want to do this, it [is] not right,” one student wrote. “If I was the police and caught him I would cut all his fingers off one by one then cut all his toes one by one. Then give him/her/them the most painful death in fire.”

“The sniper shot the guy across the street from my house,” another student wrote. “I heard all of these helicopters around my house, so I looked outside and saw one. If that sniper guy tries to mess with me or my family I will hunt you down and kill you.”

“Everything,” one wrote simply, “is not okay.”

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Schools in D.C. area reopen cautiously

CNN.com
October 22, 2002

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Public school officials in the D.C. area and Virginia kept schools open Wednesday, after a message believed to be from the sniper ominously warned that children "are not safe anywhere, at any time."

School districts contacted by CNN said they were in close touch with law enforcement officials about their plans and decided the schools would be safe. Schools put strict limits on outdoor activities and there was a heavy police presence at some schools.

"Obviously we take the threats very seriously," said Elena Temple, a spokeswoman for the District of Columbia Board of Education. "We do feel as if the children are safe in school."

The one change D.C. schools made Wednesday is not running bus service to the public schools, said Superintendent Paul Vance.

"That was a close call for us," he said of Tuesday's shooting in neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland, where a bus driver was gunned down in an attack believed to be linked to the sniper.

"We have several facilities that we sent children to -- special-education children -- and our buses travel that same route. Forty-five minutes, 50 minutes later, it could well have been one of our buses," said Vance.

School officials in Montgomery County said they would continue Code Blue security restrictions on Wednesday. That means recess and physical education will be held inside, and open lunch for high school seniors and field trips will not be held at all.

"School system staff, students, parents, and the community are asked to continue to be patient and flexible in order to allow the school system the maximum ability to respond correctly to changing circumstances," read a statement from the Montgomery County Public Schools.

Dewitt Wood, the father of a student in Montgomery County, took his son home early Tuesday following the fatal shooting. He said he is considering keeping his son at home until the sniper is caught.

"If I had known earlier," Wood said of the shooting, "I probably wouldn't have let him come to school at all."

An elementary school student named Melissa was escorted out of school by her father. "I was scared, because anything could have happened at school," she said. "I just wanted to be safe with my family."

In neighboring Prince George's County, which also abuts the District of Columbia, schools also were observing a Code Blue Wednesday, said Athena Ware, spokeswoman for the county's public schools. A heightened police presence also will be in place around the schools, she said.

A letter found near the scene of Saturday's sniper shooting in Ashland, Virginia, warned in a postscript: "Your children are not safe anywhere, at any time." The words were read aloud by Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose.

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Moose said investigators had already shared that element of the letter with community leaders and law enforcement authorities to let them know of the threat, but he said he would not discuss the letter's other contents because it would be "detrimental to the investigation."

The shooting in Ashland, about 80 miles south of the nation's capital, led authorities there to close 10 Richmond area school districts Monday and Tuesday. But all 10 districts planned to reopen Wednesday, said Laura Neff-Henderson, a representative of the Petersburg Public Schools who spoke on behalf of the region.

"After discussion with law enforcement and consideration of all the events that have gone on ... we are going back to school," she said. "Of course, we have safety precautions in place. Most of the precautions are precautions and safety measures that have always been in place -- they're just going to be more heavily and strictly enforced."



School Administrators, Parents on Full Alert Following Sniper Attacks

ABC News

October 8, 2002

By Dan Harris

(New York)

The sniper shooting of a 13-year-old Bowie, Md., student has many parents again asking the question: "Are my kids safe in school?"

Following Monday morning's shooting, the Benjamin Tasker Middle School went into what's called "Code Blue" — the second-highest level of alert.

The doors were locked, students were confined to their classrooms and parents were made to present identification before they could take their children home.

Schools throughout the region followed similar procedures.

"We just didn't let 9/11 and some of the other issues go by," Jerry Weast, superintendent of Montgomery Public Schools in Maryland, told ABCNEWS. "We had practiced earlier this year on a full alert, so this becomes the second time we've gone to a full alert ... only this one was for real."

The security measures show how much has changed at the nation's schools since the shootings at Columbine High and the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Academics Are Second to Student Safety

Today, at schools throughout the country, there are metal detectors, bag searches and security cameras.

In Florida, for instance, SWAT teams conducted exercises with student actors who pretend to be shot or overcome by hazardous materials.

In Passaic County, N.J., administrators now require students to show ID badges before entering the school. They've hired more security guards and invested in a new communications system, which allows Superintendent Henry Holster to reach every principal during a crisis.

Holster says his job has changed radically in recent years. "Academics are second. It's on the back burner to the front line of safety of children."

Despite the new safety measures, some argue there's more to be done. They say it's still too easy for outsiders to gain access to schools, and that there's not enough money, training or coordination devoted to security. Schools are particularly vulnerable to terror attacks, they say.

"We have had some meaningful improvements post-Columbine, but we still can't afford complacency and a 'been there, done that' attitude by school administrators in terms of security and crisis planning," said Ken Trump, a consultant for National School Safety and Security Services:

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Still, Stephens says children are 99 times more likely to be shot outside of school than inside.

Ron Stephens of the National School Safety Center agreed. “Our world may be unsafe, but our schools continue to be the safest place for our young people to be,” he said.

However, no amount of planning, it seems, is likely to stop an armed, angry person determined to shoot an innocent student.