

Schools safe, threats remain

By Ben Feller
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Only 52 of the nation's 91,000 public schools are labeled persistently dangerous by their states, findings that allow students in those few schools to transfer to safer places but deny a similar option for tens of millions of other children.

The lack of a label does not mean a school is without crime, but rather that there is not enough to merit the designation. There were nearly 700,000 violent crimes in America's schools in 2000, the last year for which government numbers were available.

The new school year marks the first time that states must define and identify their most dangerous schools and let all students at those schools enroll elsewhere in their district. Most states have responded by declaring they have no schools fitting that description.

Forty-four states and the District of Columbia reported not a single unsafe schools. The exceptions were Pennsylvania (28), Nevada (eight), New Jersey (seven), Texas (six), New York (two) and Oregon (one). The numbers may change after final state reviews or appeals.

At a time when campuses use a range of tools to halt crime, from metal detectors to full-time police officer, 99.9 percent of schools got passing safety grades, based on self-reported data.

"I don't think most parents would be surprised to find out that schools aren't persistently dangerous because they believe their schools are safe," said Jo Loss, mother of two public-school children in Castro Valley, Calif., and a leader of the state's PTA.

The order to designate unsafe schools is part of federal law designed to hold schools accountable and give students choices. But to some school advocates, the small number identified is so implausible it renders the ordered assessment meaningless.

"The states are sending a false sense of security to parents, and it creates a laxity among educators in terms of school safety," said Kenneth Trump, a national school safety consultant who has worked with officials in more than 35 states. "It's like a government Grade A stamp of approval saying everything is safe and fine."

To get the label in Washington state, for example, a 1,000-student school would have to expel three students per year for gun violations and 10 additional students per year for other violent offenses — and

Feeling unsafe

While violent crimes at schools are decreasing overall, students say they don't feel secure as weapons use and threats increase.

Students grade nine through 12 who reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property

| YEAR | PERCENT |
|------|---------|
| 2001 | 8.9 |
| 1999 | 7.7 |
| 1997 | 7.4 |
| 1995 | 8.4 |
| 1993 | 7.3 |

Number of violent crimes against students age 12 to 18 at school or on their way to and from school



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics

that would have to happen for three straight years.

Washington's policy was purposely set high because of the "significant consequences of being defined as persistently dangerous," said Martin Mueller of the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Connecticut gives schools three years to fix problems. "If they do not improve, then they can be named, but we are not automatically condemning a school," said Thomas Murphy of the state's Education Department.

Most states have determined that to merit the dangerous label, schools must meet at least one threshold, such as student gun violations or expulsions based on violent behavior.

Typically, states tied the minimum number of incidents to enrollment — requiring a higher number at larger schools — and they only count schools that show trouble over two years or three years.

The states also based their definitions on the most serious crimes: murder, arson, robbery, kidnapping. A dangerous environment, not just unacceptable behavior, is the target, said Bill Modzeleski, school safety director for the Education Department.

"When you see what Congress said in the legislation, then clearly there probably aren't as many persistently dangerous schools as the public may believe," he said.

Marsha Smith, a physical education teacher in Rockville, Md., and a consultant on teenage health and school safety, added, "The public may believe that schools are dangerous, but it's quite the opposite. Schools are the safest place for students to be."

Government numbers show that students age 12 to 18 are facing fewer violent crimes at school — 699,800 in 2000, down 51 percent since 1993. Yet an increasing number of high school students, almost one in 10, reported being threatened or injured with a weapon at school in 2001.

The law allows students who are victims of a violent crime at school to transfer, regardless of whether their school is persistently dangerous.

California, whose 8,000-plus schools are more than in other state, listed none as unsafe. Neither did Colorado, where two young gunmen in 1999 killed 13 people and wounded more than 20 others before killing themselves at Columbine High School outside Denver.

In Philadelphia, school officials say they are paying a price for aggressively disciplining misbehaving students. The city had 27 of the state's 28 persistently dangerous schools, which unfairly gave them all a "big black eye," said Paul Vallas, the chief executive for the school district. Vallas has asked the state for a one-year exemption from having to offer transfers to students.

William Craig cannot think of a single violent crime, let alone a pattern of dangerous behavior, during his eight years as principal at Terrace Hills Middle School in El Paso. Yet the school is one of six campuses out of 7,734 in Texas deemed persistently dangerous.

Craig blames faulty school data, including rock-throwing incidents counted as serious weapons violations. El Paso school district leaders, in disbelief that four of their schools got tagged as unsafe, have appealed to the state.

"It's a shame people didn't take a look around before they put such a heavy-duty label on us," Craig said. "You look at the inner cities — much bigger cities than El Paso that didn't get named — and it kind of makes you wonder: What's going on here?"

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Teen shot by officers intended suicide

By Nicholas K. Geranos
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPOKANE, Wash. — A troubled teenager who was critically wounded by officers after he fired a gun at school was trying to commit suicide, police said Tuesday.

Sean Fitzpatrick, 16, left a page-and-a-half suicide note at home before Monday's shooting, saying he wanted to be shot by police, police Chief Roger Bragdon said. He also made suicidal statements during the 20 minutes he talked with a police negotiator, Bragdon said.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the young man intended to commit suicide by having us do it," Bragdon said.

Bragdon declined to reveal the contents of the note, saying only the teen was explicit about his emotional pain and depression. Bragdon could not say why the student chose his high school for the showdown.

Fitzpatrick was shot three times by SWAT team officers who fired almost simultaneously when the student raised a 9mm semiautomatic handgun toward them, Bragdon said. Fitzpatrick was shot in the jaw, stomach and arm and was in critical condition Tuesday at Sacred Heart Medical Center.

Bragdon said the suicide note was clear Fitzpatrick did not intend to harm others.

Fitzpatrick's parents, Angel Fitzpatrick and

Linda Schearing of Fairfield, a town 30 miles south of Spokane, were brought to the school but had not spoken to their son, officials said.

The parents apologized to the community Tuesday in a statement released by family attorney Carl Hueber. The boy had no previous criminal problems, and his parents were cooperating with police, Hueber said in the statement.

"He was apparently suffering from severe mental problems which had not been recognized by his family, friends or teachers," the statement said. Bragdon said Fitzpatrick entered a science classroom shortly after 11 a.m. Monday, ordered a student teacher and several students to leave and fired once into a wall. He took no hostages.

The boy also sprayed the room with retardant from fire extinguishers. Officers could see the boy because he had propped open a door, and they talked with him, Bragdon said.

However, Fitzpatrick suddenly stopped talking, put on his jacket, and drew the pistol from a pants pocket, Bragdon said.

"They knew it couldn't be stopped," Bragdon said of the shooting.

Authorities said it is too early to say if Fitzpatrick will face criminal charges if he recovers.

School Superintendent Brian Benzel cited privacy laws in refusing to release any information about Fitzpatrick's school performance and activities.

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