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Thursday, September 25, 2003

Schools safe, threats remain

By Ben Feller THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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

The lack of a label does not an a school is without crime, out rather that there is not enough to merit the designation. There were nearly 700,000 viont crimes in America's schools n 2000, the last year for which overnment numbers were

The new school year marks e first time that states must efine and identify their most angerous schools and let all tudents at those schools enroll lsewhere in their district. Most states have responded by declaring they have no schools fitting nat description.

Forty-four states and the District of Columbia reported then must get up for a 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

"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 Democrats, he said stamp of approval saying everyelieve we are even thing is safe and fine.

additional students per year for other violent offenses — and Department.

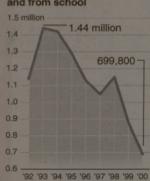
Feeling unsafe

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

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



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 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 To get the label in crimes: murder, arson, robbery, Washington state, for example, a kidnapping. A dangerous envi-1,000-student school would ronment, not just unacceptable have to expel three students per behavior, is the target, said Bill year for gun violations and 10 Modzeleski, school safety director for the Education

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

William Craigo 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.

Craigo 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

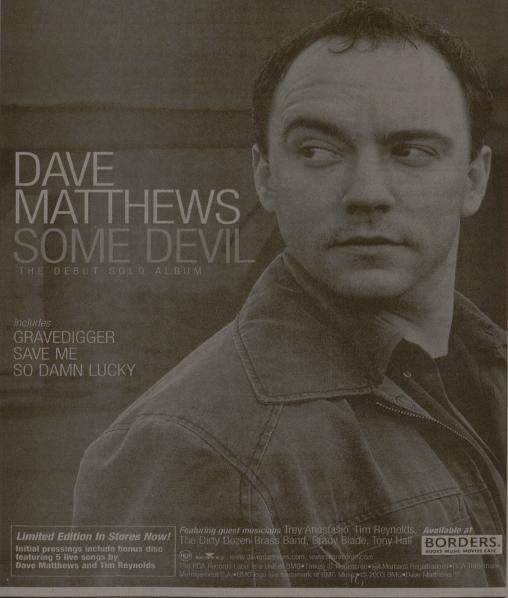
"It's a shame people didn't take a look around before they put such a heavy-duty label on us," Craigo said. "You look at the inner cities — much bigger cities than El Paso that didn't get named — and it kind of makes you wonder: What's going on

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Teen shot by officers intended suicide

By Nicholas K. Geranos THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPOKANE, Wash. — A troubled teenager who

vas 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 suiide note at home before Monday's shooting, saying he wanted to be shot by police, police Chief Roger Bragdon said. He also made suicidal statenents during the 20 minutes he talked with a olice negotiator, Bragdon said.

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

Bragdon declined to reveal the contents of the te, saying only the teen was explicit about his motional pain and depression. Bragdon could not ay why the student chose his high school for the

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

Bragdon said the suicide note was clear itzpatrick 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

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