

Attorney General Phil Weiser tells Colorado schools to remember “lessons of Columbine”

Healthy school climate, threat assessment key, he said

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Twenty years after the shootings at Columbine High School, Colorado needs to be careful that it doesn't forget the “lessons” those deaths taught so painfully, Attorney General Phil Weiser said Tuesday.



Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser

Weiser spoke at the Uniting to Prevent School Violence conference at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus on Tuesday afternoon. He called on schools to do more to monitor their “climate,” and to ensure that students know how to alert someone if they see a potential threat.

While reports that the two killers at Columbine were bullied turned out to be unfounded, a hostile school climate still has been shown to contribute to violence, substance abuse and self-harm by students, Weiser said. Teachers and administrators may not realize if their schools have a negative climate, so they need to keep a pulse on students' views, he said.

“A safe environment is one where bullying and harassment doesn't take place,” he said.

Last school year, the Safe2Tell anonymous reporting system received about 16,000 tips about potential threats, but schools constantly receive new students and staff who need to be trained on what to do if they notice something suspicious, Weiser said.

In some cases, police were able to quickly apprehend a suspect who had made threats after receiving Safe2Tell tips, and once they were able to get medical help for a student having psychiatric symptoms caused by medication, he said.

“We need to constantly raise awareness,” he said.

The Colorado Attorney General’s Office is reissuing a guide to school safety that got partially lost in the shuffle when it debuted, Weiser said. The guide contains evidence-based tactics on improving school climate, assessing threats and responding to an attack, he said.

In recent years, a backlash has developed against some elements of how schools prepare for violence, especially lockdown drills. Surveys have shown that teens worry their schools are unsafe, but the research isn’t clear on whether drills make students feel worse or better.

Ultimately, failing to prepare kids for the possibility of an attack isn’t an option, Weiser said.

“There are people who say, ‘Do we have to do this? Because I don’t want to scare our kids.’ This is the world we live in,” he said.