



**WEEKLY MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH**

**ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO**

**ALSO PRESENT: FRANK HOLLEMAN**

**DEPUTY SECRETARY OF EDUCATION**

**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

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**9:31 A.M. EDT**

ATTY GEN. RENO: This morning I'm very pleased to be joined by Deputy Secretary Frank Holleman of the Department of Education, and together we're releasing the Year 2000 Annual Report on School Safety.

America's schools are safe places. In fact, crime in the nation's schools has decreased since 1992. But as I've said before, we can't be satisfied; we can and must do more. Youth crime and violence are still one of the great challenges that we face. The classroom hostage-taking in Arizona on Tuesday, which, thankfully, ended without injury, is a stark reminder of the fact.

Youth who commit violence, violent crimes, must be held accountable, and the punishment must be fair and firm and fit the crime.

At the same time, we must do everything we can to prevent

the violence in the first place.

America has shown that if we work together, if communities, schools, the businessman, the police officer, the teacher, the principal, the preacher come together and focus on children, communities around the country are proving that prevention and intervention strategies help to keep our young people out of trouble.

That's why it's critical for us to do all we can to identify young people who are on the verge of getting in trouble, who need our help, and then get that help for them.

We've made tremendous strides in these last years in mental wellness and in dealing with emotional problems among America's youth.

I've visited inspiring peer mediation programs in schools like George Washington High School in San Francisco.

We must make mental health services truly available in schools across the country.

We must expand conflict resolution programs in schools, in order to keep our children safe.

We must deliver services to children, because we know it can help to solve the problem and prevent the crime and the tragedy that accompanies it.

We must create a school-wide and community-wide base that fosters positive discipline, academic success, as well as mental and emotional wellness.

If we do, we will be able to strike the right balance, as we must, between responding to early warning signs of violence, on the one hand, and unfairly labeling or stigmatizing children, on the other.

This year's Annual Report reminds us all to take certain key principles to heart:

Listen to those who work in and who learn in schools every day. Collaborate in new and creative ways, and implement tailored strategies focused on prevention, intervention, and accountability.

I can remember the names of all my elementary school teachers.

I can remember what the classrooms looked like.

I can remember feeling safe there.

We must do this for all the children of America.

Frank?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Thank you, Attorney General. It's a real pleasure for me to be here with you at the Justice Department today.

This report we are releasing today contains good news for America's families. Since 1992, school crime has decreased. When we drop our children off at school or when we walk them to the school bus, we parents can know that our children are safer than they had been in the past.

Crimes such as theft and assault have declined over the six years from 1992 to 1998.

Thefts are the most common school crime, and they have declined significantly.

There has been a steady decline in the percentage of high school students who report carrying a weapon to school, a decline in the number of students who engaged in fights at school, and a drop in the percentage of students who report gangs in schools.

Throughout the country, communities and schools are working together to make their neighborhoods and their communities safer, and the Department of Justice and the Department of

Education are working together to support and encourage community partnerships.

This year, 77 school districts and communities are being supported in their work through the Safe Schools, Healthy Students Initiative of our two departments and the Department of Health and Human Services.

This initiative promotes comprehensive strategies for safer schools, healthier students, and greater academic achievement through a partnership between educators, law enforcement, and mental health professionals.

At the same time, as the attorney general said, we need to do more.

We need to make sure that quality after-school programs are available throughout the country so that children both have the chance to improve their academic performance and are safe during those critical after-school hours. We know, in general, that smaller learning communities promote safe schools.

That's why smaller classes, smaller schools, and smaller schools- within-schools are critical to our continuing efforts to make schools safer.

We also know that the middle school years are critical years of transition and that our young adolescents, particularly, need guidance and direction.

That's why we need initiatives like our GEAR-UP Partnerships, aimed at middle school students to provide them with mentors and guidance to encourage them to do better academically and to prepare for college.

We know that, in general, a school is the safest place in the community for our children.

Still, we also know that we need to do more to make our schools safer and our children successful academically.

Partnerships are the key to that success, whether it's a partnership with parents, with communities, and with schools.

Here at the Department of Education and at the Department of Justice, we are working in partnership, and we want to thank the attorney general for working with us, in promoting community initiatives to make our communities, our neighborhoods, and our schools safer.

Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, Mr. Holleman, you say America's schools are safe places. I'm trying to imagine how I'd feel if one out of every 14 of my coworkers was occasionally bringing a weapon to the workplace.

That's 7 percent of students bringing a weapon to school. It can't be a very comforting figure for parents, even though it's considerably down from previous years.

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's why we have to do more. That's the reason we can't become complacent.

That's the reason we must take steps to make sure that guns do not fall into the hands of people who cannot properly control them and keep them out of the hands of children.

Q Just to follow-up on that, how is it that you think 7 percent are getting -- are bringing weapons to school, with all the toughened regulations, with all the metal detectors that some districts are talking about in the last few years? How is that even happening?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You have to check each community, understand what provisions are in place. And again, what it -- one of the things that I hope that we can do in these next years is develop the information base of where there are problems, what is being reported, what can be done to be more effective in terms of enforcement.

Q Secretary Holleman, of the 3,500 or so students who were

expelled under state and federal laws for bringing a gun to school -- I guess it's the state laws -- does the department track how many of them go into alternative schools? And what is your view on whether they should all be -- someone should still be keeping track of them? How is that done?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Well, I think that the first principle we endorse and support is the concept that denial of education should not be a method of punishment. So when a child is suspended or expelled from school, along with that should go the provision of educational services, whether that's through an alternative school or through some other mechanism, to ensure that that child continues with his or her educational success.

In terms of the statistics we keep, Bill Modzeleski is here, who's the director of our Safe and Drug-Free School program, and he can provide you those specific statistics, to the extent we have them, in terms of whether schools do provide educational services when children are expelled.

Q But generally what's the department -- your view, obviously, is that they should continue to receive some education.

Beyond the law, which provides that they should be expelled, what can or does the department do receive some to encourage the states to make sure they are -- that they do still kind of education?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Well, for one thing, we provide significant funding through Title I, for example, to schools that have a high number of kids in poverty, and that money can be used to provide educational services to children who are expelled or suspended, as well as others.

We provide technical assistance and guidance through publications about the importance of continuing education. And the secretary has been very affirmative in his statements around the country using the bully pulpit of his office to encourage state and local school districts, who

are in charge, generally, of expulsion policies, to continue education for kids when they're expelled or suspended.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think this could be a good -- these are the types of issues where it's important to build partnerships.

The schools shouldn't have to bear the burden. Their burden should be to educate our children.

The rest of the community, along with the schools, have a responsibility to devise programs that can figure out what's causing the problem with this young person, and together, the medical community, the public health community, people who may surround that child, reach out with the schools to design programs after expulsion that continue to provide the education, but also say, "What's wrong? What can we do to get this youngster off on the right foot?"

Q Ms. Reno, a couple questions on the juvenile justice system and the law. Does it seem to you, with increasing laws in every state that makes kids subject to adult penalties, that the juvenile justice system still even exists in this country? And secondly, there's a new study out today that says once again that minority youths are locked up at an astonishing rate compared to white youth who commit the same crimes.

I think it was four times as often for minority kids to be locked up, frequently in adult prisons.

ATTY GEN. RENO: These are two very important issues. And first of all, as I have said on a number of occasions, I've watched the juvenile court system be overwhelmed by cases coming to it as the last institution to deal with a problem involving a child when the other institutions, including the school, the family, the neighborhood, sometimes the faith community, have failed.

As the juvenile courts received greater and greater

numbers, the courts were less equipped to deal with the individual child on an individual basis -- and that's the only way I think you can really be effective -- and they didn't have adequate resources to address the years of problems that the child had. Faced with that, they were not as effective.

Without the effectiveness, people sometimes lost confidence in the juvenile justice system.

I think we have a wonderful opportunity in this country now to show what courts can do, and I cite the example of the drug courts.

It's about 11 years old now, 11 or 12 years old. Starting with one, there are now over 400, operating on the theory that if you have a small enough caseload so that the judge can know the person, and not just know them as a number or as a file, and know that there are sufficient resources to adequately deal with that person's problems in the drug court -- or, we could use the same theory in a juvenile justice court.

I think you can make a difference, and I think you will save money in the long run, because you will interrupt that cycle of a kid coming back into the system again and again. Why does that happen? The judge adjudicates the child, provides for a disposition, he's sent to a special school for three months; but that's three months that will never correct the problems that were generated over a 16- or 17-year period.

If we use our resources wisely, in a comprehensive, thorough manner, I think our courts, with judges who care, can make a tremendous difference.

One of the points that I raised with respect to your second point is that there are points along the way.

I would like to know, in terms of the percentage of young people who are minority, how many are arrested instead of being told, "Go home and don't do it again," because I



think that's the first entry into the program -- into the justice system.

The second is what you referred to.

I believe the figure said 31 percent of those arrested are minorities; 44 percent, or 41 percent, are detained in the juvenile justice system.

Now, as I've said to you on some other occasions when I've raised this issue, sometimes the problem is that there is nobody at home to send the child home to.

There is nobody to care for the child. We need to -- and we're trying -- to figure out what we can do to generate ideas through grants or other opportunities to see what can be done to level that playing field, so that that child -- who may be similarly situated to another, but does not have a home circumstance that will permit him to go home -- how we can level that playing field and give that child an opportunity.

Then the third point along the way is when a child is determined to have committed a crime that involves a transfer to the adult court. There's a disproportionate number there. We've got to figure out what we can do to level the playing field every step of the way, to make the system as fair as possible.

But we've also got to recognize -- and it's something that I have focused on for a long time -- 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year.

The concept of reward and punishment and conscience is developed then.

If a child does not have a conscience in those first three years, because of lack of supervision and care, what good are all the efforts going to be 16, 17, 21 years from then? It is so important, and that's the reason the partnership we've had with the Department of Education and HHS and Labor is important, and the Healthy Children, Safe School

initiatives in which we have provided grants to communities across the country, collective grants from the departments, the four departments.

We've got to give children a future from the beginning if we're going to be successful.

And I think we can.

Q Ms. Reno, have there been any recent studies as to why so many kids are bringing weapons to school, and any strategy designed to head this behavior off at the pass?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I will ask Myron to do is provide you with any information that may be available through the best practices information that we've developed on guns.

Q Ms. Reno -- (off mike) --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Can you speak a little bit louder, please?

Q Sure. There seem to be increasing questions over in Yemen about whether or not the U.S. authorities are getting adequate cooperation from their counterparts over there.

Can you give us an idea of how that

relationship is going and what the state of affairs is now?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I -- as I understand it, everybody is trying to work together. The Yemeni authorities are conducting an investigation.

We want to work with them.

And other than that, I don't think I should comment further on what is a pending matter.

Q But on that subject, there have been some correlation -- there is some correlation between the various attacks against U.S. military in the Middle East and this bombing

in Yemen.

And I would ask if there is a correlation that leads to the mastermind of these plots as being bin Laden.

How is it that the United States can afford to give this man a sanctuary, or how is it that we can respect the Taliban in giving this man a sanctuary if he's going to go on and on and on hitting us where we're blind?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not respond to your particular presumptions in which you ask the question, but would simply respond by saying I can't comment on a pending matter.

Q Ms. Reno, is the department involved in any way with concern, local concern here about a young man who was shot, Prince Jones? Is the Justice Department looking into that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yesterday Bill Lann Lee, the assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division, met with concerned students from Howard and explained that we are conducting an investigation.

Q Furthermore, Ms. Reno, there have also been calls for an investigation into the overall Prince George's County Police Department and some of the actions that have happened there. Are you aware of anything, and is there any movement in your department?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't comment one way or the other with respect to what actions we're taking.

Q (Off mike) -- was raising some pretty serious charges against this department this week concerning a criminal investigation that federal prosecutors are conducting in California over the military base closure and Halliburton's role, the role of Mr. Cheney's old company, saying that basically this was a politically inspired investigation, and that if Mr. Gore were not down in the polls, his company would not be under investigation.

Can you say, in a situation like that, has main Justice had any role, even to the point of being notified that such investigation --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I didn't know anything about it.

Q Attorney General Reno, can you give us a sense of your degree of involvement or oversight in the Yemen investigation? We know that the Yemeni authorities have the lead and that they're working closely with the FBI.

What is your role as attorney general? Are you involved in briefings? Are you overseeing the work of the FBI?

How do you interface with this investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I should, when I should.

Q FBI agents are beginning to come home. Is this the start of a full drawdown of the investigative force?

And is that the result of security concerns, or is their work just done?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we have tried to do is to get evidence- recovery experts in as we've needed them, and various particular specialties in.

When they have concluded their work we're bringing them out, and trying to do it in an orderly way that will ensure security and address the issues that we need to address.

Q Ms. Reno, on Yemen: As of a few days ago, the FBI special agents in Yemen had not been able to interview any of the detainees in that country by the local officials.

Is that on the agenda? Is Yemen allowing us to conduct a full investigation on the ground?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't comment with respect to any matters on the pending investigation.

Q Ms. Reno, have you received a letter from the attorney for Tom Downey, complaining about the pace of the investigation into the Bush debate material?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have heard about it, but I went through my mail and I have not received it yet.

Q Is this something that concerns you -- are you --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I need to get the letter first before I can comment.

Q Anything imminent on that? Can you give us a feel for whether the Justice Department and the Bureau are

-- if this is a matter that's still under investigation at all?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Which matter? The debate matter?

Q The debate tape.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, it is under investigation.

Q Remains under investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It does.

Q Ms. Reno, although I realize that you haven't seen the letter, he says, as other people have said -- he's not the only one, so it's not just a matter of his letter -- but many people have said it would be good if the Justice Department -- the FBI would wrap this up before the election. There are other people who say no, they should wait until after the election.

It's one of those damned if you do, damned if you don't things.

Are you damned if you do or damned if you don't? I mean, is there a need to resolve this before the election?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There is a need to resolve any allegation of crime in which an investigation is being conducted as soon as you possibly can, consistent with a thorough investigation.

Q Are you confident that the Department of Justice assets -- the FBI especially -- are sufficiently well-protected in Yemen; that there could not be a follow-up act of terrorism that could inflict even more casualties, maybe even set up that way?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it is important that we take every possible step that's realistic and feasible to secure the safety of all our forces, both military and law enforcement.

As I have told you on many occasions in the past, if I could assure that, I would immediately take whatever step I could to do that.

But this is a situation where you cannot control the instincts of everyone in every circumstance at every time.

Q Ms. Reno, strictly as a matter of curiosity, with no ulterior object in mind -- (laughter).

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That was one of the most interesting leads!

Q Well, I mean, I'm very sincere with that.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, one thing, let me -- you may surprise me, but I think you're probably one of the most sincere people I know. (Laughter.)

Q Would a president-elect or vice president-elect come under the purview of your special counsel regulations?

In other words, if there were serious allegations against somebody who's elected in November, would you be obligated, if there were credible and specific evidence against them,

to --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: As you know, I don't do what-ifs.  
(Laughter.)

Q Well, no, I'm just asking. Will a vice president-elect or a president-elect come under those provisions?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Again, it's important that -- let me --  
Since you're doing it only for your curiosity --

(laughter) -- let me ask Myron to give you a copy of it and go through it with you.

Thank you.

Q Mr. Holleman -- oh, sorry. May I just return to school violence for a moment?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Sure.

Q The incident earlier this week that the attorney general referred to once again raises the troubling issue of guns in school.

There is a real division of opinion among educators and specialists in school safety about the wisdom of metal detectors in schools; about whether this can really solve the problem.

Has the department looked into this? Does the department have a view on whether -- to put it in the only way I can think of, that every public school in America should have a metal detector?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Well, I don't think anyone believes that every public school in America should have a metal detector, and whether that kind of precaution is necessary is really in the hands of the local school district and the local principal. But I think, in general, what we advocate is to put in place precautionary measures, a quality educational program, and well-trained teachers to prevent

the problem from occurring in the first place.

The attorney general referred to earlier many of our partnerships who are participating in the Safe Schools initiative, in order to promote safety in their schools, have expended significant resources on early childhood programs, because we know that the stronger start a young child receives, the better they do in school and the less likely they are to get into trouble or to bring a weapon to school, for example.

So the most effective way to keep weapons or guns out of school, or to prevent violence or misconduct in school is to have strong preparation early on, an engaging curriculum and learning environment, and well-trained teachers, so that students are focused on learning, rather than other things.

Q But following up on that, things like not only metal detectors, but also surveillance cameras, which are now very common in schools, and police, an increased police presence within schools -- are those kinds of things having overall a positive influence on the school environment or a negative one, would you say?

MR. HOLLEMAN: Well, of course it depends on how it's handled. For example, a partnership between law enforcement and education can be a very positive thing in a school, because students can establish that relationship with their local policeman on the beat or their local law enforcement organization.

And the police department, in fact, can become part of the effort to improve the quality of education and to reduce violence and crime in the community, not only within the school, but in the community at large.

Q Attorney General Reno, you've traveled far and wide across this country. If there's been a sharp decline in the percentage of high school-aged students bringing weapons to school, why is it, do you believe, that many parents and children feel less safe in school today than they did in



1993?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think if you have seen some of the tragedies that have been reported, they strike so close to home.

You think, "Could it be my son's school?" And there have been some situations that just stagger the imagination.

I think, in -- where you have such acute and tragic cases, it makes us all realize that we cannot become complacent; we have got to do more.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q (Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes. Now one of the things -- can I ask you all -- would let me turn tables on you one day before I leave?

Q Absolutely.

Q Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q (Laughs.)

Q That's fair play!

ATTY GEN. RENO: We'll set it up.

Q But we can't comment on pending investigations!  
(Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Or on scoops that you have.

Q Yeah.

(Cross talk, laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: But you will tell me your opinion on "zero to three."

Q (Laughs.) No sources!

END.