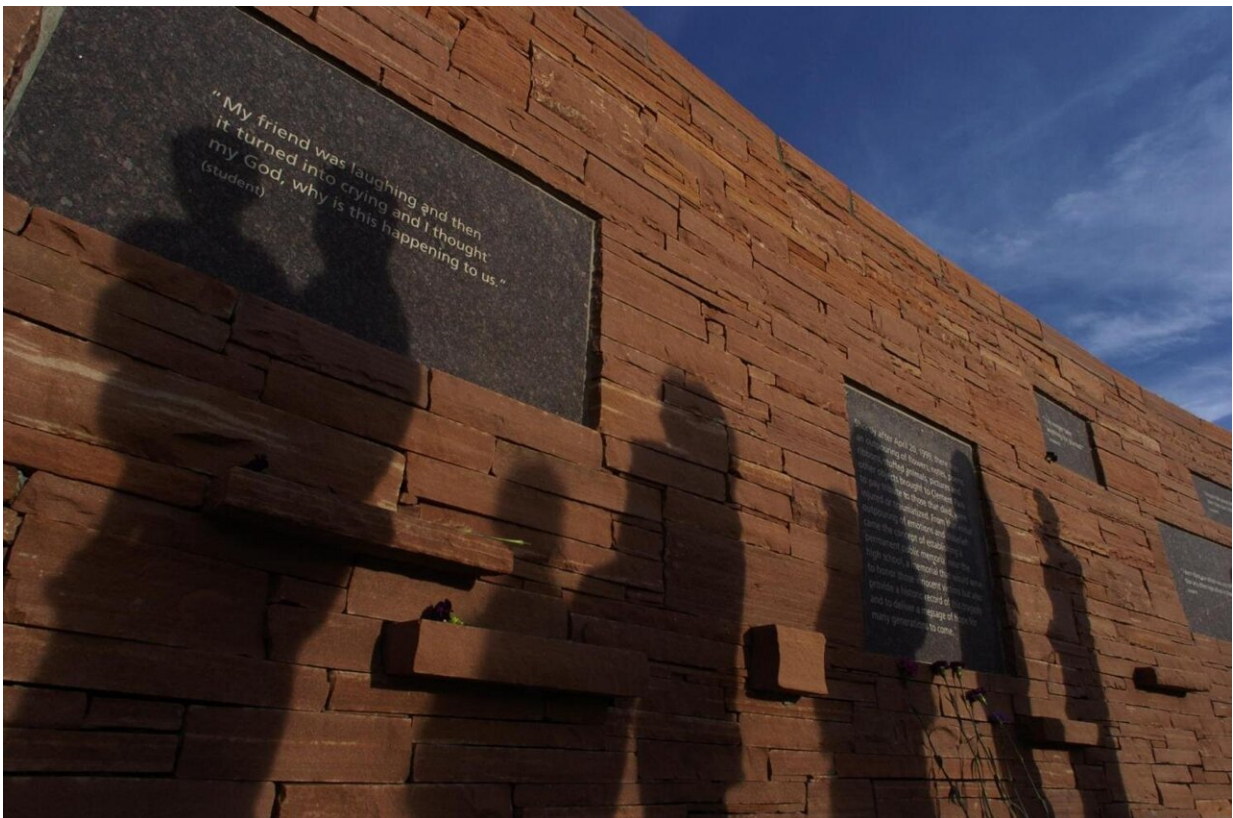


# Student teachers feeling the toll of school violence, educator says

April 10 2023, by Daniel Strain

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Visitors view the Columbine Memorial in Littleton, Colorado. Credit: Glenn Asakawa/CU Boulder

Deena Gumina was in third grade in 1999 when a mass shooting at Columbine High School devastated her hometown of Littleton,

Colorado. In the years since, these kinds of violent events have become increasingly common across the country, altering the face of K-12 education in the United States—including for Gumina herself. She graduated from high school at Columbine in 2008 and later taught elementary school for five years in Denver.

Today, she's an assistant teaching professor in the School of Education at CU Boulder where she prepares her [students](#) to become the teachers of the future. Last month, she wrote an [op-ed for Chalkbeat Colorado](#) about the emotional toll that gun violence has taken on her own students. The article was tragically timely—days later, another deadly school shooting took place in Colorado, this one at Denver's East High School.

Gumina spoke to CU Boulder Today about how teachers have become increasingly "under attack" around the nation, and why she still sees room for hope.

"I tell my students, 'You can actually make a change,'" Gumina said. "'You as one person along with your students can do something.'"

## **What motivated you to speak out about the challenges facing aspiring teachers today?**

My students came into class on Tuesday, Feb. 18, the morning after there was a gun-related incident near campus in Boulder. They were scared, and they were not sure what to do. I really didn't know what to say. My students were looking to me to say, "It's going to be okay." But I don't know that. I don't know that they are safe. I don't know that they will be safe in their jobs.

## **How do these violent incidents affect your students emotionally?**

Some of our students have been in active shooter situations themselves. All of them have been in shooter drills. This has been the reality for them for their entire educational lives. It's not new, but it's also impossible to normalize.

We're all expected to hold this space for our students when we can't even hold it for ourselves: I'm here to be a safe space for you, but I don't feel safe myself. It feels like it's event after event, and there's not enough breathing room to recover.

## **You've also been close to gun violence. How has that changed your life?**

I was in third grade during the shooting at Columbine, but I have vivid memories of that day. That was the first time that many people around the country really understood that this could happen. It was a shift in our understanding of how school works.

It landed on me at the time, and it continues to land on me. I felt it again every time I would do an active shooter drill with my students because I knew this was real.

## **Have school shootings shifted how we prepare students for becoming teachers?**

I'm preparing students for a job that we see, over and over again, in the news is under attack. It's under attack on so many levels. It's not just that your job is hard. Your job can also be dangerous, and that can color everything we do.

Students have to come into class and think about: "What would I do if this happened? Where would I put my children? Where would I hide

myself? How would I lock the door? Could we get out the window?"

That was really hard for me when I was a teacher. Now it's equally hard as a teacher educator looking at my college students and telling them, "Unfortunately, this is part of the job, even though it shouldn't be. You're going to do two to three active shooter drills a year."

## **What gives you hope, even amid these horrific events?**

There is so much hope in the youth, among our college and [high school students](#). In March, students from East High School in Denver took their mental health day to do a walkout and protest at the Colorado State Capitol. They are not okay with this. It's not hypothetical situation for them in the way I think it is for many of the adults who make policy decisions.

Students here at the university and those who are facing this in [high school](#) are so strong and resilient. It's time that adults show up for them.

## **How are teachers taking action around these issues?**

Anyone who works with students should be willing to do the same thing. It's not enough to just be sad anymore.

I think action is possible if we continue to show up. It's my job to show up for my college students. It's my [college students'](#) job to show up for their [elementary students](#). There is power in numbers, and there are many of us. There are so many people who feel this very deeply and urgently.

That's the message that I try to send to my students about everything they are up against in schools: If you don't like it, work to change it.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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