LITTLETON, Colo. (APBnews.com) -- The law enforcement response to the Columbine High School massacre has been called pathetic. It has also been called flawless.

But the truth lies somewhere in the middle, tactical experts say.

Throughout the past year, SWAT trainers have used the siege to show the pitfalls in school attacks involving an unknown number of gunmen, booby traps and bombs. They've formed opinions on what was done well with Columbine, and what could have been done significantly better.

And while critics have scoffed at everything from the 90 minutes it took police to enter the building to the five hours it took to clear the victims, SWAT experts have come to one conclusion: It's all debatable.

The only thing that's for sure is that these groups need more funding, they say.

"Columbine put an emphasis on what needs to be done," said Stuart Meyers, president of Operational Tactics Inc., a Gaithersburg, Md.-based SWAT training organization. "Agencies need the money to train responsibly. ... If we as a society want to effectively resolve these situations, we need to allocate resources to train emergency teams."

Meyers said he has seen more communities paying to train their police since Columbine.

'Not a cut-and-dried incident'

The undisputed facts remain that it took officers more than an hour to enter Columbine High School after the first report of gunfire on April 20, 1999, authorities said. It took nearly 3 1/2 hours to pull out an injured teacher, who died before he could reach a hospital. It took 24 hours to retrieve the 14 other bodies, which were left in the building overnight.

Several of the 19 intent-to-sue filings in Jefferson County fault rescue efforts for the deaths of the 12 students and a teacher killed when two teenagers on a suicide mission tore through the hallways spraying gunfire and detonating bombs. Eric Harris and Dylann Klebold killed themselves sometime during the siege.

"This was not a cut-and-dried incident," Meyers said.

No longer outgunned

Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone, whose officers were among the first to respond to Columbine when the shooting began, defended his officers, who he said were "way outgunned" by the teenage killers.

Stone said one of his priorities in the fallout of the standoff will be to secure high-power weaponry for all patrol cars.

"The handguns we carry aren't much use against someone with a semiautomatic rifle who can be accurate from 100 yards," he said.

Stone also said patrol officers need improved tactical training.

"A lot of us had that in the military, but a lot of younger guys who weren't in the military just haven't had that training," said Stone, who served as a military policeman in the California and Colorado National Guard.

Police response was 'normal'

Officials say the most prominent complaint made of the Columbine SWAT response was the amount of time it took authorities to enter the school as the gunmen sprayed gunfire from two 12-gauge sawed-off shotguns, a 9 mm TEC-DC9 semiautomatic pistol and a 9mm semiautomatic rifle. But Meyers, a renowned training expert, said he sees "no problem" with the timing.

"The response was normal given all the components: the explosive devices, the fire alarms, the water sprinkler systems, not knowing what was going on inside," he said. "They were trying to protect their guys, and if you lose the guys that are going in, it's counterproductive. So if it took them a little bit to assemble and develop a plan, that's understandable."

During the initial response at Columbine, members from three SWAT teams -- Jefferson County, Littleton and Denver -- communicated on different radio frequencies, officials said. The teams used hand signals to communicate within the building.

"In order to do something like this properly, you would need 100 police officers answering to one central command post -- but that's costly," Meyers said. "You're looking at $2,500 a person to outfit them with radios so they can operate off the same channel. That would add to communication."
"In order to do this effectively, they would need to be in constant communication," he added. "They would need to detail where they found explosive devices, what they found in the rooms, when they debriefed students. They needed to tell the others what they learned. They didn't have that coordination."

**Conflicting details**

At first, authorities believed the school was under a terrorist attack in which hostages were being held. They were conscious of the fact that 2,000 students and teachers were in danger and thought hundreds could be wounded, hundreds possibly dead.

Then response teams also were faced with dozens of erroneous reports on the gunmen. Although phone calls and e-mails poured from inside the school detailing their locations, they were not sure how many suspects there were. They were told upward of six, officials said.

Bombs and booby traps significantly hampered the efforts, especially since they did not have a floor plan of the sprawling 90,000-foot school.

Detractors also have questioned why, if students could pour out of the building without snagging a booby trap, the officers could not walk in. There was no sniper fire, no armed suspects guarding the doors, and authorities have admitted the gunmen probably took their lives early in the siege.

**Hospital: Most victims died early on**

Some have even asked how two dead gunmen could have held a hundred officers at bay and whether the victims died as a result of not receiving prompt medical attention.

Angela Sanders, the daughter of slain teacher William "Dave" Sanders, 47, has filed an intent to sue Jefferson County emergency response teams, claiming that her father could have survived if he was removed from the building sooner.

An officer on the scene admitted to APBnews.com that it took police "an excessive amount of time" to enter the building. He would not say whether that put lives in danger.

Officials at Denver Health Medical Center, which sent paramedics to the scene, have said that most of the victims died immediately after being shot. Others died a few minutes later. Sanders clung to life on a classroom floor until paramedics arrived. He was pronounced dead four hours after the shooting erupted.

**Preparing for another Columbine**

The Columbine massacre, known in tactical circles as "the worse-case scenario," has spurred changes nationally in the way authorities prepare for similar catastrophes. A number of seminars and training sessions over the past year have focused on teaching SWAT members, students and teachers how to interact during a school shooting.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police has put together a guide on responding to school shootings. The group urges that emergency units plan a meeting ahead of time with school officials to develop and coordinate safety plans.

The group suggested that first responders at school emergencies should already have site layouts, building floor plans and aerial maps in their cars.

Some SWAT teams have since developed campus and school floor plans, experts said. And while those who responded to Columbine have been blamed for not knowing the ins and outs of the building, SWAT trainers defend the fact that teams were pulled in from cities unfamiliar with the school.

"No SWAT team knows everything about every building," said Karl Schwartz, president of the SWAT Training and Tactics Corp. "These guys had no idea what they were up against. They did what they could. Should they have been more prepared? Could it have been done faster, better, with more training? Yes. But they didn't have it."

**A high school training ground**

Whether SWAT officers did all they could to aid the dying and wounded has long been questioned. There is still no answer as this Denver suburb continues to heal.

"Every call is unique, and these guys responded heroically and courageously," said Ron Watson, spokesman for the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) in Doylestown, Pa. "We are often asked to review critical incidents, and although we haven't formally reviewed this one, we do have opinions. We know these guys used excellent tactics. They put their lives on the line."

Since the massacre, NTOA has helped build "R.U. Ready High School," a 7,000-square-foot training complex at Blackwater Training Center in Moyock, N.C. In the fall, more than 400 officers were trained at the facility on how to deal with a massive school attack. The trainees were even faced with fake screams, booby traps, knapsacks and desks that may have contained bombs and gunmen who could have mingled with students to escape.

It was the most life-threatening scenario the organizations could prepare for.
“There was no back-slapping or celebration at the end of the simulation,” said Larry Glick, NTOA’s executive director. “Several officers told us they never believed in their worst nightmares that such an event could take place, let alone that they would have to train for it.”

Michelle Gotthelf is an APBnews.com assistant news editor (michelle.gotthelf@apbnews.com). APBnews.com correspondent Keith Coffman contributed to this report.