

DEALING WITH BOMB THREATS AT SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Bomb threats to schools are a significant problem throughout the United States. Although more than 90% of bomb threats turn out to be pranks, school districts must take each threat seriously because of the real potential for death and serious injury. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms reports that there were 2,217 bombing incidents in the U.S. in 1997, with 107 of those occurring in educational settings. One Maryland school district experienced more than 150 bomb threats and 55 associated arrests during the 1997- 98 school year.

The first known school bombing occurred in May 1927 in Bath, Michigan (population 700) when a local farmer blew up the school killing 38 pupils and 6 adults and seriously injuring over 40 other students. (Boulder News, April 25, 1999). In the Columbine High School tragedy, the Jefferson County, Colorado Sheriffs Department reported that there were 30 exploded devices and 46 unexploded devices in the school. In addition, 23 other explosive devices were found in the shooters' cars and homes. Many of these were homemade bombs which are easily manufactured by following directions found on the Internet.

WHAT THE PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY SHOULD KNOW

1. All threats are taken seriously.
2. An individual who makes a false bomb report could be charged with a class D felony (575.090 RSMo. 2000) or a class C felony (terroristic threat, 574.115 RSMo. 2000) in Missouri.
3. The school district has procedures in place to deal with bomb threats:
 - a. A checklist to guide the action of the individual who receives a threat over the telephone.
 - b. Notification procedures (including law enforcement)

- c. Search procedures (proactive security: the district maintains neat and orderly facilities, controls access, and keeps unoccupied areas secured)
- d. Procedures for safely evacuating the building(s) as appropriate
- e. Procedures for securing the crime scene

WHEN TO EVACUATE/CLOSE SCHOOL

1. There is no black and white line for determining when to evacuate the school.
2. When students see an immediate evacuation each time a bomb threat is received, they quickly learn that the best way to get out of class is to call in a bomb threat.
3. All bomb threats must be taken seriously and carefully analyzed. Factors to consider include:
 - a. Have there been national bomb incidents lately?
 - b. Have there been other hoaxes lately?
 - c. Has a hostile student been suspended recently?
 - d. Are there exams scheduled for today?
 - e. Is there any unexplained student unrest?
 - f. Are there any rumors circulating about a student threatening to harm others?
 - g. How much information did the caller provide? How specific is the information? (In general, you can get more specific information out of a caller when it is not a hoax).
 - h. How serious was the caller's voice?
 - I. Are there any missing chemicals?
 - j. Have there been any recent break-ins?
 - k. Did the caller give repeated warnings? (This seriously escalates the degree of danger.)
 - l. Are there surveillance video tapes to check?

ADMINISTRATORS HAVE ALTERNATIVES

1. Conduct a low profile search of the exterior grounds and public areas of the building.
2. Conduct a comprehensive search having all staff search their work area, in addition to the grounds and public areas.
3. Search with partial evacuation.
4. Evacuate after searching.
5. Evacuate immediately after clearing egress routes and assembly areas.
6. When conducting a search:
 - a. No two-way radios or cell phones should be used.
 - b. Searches should be systematic; conducted in levels: First, search the floor and area up to waist high; Second, search waist high to chin high; and Third, search chin high to the ceiling. Suspicious objects should not be touched. Law enforcement should be notified.

ACTIONS THAT DISCOURAGE FALSE BOMB THREATS

1. Do not release students but relocate them onto buses or into other facilities while the search is conducted.
2. Require lost time to be made up on weekends or at the end of the school year.

CRISIS RESPONSE PLANS

A district should include procedures for dealing with bomb threats in its crisis response plan. The Missouri Model Crisis Response Plan has a section for dealing with bomb threats. The model plan can be accessed at <http://www.dps.state.mo.us/home/governortaskforce.html>.

REFERENCES

1. Bomb Threats and Physical Security Planning, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Department of the Treasury, ATF P 7550.2 (7/87) [Special Agent Jim Jimerson of the Kansas City Bomb and Arson Group, ATF, can be contacted at (816) 421-3231)].

2. "How to Handle Bomb Threats and Suspicious Devices" by Kenneth Trump, School Planning and Management, February 1999.
3. "Managing Bomb Threats for School Administrators" by Marie Courtney, The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress Homepage, <http://www.aaets.org/arts/art99.htm>.
4. The Missouri statute on the crime of making a false bomb report (575.090 RSMo) and the Missouri statute on the crime of making a terroristic threat (574.115 RSMo) can be accessed at: <http://www.moga.state.mo.us/statutes>.