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Schools adopt new approach to handling threats

Authorities aim to ensure safety while also discouraging copycats

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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When students and staff arrived at Waukesha West High School on the morning of May 7, they had to pile backpacks, lumpy sweatshirts and other belongings in the middle of the floor to be searched by bomb-sniffing dogs.

A threat left in a boys' bathroom at the school just a few days earlier had warned of an explosion that could take place at the school on that day.

Law enforcement officials had determined it to be a "low level" threat, and West Principal Melissa Thompson decided to notify parents but carry on with classes.

"I'm overjoyed that everybody was safe and there wasn't more to the threat," Thompson said afterward. "I can say that our school was perhaps the safest in the state that Friday."

Bomb threats, unfortunately, are nothing new for schools. But the way that they are dealt with has changed.

Before the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in 1999, the most shocking and violent of what have been mostly rare fatal outbursts in American schools, school administrators might have just ignored such threats as student pranks.

Immediately in the wake of the Columbine massacre, however, officials were more likely to close schools and evacuate buildings rather than take any risks when confronted with a rash of such threats.

Today, school officials, law enforcement and school safety officers say they have to take a more nuanced approach to such threats, making sure that everyone is safe at the same time as not encouraging copycat efforts.

Such an approach involves evaluating each threat on a case-by-case basis, treating each as if it could be real and only shutting down or evacuating schools if the danger is credible. "We investigate them, we're aggressive and we will take necessary action to take those in custody," Waukesha County Sheriff's Detective Steve Pederson said. "We don't look at these for one second as a prank or a joke."

Criminal charges

It also means punishing those responsible for making threats, often by bringing criminal charges and seeking restitution for the expenses involved in securing the schools, as Waukesha County Assistant District Attorney Lesli Boese plans to do with a Nashotah teenager who confessed to scrawling a threat on a bathroom wall at Arrowhead High School in April.

"There will be a bomb that will go off Friday April 30 to blow up all you (expletive) bullies and snobs. I'm sick of all of you," the threat read. Boese said the teen will be charged with a felony as an adult because he turned 17 in the days before his referral reached her office.

The high school remained open on the day of the threat, although Arrowhead Superintendent Craig Jefson said both the Waukesha and Milwaukee County sheriff's departments helped make sure its buildings were clear of bombs or other dangers. Only a quarter of the student body came to classes on April 30, however, he said.

This was the second time in the three years that Jefson has been at Arrowhead where he has faced a student-initiated bomb threat that turned out to be false.

"I think we always have to take them very seriously," he said. "If there's a 99.9% chance it won't happen, there's a .1% chance it will."

That point is echoed by Peter Pochowski, the former security head for Milwaukee Public Schools who is now executive director of the National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officers. He said he oversaw a decrease of bomb threats at MPS from over 100 to between 15 and 20 a year.

Just last month Riverside University High School in Milwaukee was put on lockdown after five containers with foaming liquid were found outside the school. Three of the containers went off, making a mess, and two students had been arrested by the end of the day.

In addition to pursuing criminal charges, Pochowski said, school officials also have to take their own disciplinary action against students.

And schools should rely on law enforcement's evaluation to determine whether to close schools, he said.

"If you always evacuate, then you're just feeding these students that want to miss a math test," he said. "And if you never evacuate, then you're risking the prospect that something terrible could happen."

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