

How to Handle Bomb Threats and Suspicious Devices

How often have you heard a potential threat called a "ticking time-bomb"? More and more, that's a literal description, not just a figure of speech. Here's what you should know about the problem.

by Kenneth S. Trump, M.P.A.

As our nation struggles to recover from the high-profile shootings in several schools last year, educators today face school security threats of an equally, if not more, challenging nature. Bombs are one of several new crime trends posing problems for school administrators and staff. While bomb threats to schools may have been common in the past, the threats are now being replaced by actual devices.

An Explosion of Incidents

A significant number of homemade bombs appeared on school grounds, in schools, and even on school buses during the past school year. Coupled with an increase in bomb threats, these devices have caused major disruptions across the country. A few such reported cases include:

- One Maryland school district experienced more than 150 bomb threats and 55 associated arrests last year.
- Ten bombs, fireworks strapped to aerosol cans, forced the closure of a California elementary school.
- Up to a pound of ammonium nitrate (a bomb component) was found in a trash bag carried by a Nevada middle school student.
- Eight boys confessed to making three homemade bombs, two of which were placed at a Minnesota elementary school.

The most obvious danger in these and similar cases is the potential for death, serious injuries, and/or extensive property damage. But bomb threats, suspicious devices, and related evacuations and searches also account for a

significant amount of lost instructional time. Less obvious, but certainly not less expensive, are the costs associated with responses by police, fire, and related emergency services officials.

Why Bombs?

The Internet can be given the most credit for the growth of bombs on school property. Today's technology has placed formulas for homemade bombs at the fingertips of youth with a few simple computer keystrokes. One search, for example, recorded more than 180,000 Internet sites on explosives ranging from pipe bombs to nuclear devices; one site alone contained more than 130 links to explosive formulas and disruptive techniques.

The ingredients for homemade bombs are as easily accessible as the formulas. Common household products used in homemade bombs include items such as aluminum foil, ammonia, baking soda, cane sugar, cleaning fluid, Epsom salts, and vinegar. Add a bottle, pipe, or other readily available items, and it is easy to see how students now have new tools for creating havoc.

With the formulas and the ingredients readily available, the only missing piece is the motivation. Bombs and bomb threats spark the ultimate safety fears in most educators, requiring a timely response which typically disrupts the educational operation, while giving the offender a sense of power and control. As international and domestic terrorism continue to grow in the broader community, and the tools of fear and destruction in these environments con-

tinue to be bombs, it is not surprising to see the same tools used in our schools.

Teen Bombers and Targets

Although any student may make bomb threats or plant suspicious devices, educators should take caution not to fall prey to stereotypes when attempting to identify potential teen bombers. It is not unusual to find students involved in such activities to have clean discipline and criminal records, above-average grades, and be exceptionally intelligent in science and literate with computers. Unlike other cases, the student who is a chronic discipline problem may not be the prime suspect when investigating bomb offenses.

Likewise, school officials should not limit their expectations of potential problems with bombs to the secondary level. While the offenders may be middle or high school-aged students, it is important to realize that bombs and bomb threats have also been targeted at elementary schools and other sites under school jurisdiction, including on school buses. In fact, there have been several reports of students having homemade bombs on school buses, including one which reportedly exploded as two students attempted to assemble it while the bus was on the way to the school.

Crisis Guideline Considerations

Many schools have a policy on handling bomb threats. Fewer schools have more detailed procedures and guidelines for handling suspicious devices. Bomb threats and suspicious devices should be at the top of the list in school district poli-

cies and crisis preparedness guidelines.

Bomb Threat Checklists. It is important for staff who answer phones to have a bomb threat checklist available near the phone. These checklists, available from the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms or your local law enforcement agency, provide a list of questions to ask callers and characteristics to note regarding the call and the caller. Staff should receive training from security specialists on how to handle threatening calls and other types of crisis situations.

Notification Procedures. Persons taking the threatening call should know whom to notify and do so in a timely manner. Typically, this would be a principal, assistant principal, and/or security official. Procedures should also be in a place to notify law enforcement in a prompt and timely manner, and training should be provided to all staff on how to report bombs and other emergencies to emergency services dispatchers.

Search Procedures. Who conducts the search for suspicious devices — school staff or emergency services personnel? Experts suggest that those most familiar with the property conduct at least a visual search for suspicious devices. Teachers know their classrooms better than anyone else and custodians or administrators are likely to be most familiar with common areas, so it makes sense for these staff to inspect their respective areas visually for unusual items.

Visual inspection, however, does not mean touching, picking up, or moving suspicious items. In our training programs for school personnel, we have numerous examples of everyone from custodians to principals having touched or moved bombs, even when there were warning notes not to do so! Rule number one of dealing with suspicious devices is not to touch or move them.

Securing the Crime Scene. Procedures should also exist for securing the area where a suspicious device is found. No suspicious device should be left unattended once it is located. Guidelines should include steps for insuring that adults secure the area until the arrival of emergency services personnel.

Do We Evacuate? One of the most pressing questions is whether to evacuate the building each time the school receives a bomb threat. 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 every time they do not want to go to class. In fact, it is not uncommon for bomb threats to be phoned into a school's main office by a student calling from a pay phone right in the school hallway!

Unfortunately, there is no black and white line for determining when to evacuate a school. While the obvious and immediate drawback of evacuating each time a threat is received is the tendency to stimulate more threats, the other obvious problem is the risk posed by not evacuating the building and having an actual device explode. Nine of ten bomb threat calls may be unfounded, but do you want to risk receiving number ten and not taking action?

ARE YOU PREPARED?

Is your school prepared for a crisis?

The author of this article, Kenneth S. Trump, has written a practical, cost-effective guide to school security titled *Practical School Security, Basic Guidelines for Safe and Secure Schools*. The 120-page text includes information on identifying security threats, conducting security assessments, strategies for crises, staffing issues, gangs, metal detectors, and computer security.

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Some bomb specialists have noted that the more detailed the bomb threat call and the more follow-up calls received, the more likely it is that there could be an actual bomb. While this may serve as one guide, it is recommended that school administrators meet with law enforcement and emergency services bomb specialists who would respond to a bomb threat or bomb device before an actual incident. The purpose of this meeting should include developing school and/or district-specific procedures for evaluating bomb threat calls, including procedures for evacuating building and grounds.

All threats and suspicious devices should be treated seriously. While questions may exist as to whether to evacuate based only a threatening call, evacuations should take place without question when a suspicious device is found. Although the procedures for handling

such incidents may vary somewhat from school to school, immediately dismissing or ignoring threats is a dangerous move, especially given new trends. All threats and devices must be treated seriously and in a balanced, rational way.

How Do We Evacuate? The question is not only whether you evacuate, but how you evacuate a school. One school administrator noted in a recent conference that he understood that fire codes prohibited him from using the fire alarm for evacuating for anything except an actual fire, while another educator pointed out concerns that his fire alarm system or a public address announcement might actually trigger a bomb if one was on the property. Whether to use fire drill evacuation procedures or have a separate evacuation process for bomb threats is another important issue to discuss with emergency services providers.

To Where Do We Evacuate? Typically, school fire drill plans identify evacuation sites outside the school. But what if there is a need to evacuate an outside area or, for that matter, the entire campus? Steps for relocating students to other schools or sites within the community, including plans for quickly mobilizing mass student transportation, are also issues to include in crisis guidelines.

Recovery. Contingency plans should also be in place for managing an actual explosion and for operational recovery afterward. While nobody wants to think of such a tragedy occurring, reality tells us that it could happen. Considering how to deal with the "crisis after the crisis" is a must in planning.

Risk Reduction Steps

Being prepared for bomb threats and bombs is important, but school officials should also take steps to reduce the risks of such occurrences. These include the following:

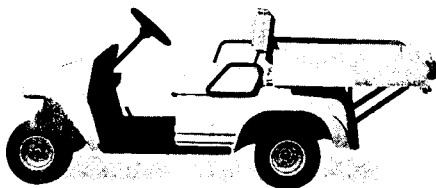
- **Computer Classes:** Have an "acceptable use" policy for school computers, install filters for inappropriate Internet sites, and train technology teachers on current trends in misuse of school technology. Be prepared to get e-mail bomb threats from students at your own school!
- **Science Classes:** Monitor student projects and have the security of your science labs assessed by school security professionals. Chemicals have been stolen from school sci-

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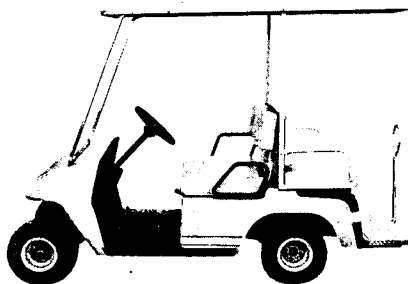
- **Shop Classes:** Train shop teachers on misuse of shop labs for building weapons and other criminal tools.
- **Offices:** Install caller ID, at least on main phone lines, and ensure that staff know how to use features such as call-tracing. Train staff in office safety, phone tips, crisis preparedness, and use of threat checklists.

- **Custodians:** Ensure that your custodians are part of your school crisis teams. Their familiarity with school operations and the likelihood of finding suspicious devices on school grounds should not be overlooked.
- **Pay Phones:** Pay phones should be eliminated, if possible, or turned off except during emergencies or special events.

- **Supervision:** Nothing beats the old-fashioned techniques of order, structure, discipline, and supervision. Staff should be visible throughout the school on a regular basis, especially during periods of high pupil movement. The proper use of technology, such as surveillance cameras, can enhance such supervision, but should not be a substitute for adult visibility and mobility.
- **Vigorous Enforcement:** Review discipline policies and insure that bomb threats and suspicious priorities receive the maximum in terms of consequences. If necessary, develop a procedure for extending the school year calendar if these offenses create ongoing, extended educational disruptions. (This may deter spin-off offenses targeted to stop classes.) Coordinate with law enforcement and, if necessary, legislators to develop enhanced criminal enforcement and penalties for school-related bomb offenses.



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Proactive Security

Bomb threats and suspicious devices are only one issue in a list of crisis preparedness considerations. To reduce security risks, all schools should take steps in at least four areas:

1. **Policies and Procedures:** Have and consistently enforce security-related policies and procedures.
2. **Training:** Train all staff, including support personnel, on security trends and crisis preparedness strategies.
3. **Security Assessments:** Consult with school security and crime prevention specialists to identify physical security and other measures to reduce security risks.
4. **Crisis Preparedness Guidelines:** Have crisis preparedness guidelines, and train and test staff on them.

Today, the question for school administrators is not *if* you might have a crisis, but *when* you will have one and *how* prepared you are to manage it. ▲

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