

Bomb Threat Basics

©2006 Michael Dorn
Executive Director - Safe Havens International Inc.

A few years ago, a rural Georgia school district learned about a flaw in the district's bomb threat protocol. The protocol called for evacuation of students to the same site each time a bomb threat was received. Fortunately, the school and public safety officials in the community had exceptional preventive protocols. The new superintendent had served in a coastal Georgia district several years before when a student accidentally detonated a live military grenade in a band room. Knowing firsthand how serious an incident involving explosives can be, he took seriously a report that a student had made threats to set off a bomb at his middle school. The superintendent had attended training given by the Bibb County Public School Police Department on how to develop a multidisciplinary threat assessment team. When the student made threatening statements to other students, several of them quickly reported him.

By taking the threats seriously and conducting a thorough investigation, school and law enforcement officials recovered drawings of the building showing the locations of relevant security features. They next conducted a home search and recovered a partially constructed hoax device and drawings common to violent extremist groups. During interviews with the student, he admitted that he planned to build a real device, place it in the evacuation area, and call in a bomb threat. The student also admitted that part of his plan was to try to cripple school system computers with several viruses. An independent psychologist who completed a court ordered evaluation felt that the young man was intent on and fully capable of carrying out his plan (had he not been identified through the investigation).

There are three basic options when a bomb threat at a school facility is received:

1 - Ignore the threat It is strongly advised that this approach never be used. It exposes students and staff to increased danger and dramatically increases civil liability for the school district.

2 - Automatically evacuate the school whenever a threat is received This may reassure parents and students, but it will often result in an increase in the number of bomb threat incidents and may increase the danger to students and staff by allowing a bomber to thoroughly pattern the school's response. Dangers to be addressed during evacuation include: devices or secondary devices placed in evacuation areas or along evacuation routes, vehicle bombs (which are typically much more powerful than most devices that have been traditionally placed in schools), and the danger of planned shooters.

3 - Credibility assessment based response protocol This can be developed through a team approach utilizing the guidance of local, state, and federal experts. In this model, a multi-disciplinary team makes a rapid assessment of each threat that is received and a decision is made to evacuate the building while a bomb sweep is conducted or to conduct a search in place without evacuation of the facility. In this model, all threats are evaluated and an appropriate response is selected.

The proper handling of the situation through an effective school, mental health and law enforcement threat management partnership in the mid 1990s was one of many successful uses of this technique and helped establish this concept, which has now spread throughout the United States and other countries. The situation also demonstrates how a somewhat simple yet advanced tactic can exploit bomb threat response plans that are not properly developed. Bomb threat management requires detailed emergency operations plan protocols.

While better reporting may be an influence, the use of explosive devices in the school setting appears to have increased in recent decades. Improvised explosive devices have detonated in Colorado, Missouri, and Georgia on school property as well as in a number of other states. Following incidents like the Columbine and Beslan attacks, a number of other incidents took place

involving real devices, hoax devices, and many U.S. schools were inundated with bomb threats, especially in springtime, when many of these incidents have anniversaries. This copycat behavior should not be surprising. Additionally, real concerns regarding secondary devices – devices designed to kill or injure evacuees and public safety responders - have been used repeatedly in other settings on U.S. soil.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms has received thousands of notifications of juvenile cases involving explosives. Why are so many of our youth experimenting with bombs? One reason is the unprecedented access to bomb making instructions and tactics for the deployment of explosives. Today's terrorist, anarchist, troubled youth, or curiosity seeker can simply browse the internet to learn how to make and use a wide variety of explosive devices. During [tactical site survey](#) training sessions in Indiana and Michigan in recent months, we have been easily able to locate bomb-making materials through computers in school media centers. In one Michigan elementary school, we easily downloaded a manual that was more than 200 pages thick and contained instructions on the manufacture of dozens of weapons ranging from napalm to vehicle bombs. We have found similar information accessible on school computers in many other states, and there is no shortage of propaganda from hate groups who wish to persuade maladjusted students why they should use explosives to make a statement to society.

For those who may be uncomfortable with the web, there is a wide selection of books to choose from. One catalogue lists an incredible number of titles relating to explosives. Texts on bomb making, triggering devices, booby traps, and remote control systems for explosives abound. The ease of learning how to make and use bombs is more disturbing because functional explosives can be made from such a wide variety of easily obtainable materials. A student of average intelligence could build a powerful vehicle bomb if they were motivated to do so.

At the same time, we know that actual bombings of K-12 schools are extremely rare, with less than a dozen actual devices placed on American K-12 schools each year. With more than 55 million students, this makes school bombing incidents relatively rare. Of course, this small number of often ineffective and weak devices also shows that school and public safety officials cannot afford to take bomb threats lightly. We cannot forget the power of the device placed in the cafeteria of Columbine High School, which luckily failed to detonate. According to Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco

Important considerations for bomb threat evacuations:

Distance - Many experts advise that when a decision to evacuate is made, that people be moved at least 1,000 feet from the building if possible. Nails taped to a common pipe bomb can travel at speeds above 3,000 feet per second – a velocity on par with many high powered rifle projectiles.

Shielding – Moving evacuees to a position where a large earth bank, building, or other object will be between the evacuees and the affected facility. This may help to shield evacuees from the effects of a blast.

Go ahead team – A school based team that is trained to move to the selected evacuation site before students are taken to that area. The team scans the area for suspicious persons and/or packages.

Law enforcement response to the evacuation site – Armed law enforcement personnel dispatched to the evacuation site to provide protection from a planned shooter. If officers perform in this capacity whenever there is a bomb threat drill, they can provide a powerful deterrent to those who might consider planning such an attack.

Multiple evacuation sites – As a deterrent to those who might plan to place one or more devices in the evacuation area, schools may select several suitable sites and vary their use from time to time.

Protection of students from vehicles – planning for a safe means to evacuate students across roadways is a must. If the individual site will require evacuees to cross one or more roads, personnel need to be designated to insure their safety.

Concerns of potential vehicle bombs- As the Oklahoma City and World Trade Center Bombings demonstrated, vehicle bombs can be quite powerful. According to the ATF, experiments have shown that even a compact sedan trunk bomb will have a lethal air blast range of 100 feet and a falling glass hazard out to 1,250 feet. Obviously, parking areas can be an unsafe place to congregate students during bomb threats.

Planning for a remote evacuation site – In the case where a detonation actually occurs, a well thought out family reunification process must be worked out in advance. If a suspicious package is found, students and staff may need to be kept out of the building for an extended period of time while bomb technicians render the situation safe. It is often necessary to move students to a remote area when this occurs, particularly during inclement weather.

and Firearms agents, this device could have killed as many as 450 students and staff had it functioned properly.

What can and should schools do? A few key responses can go a long way to help schools decrease the threat level and to reduce the number of bomb threats received:

1. Accept the reality that incidents involving bomb threats, hoax devices, and real devices can occur in any school.

2. Get help from the experts, most importantly those public safety agencies that will actually be involved when incidents occur.

3. Develop and implement preventive measures based on the recommendations of the experts.

4. Be cautious in the selection of for-fee experts for assistance with the development of bomb threat protocols. Hundreds of private consultants will eagerly accept payment to work with schools to develop protocols though they have no formal experience in emergency management, antiterrorism, bomb threat management or related fields.

5. Develop bomb threat protocols for schools, special events, and school buses, and effectively communicate them to **all** staff and area public safety agencies.

6. Develop crisis protocols for situations involving suspicious packages, known devices, and detonation of a device on school property and at off campus sites where school events take place.

7. Distribute plans to **all** staff who have a role in bomb threat/bomb incident management.

8. Train staff on their plan components and responsibilities. Training for search team members is particularly important.

9. Take reasonable steps to secure plan components from students and others who might attempt to use stolen plans in planning attacks (as has already taken place in high schools in Georgia and North Carolina). For example, we would advise not to post teacher flip charts by the classroom door where they can be easily stolen.

10. Keep filters on school computers updated to screen out hate group and bomb making web sites, and constantly check for loopholes.

11. If possible, use weapons detection K-9s to check vehicles, student lockers and public areas.

12. Install call tracing features on school phones and train staff on their use.

13. Prosecute individuals who call in bomb threats and publicize the fact that arrests have been made and will be made in the event of future events.

14. Educate students on the seriousness of calling in bomb threats.

15. Ask prosecutors to seek restitution for actual costs to the school system and to local public safety agencies when violators are arrested. If this support is received, publicize the results.

We should now look closer at each of the following topics:

1. School officials must accept the fact that while incidents involving real explosive devices are still statistically rare in the school environment, they do occur with enough frequency to merit serious consideration. No public or private school in any area of the country can prudently dismiss this reality. While most school bomb incidents involving detonation of actual devices have involved small devices of relatively low power, the device that failed to detonate at Columbine High School clearly demonstrates the potential for a mass casualty bomb incident in the school setting.

2. Experts in the area of explosives should be contacted to see what training and technical assistance is available (for a few examples of some excellent free government resources see the box on the next page). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) is the nation's lead agency for bomb incidents. The BATF has some of the world's best experts in this field on staff and some of the most state of the art information available anywhere on bombs and bomb

incidents. Consider calling on those individuals whose full time capacity is to deal with these matters - the professionals who will be there by your side to assist you if an actual device detonates in one of your buildings. United States Postal Inspectors are responsible for preventing, investigating, and responding to incidents involving packages that are sent through the U.S. mail system. Here again, we find the best in the business – it is their job to be. Don't overlook your state and local law enforcement agencies. In my state, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation goes to the extent of sending its bomb technicians to Israel for training to ensure that they have all available information on their specialty. Experts in explosives who work for public safety organizations tend to be very competent, as their lives depend on it, and they don't have anything to sell you. As a taxpayer, they work for you, and around the nation, you will typically find that they are eager to assist you; particularly when it involves prevention of and advanced preparation for bomb incidents. It is in their interest to work with you ahead of time rather than to come in to clean up a disastrous situation that could have been prevented. While qualified for-profit school safety consultants do exist, there are many consultants who regularly work out of their fields of expertise. As with some other school safety issues, bomb threat management training is a high liability area. Be sure to check a consultant's credentials to make sure not only that they are qualified, but that you can demonstrate their level of qualifications to a jury. Look for specific credentials relating to this issue.

A few free government resources:

- **ADL- The Anti-Defamation League** can provide school administrators with high quality training and/or resource materials relating to hate groups.
National Office phone: (212) 490-2525
- **The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms** is the nation's lead federal law enforcement agency in the area of illegal explosives. ATF personnel can provide free training of the highest quality in many areas of the country. The agency also produces printed materials that are well suited for school staff.
*Arson & Explosives Division (Washington D.C.)
Phone: (202) 927-7930*
- **United States Postal Inspectors** – They have a great deal of knowledge concerning mail bombs, and can provide training & assistance with printed materials focused on prevention efforts and in many areas of the country.
Phone: (800) 654-8896

3. Using the advice obtained from the experts, make each facility a tougher target and document your efforts. Take steps such as making sure that all vacant school lockers are kept securely locked, and evaluate the types, numbers, and locations of waste receptacles and dumpsters in and around your facility. Implementation of a strict [dress code](#), random [weapons screening](#), enhanced natural surveillance, and proper installation of security cameras will increase the chances that a violator will be caught (and more importantly, deterred). Setting a firm tone that any illegal activities relating to bombs or bomb threats will be dealt with swiftly and firmly may have a powerful deterrent value. My experience has been that school systems that make it a clear priority to identify and prosecute those who make bomb threats have far fewer bomb threats than those districts that deal with violators through suspension or expulsion without filing criminal charges. Those districts that choose to notify the media immediately following such arrests often have even better success.

4. Using guidance from local, state, and federal public safety officials, school administrators should develop a thorough and realistic standardized system-wide protocol for the handling of bomb threats. Concerns such as the use of multiple evacuation sites, how the decision to evacuate or not to evacuate will be made, the dangers of secondary (multiple) devices and credibility assessment should be addressed in the protocol. All facilities should be covered by the protocol. Be sure to include emergency management personnel in this process. The safety team at each facility should then develop a specific building procedure detailing site-specific points such

as location of evacuation sites and evacuation routes. The system wide protocol should cover those things that every site must address (such as minimum evacuation distance) and should cover district-wide issues such as incidents involving school buses, athletic events and special events such as graduation ceremonies.

5. The school system should also develop protocols and site procedures to address situations involving suspicious packages, suspected devices, and detonation of an explosive device. If a device detonates in a school where considerable planning has not been made for this situation, a bad situation can become much worse.

6. Search teams should utilize a floor plan diagram of the facility and a marking system using chalk or tape to ensure that each room is checked by an employee familiar with the facility and by the search team if the building is evacuated. If a sweep in place is conducted, the diagram should be used without marking each room with tape or chalk. Many teams use an "X" with the employee who is familiar with the room making half of the letter and the search team completing the letter.

7. Control the use of portable telephones on campus. While the dangers of bombs being detonated have often been exaggerated, there are certain unusual instances where portable electronic devices can be designed to detonate from signals emitting from cellular phones, digital phones and portable school and public safety radios. The much more regular problems stem from students calling in bomb threats from portable phones and students calling parents and the media during bomb threats. We recommend schools develop a policy that prohibits student use of portable electronic communication devices at all times on campus with a special clause that states that school staff and public safety officials can and will seize devices if they are used during an emergency such as a bomb threat. We have seen significant problems result when school officials allow students to use portable phones during bomb threats. In some cases, news helicopters have appeared over schools after students called the media and reported falsely that a device had detonated. We are also familiar with cases where hundreds of parents rushed to school because numerous students have been allowed to freely use portable phones and students have exaggerated the nature of the situation.

By recognizing the reality of the dangers of bombs in the school setting and working with public safety officials, schools can be better prepared to deal with these difficult issues. While actual detonations of explosive devices on school property are still statistically rare, no school is immune to this threat. Ask anyone who has experienced such a tragedy, and they will quickly tell you that it is worth the effort to prepare.

About the author

One of the world's most recognized, most respected and highly credentialed school safety experts, [Michael Dorn](#) has authored and co-authored more than 20 books on school safety, including a short book on bomb threat management for schools published by LRP Publications. Selected by Jane's to serve as their Senior Analyst for Public Safety, Emergency Management and school safety contracts for their offices in nine countries after an international search for the world's top school safety expert, Michael also serves as the Executive Director for Safe Havens International Inc., an IRS approved safety center whose analysts have worked in more than a dozen countries in the past two years.

During his 25 year public safety career, Michael has served as a University police lieutenant, school district police chief, School Safety Specialist for the Georgia Emergency Management Agency – Office of the Governor, and as the State Antiterrorism Planner and Lead Program Manager for the Terrorism Division of the Georgia Office of Homeland Security.

Michael has received extensive antiterrorism training in the United States as well as in Israel and has completed more than 18 months of formal police academy, fire service and emergency management training. A graduate of the prestigious FBI National Academy, Michael holds five advanced certifications through the Georgia Peace Officers Standards and Training Council.

Michael has served as an instructor for the FBI, BATF, FEMA, United States Department of Education, United States Department of Homeland Security, Israel Police and dozens of state departments of education, homeland security, state police and homeland security. Michael has provided his expertise on hundreds of government projects, including the United States Department of Education Expert Working Group for the development of the [“Practical Information on Crisis Planning – A Guide for Schools and Communities”](#) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm’s “Interactive Bomb Threat Management Tool” CD ROM.

Michael’s planning templates, [books, videos and DVDs](#) have shaped and influenced modern school safety with more than 100,000 copies in use in more than 30 countries. His information tools have been utilized by the Indiana School Safety Specialists Academy, the Wisconsin Homeland Security Council, the FBI, United States Secret Service, FEMA, United States Department of Homeland Security, United States Army, United States Navy, United States Air Force, United States Coast Guard, Israel Police, Texas Rangers, TSA, Boys and Girls clubs of America, ATF, Naval War College, Perdue University and thousands of other organizations. Michael Dorn can be contacted at mike@weakfish.org.