Ministry Releases New Bomb Threat Procedures

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Violent school threats, including bomb threats, have escalated in recent years. A study from the U.S. based National School Safety and Security Services found that there had been 812 occurrences in the United States in the first half of 2014, a 153% increase since the previous year.[1] The vast majority of these threats were hoaxes[2] that must be carefully assessed on a case by case basis.

Comparative Canadian data is not available[3] as Statistics Canada does not have a separate category for bomb threats.[4] Nonetheless, bomb threats are becoming a regular feature of the Canadian school experience due in part to the anonymity and the broad platform that social media delivers. The majority of bomb threats are now received over social media[5], and this presents a unique challenge to educators who must decide whether or not to evacuate a school.

In response to the changing landscape of school security the Ministry of Education recently released a new Bomb Threat Protocol.[6] As of September 2016, school boards and local police are expected to have revised their own local protocols to include best practices for bomb threats in each school's Emergency and Crisis Response Plan.[7]

While most of what the policy provides is termed "Effective Practices" arises from the recommendation of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, there are two mandatory requirements.

1. All publicly funded elementary and secondary school boards establish a bomb threat response policy to ensure the development and implementation of individual school plans.
2. Each board must ensure that its staff, students and other partners are aware of their obligations/responsibilities within the individual school plans.

The following are some commonly asked questions about the new policy:

What Is The Role of the Principal in the New Policy?

The principal is responsible for:

- The overall development and content of the individual school plan.
- Inviting police, fire and emergency medical services to participate in the plan development and making them aware of planning and drills.
- Training of staff and students.
- Being completely familiar with the school's bomb threat plan and with the scope of his/her authority vested in and the responsibilities associated with the principal's position as defined in the plan.

During Initial Stages of Bomb Threat:

- The principal will be responsible for initial assessment and related decisions including those regarding visual scans and evacuations.

For Ongoing Incidents:

- Police are responsible for management of the threat and any subsequent criminal investigation.
- The principal will co-operate fully with police and strive to ensure that all staff and students do the same.
- Once the principal has been relocated to a place of safety, he/she should continue to exercise his/her duties to the extent possible, in support of the emergency responders' management of the situation.

What Should the School's Bomb Threat Plan Address?

A non-exhaustive list of factors the plan should include are as follows:

- Determine likely locations in and around school for placement of suspicious packages/devices.
- Provide for controlled access to critical areas of all facilities.
- Consider the use of electronic surveillance or closed-circuit television (CCTV).
- Address ways to ensure that emergency exits are kept clear from obstructions.
- Assess whether interior/exterior and auxiliary lighting is adequate.
- Provide for the regular review of document-safeguarding procedures and inspection of first aid and firefighting equipment.
- Develop an inspection procedure for all incoming packages.

What are Effective Practices if the School Receives a Bomb Threat?

According to the RCMP, most bomb threats made over the telephone are by anonymous callers. Some are received in the mail or by other means, but these methods are rare. In each case, the communication should be taken seriously. School staff in positions that make them most likely to receive bomb threats should be identified in school plans and should receive training in proper procedures.

The person receiving a bomb threat by telephone should try to keep the caller on the line as long as possible and should record precise details of the call, especially the

exact wording of the threat. However, the person should end the call if staying on the line puts them in harm's way or prevents them from initiating response procedures.

What Information Should Be Recorded?

Staff should be trained to record precise information during a bomb threat call, including the following:

- The exact wording of the threat.
- The time and date of the call.
- The phone number or line on which the call was received.
- The caller's number, if shown on call display.
- Whether the caller is male or female and the caller's approximate age.
- The exact location of the explosive device and the time of detonation, if that information is revealed by the caller.
- The type of explosive device and what it looks like (e.g., pipe bomb), if that information is revealed by the caller.
- Any unique speech characteristics of the caller.
- Any background noises (e.g., traffic, music laughter).
- The condition or emotional state of the caller (e.g., whether the caller seems to be intoxicated, excited, angry).
- The caller's name, if that information is revealed by the caller.
- Whether the call taker recognizes the voice of the caller. and
- The time when the caller hangs up.

Following the call, the call taker should immediately "lock-in" the phone number of the received call, if this feature is available through the local telephone provider. It is suggested that the "lock-in" process be posted at all phones that can receive incoming calls.

Who Should Be Notified of a Bomb Threat?

- Once the initial assessment has taken place and decisions have been made regarding a visual scan and/or evacuation, the police must be notified. Initial contact with the police may be made while the principal is conducting the assessment and making decisions.
- Although it is important to provide police with information beyond simply that a bomb threat has been received, initial contact should not be delayed.
- The fire department should also be notified of the bomb threat. A predesignated phone number should be used, rather than 911, which is restricted to emergency calls to the police.
- When notifying the fire department, it is important to clarify that no explosion has occurred and that the police have been informed.

What Information Should Be Given to the Police?

- The information recorded by the person who has received the threat, whether by phone, email, text, social media, or online bulletin board.
- Activities taking place in the school at the time of the threat (e.g., examinations).
- The status of any evacuation that may be underway.
- The status of any safe, visual scan that may be underway.

- The in-school contact person for the police, once they are on the scene.

When Should the School Be Evacuated as Opposed to Conducting a Visual Scan?

Given that bomb threats are often designed to disrupt school exams or daily classes, the guidelines do not prescribe when to conduct a safe visual scan and/or when to evacuate during a bomb threat. However a non-exhaustive list of criteria to consider when making this decision includes:

- The information received from the source of the threat;
- Ongoing activities at the school;
- The location and time of threat; and
- Recent comments made or incidents involving school staff or students.

What Steps Do You Take if a Suspicious Package is Located?

When a suspicious package/device is located, appropriate procedures include the following:

- Isolation/containment of the device/ package, ensuring that it is not touched;
- Immediate communication of the discovery to the principal, the police and the fire department; and
- Immediate re-evaluation of any evacuation decisions in light of the discovery.

What is a Command Post?

A command post is an area within the school that provides a central location from which officials and emergency services can evaluate incidents and control the emergency response.

Normally, the main office will be the primary command post location, with another area within the school identified as an alternate (secondary) command post location. The individual school plan should identify a third off-site command post location, to be used in the event that neither on-site command post location is available.

What Communication Strategies Are Recommended?

- Communication with parents, guardians, and the community in general is important so as to ensure a good understanding of bomb threats and explosive incident procedures, without instilling fear.
- Consider sending a newsletter to each home at the beginning of the school year to inform parents of bomb threat procedures and to encourage parents to reinforce with their children the importance of understanding the procedures and following staff direction.
- Parents need to be informed of where they should proceed in the event of an actual incident. Given the dynamic, complex, and fluid nature of these incidents, communication with parents around the importance of procedures is vital.
- In all incidents resulting in an evacuation that is not a drill, it is recommended that a communication to parents be sent home with each student at the conclusion of the school day or as soon as possible thereafter.

- Parents should be encouraged to ensure that their contact information is kept up-to-date so they can easily be reached by staff in the event of an emergency.

[1] National School Safety and Security Services, " Study finds rapid escalation of violent school threats," (9 February 2015).

[2] Richard Woodbury, "Canadian bomb threats are almost always hoaxes, but still take police time," *CBC News* (25 September 2016).

[3] Evan Dyer, "Closure of RCMP bomb data centre lamented by police,"*CBC News* (13 August 2016).

[4]*Supra* note 2.

[5]*Supra* note 1.

[6] Ministry of Education, "Provincial Model for Local Police/School Board Protocol," (2015).

[7] George Zegarac, Deputy Minister of Education, Memorandum to Directors of Education and District School Boards, "Revised Provincial Model for a Local Police School Board Protocol," (9 September 2015).

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