



School Safety Monthly

January 2016

Dealing with School Threats

5 Tips for Handling Anonymous Threats.....3
Transient Threats vs. Substantive Threats.....5
Arapahoe High School Post-Incident
Review Findings Published.....7



Message from the Editor



In this Edition of School Safety Monthly we discuss how to handle threats in our schools.

In our modern times, the saying "it's a small world" rings with a great deal of truth. We are always tethered to our devices and hence to each other. With the same ease that we "like" or send love via the internet using social media or e-mail, the threats surrounding us are ever more accessible. We may take for granted the information coming to us from these various outlets and not stop to consider the effect of this constant bombardment.

Now, on a more positive note : How is it that in a world where the news coverage on the most recent mass shooting or terrorist attack seems to be on a loop, the vast majority of parents still feel safe sending their children to school every morning? The answer provides us with two key things to remember: 1) Schools are still statistically the safest place to be and 2) It is possible to overcome even the most serious of threats.

Now, back to the reality of everyday chaos! When we receive a threat, or have a concern about a student, how do you decide what threat is credible? Read along as Mike Dorn lays out some tips to use when handling anonymous threats. Then Rod Ellis decodes the difference between transient and substantive threats - a key concept when working with student threat

assessment programs. In this piece, Rod shares a case study that is excerpted from a full length article that will be featured in our next edition of *The Safety Net*, our electronic journal.

We close this issue with a quick overview of the post-incident review we conducted of the Arapahoe High School shooting, which also has specific implications for threat assessment programs.

I would like to close by thanking you for all the work you do in your local community to keep our kids safe and sound. Keep up the good work everyone!

- Rachel



Photo: Rachel Wilson

5 Tips for Addressing Anonymous Threats of School Violence

by Michael Dorn



Anonymous threats against schools have always posed challenges. However, these types of incidents have become far more challenging in recent times. The very real and increased threat of school-related terrorism, combined with the often emotive, inaccurate and alarmist coverage of school shootings, has many people very worried. Modern electronic modes of communication provide many avenues to convey threats and to reach large numbers of people. This has increased opportunities to cause alarm via the internet for those who desire to do so.

There are some strategies that can help school and public safety officials better address these difficult situations:

1. Enhance your ability to quickly discuss a threat with representatives from local police, fire and emergency management agencies. An increasing number of school districts have developed mechanisms to conference via web platforms so key personnel can meet rapidly to discuss and react to situations when they do not have the luxury of time to assemble and meet in person. This approach can also be helpful for large independent schools with multiple campuses. While people tend to focus on law enforcement for these situations, many types of incidents have aspects beyond law enforcement expertise (for example, threats involving hazardous materials). Be sure to include the two additional key public disciplines of

fire service and emergency management (often titled as homeland security) in these discussions. You should also consider public health agencies in the event of a threat of a biological incident. We have seen a few of those types of incidents directed at schools over the years.

2. It is very helpful to see if your local or state emergency management/homeland security agency can develop some tabletop scenarios for several different types of situations and facilitate an activity where key district staff and representatives from area public safety work through each scenario in limited amounts of time. In our experience, this leads to faster and higher quality decisions. While anonymous threat situations will typically still be difficult to address, your team will make better decisions faster if they have had a chance to practice as a team in real-time fashion.

3. We suggest that your team focus not only on the credibility of the threat, but the best tactical responses to the threat. There have been attacks where aggressors have communicated threats that were intentionally designed to appear to be a hoax before carrying out an attack. This type of attack occurred in London many years ago. Terrorists taped their call to the police and then sent the tape to the media after people were killed in a bombing. Poor quality bomb threat protocols made this possible. We still regularly see very outdated response plans for an array

of attack methodologies, especially as we have become so fixated on mass casualty shootings. This may seem basic, but we have seen glaring failures of this type in the attack at the U.S. Capitol, the attack on the El Al ticket counter at the LAX Airport and in many other cases. We have a topical paper on school bomb threat management that was released in 2006 that addresses this topic in more detail. [Download a PDF of the article "Bomb Threat Basics" by clicking here.](#)

4. We also suggest a series of easy to conduct simulations with the personnel who craft your messages to inform parents of danger related to threats. This will typically be done via your emergency notification system (ENS) but should also be coordinated with crafted messages that building level staff can give to parents. Schools and school districts today have excellent means to rapidly push out messages, but often do not take the time to conduct timed drills so the people who craft and send out the messages can do so more effectively and rapidly. This is easy to do and can really improve the quality and speed of getting appropriate messages out to the community should a situation involving a threat occur.

(Continued on next page)



Photo: Rachel Wilson

5. Re-evaluate your plans to make sure that certain key areas are well covered. For example, your plans should have separate and distinct protocols for chemical, biological and radiological incidents. Many schools and districts we have assessed lump these together even though they are actually three very different types of events with significantly different action steps being appropriate for each. Even worse, many schools and districts do not even have protocols for these difficult and potentially deadly situations. Schools should also conduct at least one hazardous materials incident sheltering drill annually. Many schools and districts have gotten so focused on active shooter incidents so much that these and other important protocols have been neglected in recent years.

Taking the time to develop a strategy for addressing anonymous threats of school violence can lead to improved decision-making. The stresses of limited information, resources and time make some of these situations difficult to address under the best of circumstances. Developing and practicing a multi-disciplinary threat evaluation and management approach can prove to be invaluable for these difficult and stressful situations.

For more information on the topics addressed here, see our October 2015 and November 2015 issues of School Safety Monthly:

[October 2015: All Hazards Planning](#)

[November 2015: School Terrorism, Revisited](#)

Michael Dorn serves as the Executive Director of Safe Havens International. Michael has served as a school district police chief, the School Safety Specialist for Georgia's School Safety Project and served as the State Anti-terrorism Planner and Lead Program Manager of the Georgia Office of Homeland Security. Michael was also the recipient of a fellowship from Georgia State University to travel to Israel to learn antiterrorism strategies from the Israel National Police and other government agencies. Michael welcomes reader feedback at www.safehavensinternational.org

Transient Threats vs. Substantive Threats

by Rod Ellis

The following is an excerpt from the full-length paper "Threat Made vs. Threat Posed" by Rod Ellis that will appear in Volume 3, Issue 3 of The Safety Net.

When entering this genre of school safety 8 years ago, little did I know what I was really getting into on a day-to-day basis. I'd imagine that the same is probably true for many of you presently reading this newsletter. Times have certainly changed, and we must change with them. While threat assessment programs have been in place in K-12 schools in some form since at least the early 1990s, recent events such as the Arapahoe High School shooting remind us that we should be constantly seeking ways to improve.

A Transient or Substantive Threat... what's the difference?

In the world of campus threat assessment, I quickly learned that it should definitely be a team effort among campus stakeholders such as Administrators, Counselors, Police Officers, School Nurses, School Psychologists and other school disciplines working in the school environment. In my opinion, it's very critical that the determination of the level of a threat should not be left to one individual to decide. For example, a threat that is likely to be "just talk" is considered "transient" and therefore, unlikely to actually be carried out. These threats are generally vague and lack descriptive language, thus making it more difficult to evaluate them.

Handling Transient Threats

Let's look at an example of a transient threat case. These types of threats may also be termed as "indirect threats". In this scenario, a middle school student we'll call "Don" communicated a threat

verbally. Let's set the stage of this occurrence by imagining a middle school band class during a typical school day. Picture this: Bob, a student, spills coke all over his classmate Don's brand new band instrument in band class. Don is livid. He has cautioned Bob before about his drink spills, yet Bob is still careless and Don blurts out immediately: "Bob (expletive) I have (expletive) told you again and again...I'm going to get my shotgun and shoot your (expletive). Just look at my (expletive) instrument it was brand new and expensive!!" The class, teacher, and needless to say, Bob, are stunned!

Don, who is normally reserved, calms down in a few minutes and remorsefully apologizes to Bob, his other classmates and teacher. Don states that he will take any punishment dealt to him and makes no excuses for his outburst - in other words - he really is sorry for his actions and desires to make it right and move on. He is unarmed and even states that he does not have a weapon, and sits down quietly in the corner of the classroom. This incident occurs just prior to class change. After the teacher notifies the office, the SRO responds along with an Administrator. After a short encounter with Don when they arrive in the classroom, they hold him in the room as students exit and the teacher stops other students from entering. Once the room clears, he is checked by the SRO for weapons. After checking him, they are satisfied he is not armed, and they walk with him to the office, trying to keep this as low-key as possible.

When Don's father is brought in to the school to discuss this further, they advise them that Don will be suspended. The father understands fully the gravity of the situation. Further inquiries are made with the

parent by the SRO (or other threat assessment professional). During this inquiry, it is learned that Don has no weapons in his home, nor does he have easy access to weapons. He only handles a shotgun when hunting with his Uncle. This is only done while under his close supervision. It is also revealed that the Uncle keeps the shotgun under lock and key when not being used, and Don has no access to it at his Uncle's home.

Don reads hunting magazines, yet has not shown an unhealthy fascination with weapons or unjustified violence. He lives with both parents and overall, he enjoys good family support and has no history of behavior trouble. Don walks over to the SRO and the Administrator after being told he is suspended and sticks his hand out and apologizes. He says as he leaves with his mother, saying: "Tell Bob I'm sorry, I don't want to lose our friendship over this."

Although this case should be well documented by the SRO, it would likely be handled administratively with swift and meaningful, yet fair, disciplinary consequences from school Administrators. The SRO, after conducting a brief investigation, will likely decide that this particular threat will not result in an arrest or court referral. This case can likely be disposed of after close review by a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team while Don is on suspension.

This team will review the case reports and ensure that Don's behavior is closely monitored and he gets services that he qualifies for, if his behavior warrants upon his return to school. It is very likely that this is an isolated incident involving Don, and not a pattern of behavior.

(Continued on the Following Page)



Transient Threats vs. Substantive Threats, continued

If Don shows no more outbursts under this close monitoring, this probably will be a bump in the road in Don's school career and he and Bob will be hanging out again soon.

It is also very advisable upon the initial occurrence to ensure that Bob's parent or guardian are notified as soon as possible to let them know what happened. Although you have to be sure and not overstep the boundaries of the much misunderstood Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA), you, as a school official, certainly have the authority to let the other parents know that action is being taken without being over specific about what that action would be. Although you as an Administrator should not give the name of the student, rest assured that with social media being what it is in our world, in the vast majority of cases, they will already know the name of the offending student before you even make contact with them.

Again, it is important to note that any law enforcement action, if warranted, depends on how each state's law applies and if the standard of probable cause can be applied and articulated. Another factor in actions of this nature is also likely to be driven by how the victim's parents perceive the situation. In our scenario, Don's parents have already made contact with Bob's parents and they are O.K. with Don making an apology to Bob and taking his lumps from the school, letting it go at that. Although we'll keep Don "on the radar" for a specified period of time as a threat assessment team, it is most likely that he won't reoffend and we can put this situation in the rear view mirror in the near future.

For more detail on the threat assessment process, as well as a detailed case study of a Substantive Threat, stay tuned for Volume 3 Issue 3 of The Safety Net via our email list.



Photo: Rachel Wilson

The majority of threats you encounter may end up being low level or "transient" threats, which will occur from time to time as part of adolescent behavior. While these threats should still be investigated, they can often be fairly quickly resolved.

About the author:

Chief Rod Ellis serves as the Chief of Police for a School District in Georgia. Rod served as an officer with the Georgia DNR Law Enforcement. He is a Georgia POST Certified Law Enforcement Instructor since 1997.

Chief Ellis has trained in the State of Israel in counter-terrorism; threat assessment; terror threat response; intelligence gathering, and physical protection strategies. He has advanced training in understanding terrorism, as well as pattern matching and recognition of pre-attack behaviors.

Rod served on a panel at the request of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center; COPS Office; and Johns Hopkins University in 2012, 2013 & 2014. While there, Rod represented the nation's K12 schools in regard to the early detection and prevention of mass casualty shooting events.

Chief Ellis recently served on an 12 person team who conducted a post-incident review of a school active shooter incident that occurred in the State of Colorado. He welcomes reader feedback at www.safehavensinternational.org.

Arapahoe High School Post-Incident Reports released

Over the last several months, a team of Safe Havens Analysts have been working diligently on a post-incident review of the shooting that took place at Arapahoe High School in December of 2013. The results of this report have implications for all schools so we encourage you to read our report and consider the findings in context of your own schools.

Here are a few of the key takeaways identified in the report:

- While one student was killed by the attacker, the actions of the SRO, school staff and students likely prevented additional loss of life
- The District had a number of programs, policies and practices in place for security but the incident still took place
- Basic gaps in access control probably contributed to the loss of life in the incident
- There were significant gaps in discipline and threat assessment process that were missed opportunities to prevent the attack - despite having very well developed formal programs in these areas.
- The missed opportunities to prevent the shooting or to reduce the loss of life spanned a number of areas including access control, physical security, staffing policies, emergency planning, crisis response, recovery and training.

The last bullet point is probably the most important of our findings since it is easy to get too focused on threat assessment. The threat assessment process certainly is a focal point of this incident and deserves adequate attention. At the same time, there are a number of other critical areas which must also be discussed. After all, as is noted in the reports and case files, the attacker repeatedly bragged about having deceived the interviewers and counselors he encountered during this process. This means that despite our best threat assessment efforts, we must also be ready to prevent, mitigate and respond to incidents that fall through the cracks.

[To download the Safe Havens report, click here.](#)

POST-INCIDENT REVIEW Arapahoe High School Active-Shooter Incident



A NON-PROFIT SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 27380, Macon GA, 31221-7380

Phone: 478-994-1417

Fax: 404-769-2790

www.safehavensinternational.org

Date Submitted: January 13, 2016



On January 18th, 2016, Littleton Public Schools released to the public three reports that were created based on post-incident reviews of the shooting that took place on the Arapahoe High School campus on December 13th, 2013. The Safe Havens report focused on the gaps in the threat assessment process in the larger context of all-hazards planning while the other two reports looked primarily at the threat assessment portion.

These reports were produced as part of a unique arbitration process that allowed the district to look critically at ways to learn from this incident.

To download the reports, visit:

<http://www.littletonpublicschools.net/district/arbitration-reports>

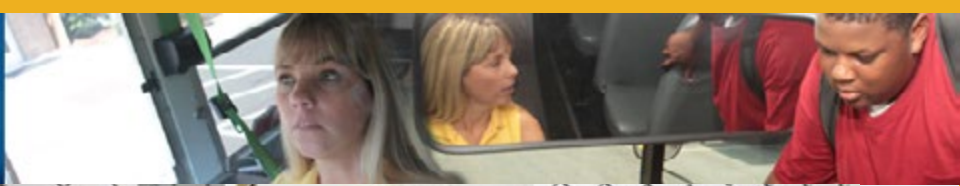


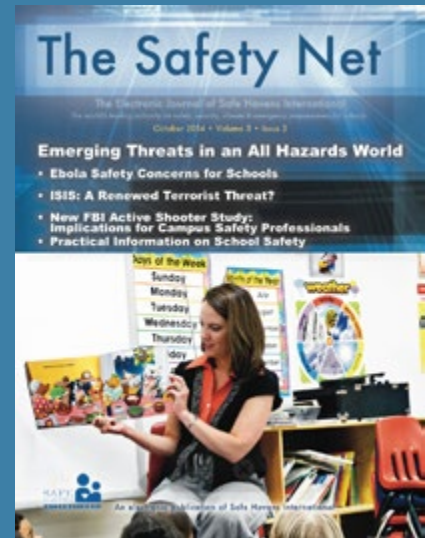
Photo of the Month: Creative Safety Signage!



Photo: Chris Dorn

The Safety Net

In addition to School Safety Monthly, Safe Havens International also publishes an annual electronic journal titled The Safety Net. This is a more in-depth publication that allows for a longer format of articles and a detailed look at topics related to school safety, school security, emergency preparedness for schools, safe school design, building climate, safe school culture and school law enforcement concepts. If you are on the mailing list for School Safety Monthly you will also receive new issues of The Safety Net. If you are not already a subscriber, click here to sign up: <http://www.safehavensinternational.org/newsletter>



School Safety Monthly

- [Chris Dorn](#).....Editor-in-Chief
- Rachel Wilson.....Editor & Art Director
- [Michael Dorn](#).....Executive Director
- Rod Ellis.....Contributor

For submissions or reproduction rights, please visit our website and use the "Contact Us" link:

www.safehavensinternational.org



Want more?

Follow us on social media:

 [Facebook.com/SafeHavensIntl](https://www.facebook.com/SafeHavensIntl)

 [@SafeHavensIntl](https://twitter.com/SafeHavensIntl)

 [Vimeo.com/safehavensintl/](https://www.vimeo.com/safehavensintl/)

 [Youtube.com/SafeHavensIntl](https://www.youtube.com/SafeHavensIntl)

 [Safe Havens International](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Safe-Havens-International)