

**MOUNT PLEASANT COTTAGE SCHOOL UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT****SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES****Introduction**

Recent bomb threats and other acts of violence in schools have increased awareness concerning the importance of response actions and coordination among school officials, law enforcement officials, and local emergency management officials. This guideline provides clarification regarding the roles of educators, staff, and law enforcement officials related to bomb threats in schools. This document should be used as a guide in the development of the section of the building-level school safety plan which addresses bomb threats.

Proper planning and prudent actions are necessary to protect the safety of students and staff. Therefore, it is critically important that school officials have a consistent, unified plan of action to deal with the threat of bombs and explosive materials in schools. Section 155.17 of the Commissioner's Regulations requires schools to maintain school safety plans to ensure the safety and health of children and staff and to ensure the integration and coordination with similar emergency planning at the municipal, county, and State levels. Each plan shall be reviewed by the appropriate school safety team on at least an annual basis, and updated as needed by July 1 in accordance with Commissioner's Regulations. Planning for a bomb threat is clearly an emergency, which must be included within the building-level school safety plan(s).

**School Bomb Threats**

A bomb threat, even if later determined to be a hoax, is a criminal action. No bomb threat should be treated as a hoax when it is first received. The school has an obligation and responsibility to ensure the safety and protection of the students and other occupants upon the receipt of any bomb threat. This obligation must take precedence over a search for a suspect object. Prudent action is dependent upon known information about the bomb threat - location, if any; time of detonation; etc. If the bomb threat is targeted at the school parking lot or the front of the school, building evacuation may not be an appropriate response. If the bomb threat indicates that a bomb is in the school, then building evacuation is necessary unless the building has been previously inspected and secured as described in these guidelines. (see subheading "Sheltering in Sanitized and Cleared Areas" of this regulation)

The decision to evacuate a building or to take shelter is dependent upon information about where the bomb is placed and how much time you have to reach a place of safety. Prudent action dictates that students and other occupants be moved from a place of danger to a place of safety. Routes of egress and evacuation or sheltering areas must be thoroughly searched for suspicious objects before ordering an evacuation. Failure to properly search evacuation routes before an evacuation takes place can expose students and staff to more danger than remaining in place until the search has taken place. Assistance is available from local police agencies and the New York State Police to train staff to check evacuation routes.

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)****Police Notification and Investigation**

A bomb threat to a school is a criminal act, which is within the domain and responsibility of law enforcement officials. Appropriate State, county, and/or local law enforcement agencies must be notified of any bomb threat as soon as possible after the receipt of the threat. Law enforcement officials will contact, as the situation requires, fire and/or county emergency coordinators according to the county emergency plan.

Police agencies, provided they have the proper resources available, may conduct building searches with the permission of the school official responsible for the building. It is not unusual during a bomb threat for police officers, when present, to request volunteer assistance from school employees. People who can be the most helpful in looking for suspicious objects are the school employees themselves. This is due to the fact that employees may be able to quickly recognize objects which do and do not belong in the building. A stranger to the building does not have the advantage of the employee in conducting this type of building search.

It should be noted that the search for something unusual does not involve touching or handling the suspect object. Only specified and highly trained law enforcement officials are authorized to handle the suspect object when located. School officials and/or employees are not trained or authorized to touch, handle, or move any suspected explosive device. Law enforcement officers, upon finding suspicious objects, will call for appropriate bomb technicians.

School officials should be aware that law enforcement agencies generally do not initially send out bomb sniffing dogs and/or trained bomb technicians until a suspect device is located. It should also be noted that bomb-sniffing dogs have a limited time of efficiency so that their use is carefully considered.

**Receiving Threatening Information**

Anyone receiving information about a bomb threat - by way of telephone, written note, or through observing a suspicious object, must immediately notify the school building administrator or his/her designee, as described in the applicable building-level school safety plan(s). School personnel should not try to determine if a telephoned bomb threat or suspicious package or letter is a hoax. School personnel must proceed as if the threat is real. Bombs can be constructed to look like almost anything. Most bombs are homemade and the probability of finding a bomb that looks like a stereotypical bomb is almost nonexistent. Therefore, the administrator or designee is to notify local law enforcement officials and initiate the planned actions to move all occupants out of harm's way. Bomb threat information is **not** to be treated as a hoax and an official search must be conducted.

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)**Written Bomb Threats

If a written bomb threat is received, the handling of the note and its envelope should be kept to an absolute minimum since it will be used as evidence in the criminal investigation. Fingerprints will be taken from the note to help determine its source. If the note is contaminated with the fingerprints of the recipients, the value of this evidence will be significantly compromised.

Mail Bombs/Suspicious Packages

Mail bombs have been contained in letters, books, and parcels of varying sizes, shapes, and colors. The New York State Police and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms have provided the following characteristics and instructions regarding mail bombs.

- 1) Letter bombs may feel rigid, appear uneven or lopsided, or are bulkier than normal.
- 2) The container is irregularly shaped, asymmetrical, and has soft spots and bulges.
- 3) There may be oil stains on the wrapper. The wrapper may emit a peculiar odor.
- 4) The package may be unprofessionally wrapped and be endorsed with phrases such as "Fragile -- Handle with Care", "Rush -- Do Not Delay", "To Be Opened in the Privacy of \_\_\_\_\_", "Prize Enclosed", or "Your Lucky Day is Here."
- 5) There may be cut and paste lettering on the address label.
- 6) The package may have no postage or non-cancelled postage.
- 7) The package may exhibit protruding wires, foil, string, or tape.
- 8) The package may emit a buzzing or ticking noise.
- 9) A suspect letter or package may arrive immediately before or after a telephone call from an unknown person asking if the item was received.

If you suspect a letter or package of being a bomb:

- 1) **Do not open or squeeze** the envelope or package.
- 2) **Do not pull** or release any wire, string, or hook.
- 3) **Do not turn** or shake the letter or package.
- 4) **Do not put** the letter or package in water or near heat.
- 5) **Do not touch** the letter or package, thereby compromising fingerprint evidence.
- 6) **Do move** people away from the suspected envelope or package.
- 7) **Do notify** the State and/or local police, depending on which law enforcement agency covers your geographic area.
- 8) **Do activate your building-level school safety plan(s) for dealing with bombs.**

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)**Telephone Bomb Threats

Handling a telephone bomb threat requires training and preparation for the person answering the call. The bomb threat caller is the best source of information about the bomb. Therefore, it is important to remain calm and try to get as much information as possible about the bomb from the person on the telephone. If possible, the person answering the call should signal co-workers of the threatening call while the call is still in progress. It is also desirable that more than one person listen in on the call.

Persons receiving threatening calls in a school should have a list of emergency agency telephone numbers available, as well as the telephone numbers of school officials to be immediately contacted. Individuals who are likely to be the first to respond to a threatening telephone call should receive training offered by the New York State Police or local law enforcement agencies. The local BOCES Health and Safety Office may be contacted for assistance in coordinating this training.

The New York State Police recommend that, if possible, the telephone threat be taped. Caller identification or other types of tracing devices should also be considered. The *New York State Police Bomb Threat Instruction Card* should be placed next to telephones that are most likely to receive such calls. Information to be asked of the caller includes:

- 1) Where is the bomb located?
- 2) When will the bomb go off?
- 3) What does the bomb look like?
- 4) What kind of explosive is involved?
- 5) Why was the bomb placed?
- 6) What is your name? (Sometimes the caller may be caught off guard and will give you his/her name.)

Other information which should be noted includes: the time of the call; language used by the caller; gender and approximate age of the caller (child or adult); speech characteristics (slow, fast, loud, soft, disguised, intoxicated, accented, etc.); and any noticeable background noises such as music, motors running or street traffic.

**Bomb Threat Response Actions**

The following three (3) actions may be used by school administrators when coping with a bomb threat in a school building. These actions require planning, preparation, and training.

- 1) Evacuation of the building after searching exit routes and evacuation areas;

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)**

- 2) Sheltering students in an area which has been "sanitized and cleared"; and
- 3) Preclearance of the building and maintenance of security to ensure no suspicious objects have been brought into the building by students, visitors, or staff.

**Building Evacuation**

When school officials receive information that a bomb threat has been received and the building has not been precleared and kept secure, the school bomb threat procedures are to be immediately activated. This may or may not warrant immediate building evacuation. If the bomb threat indicates that an explosive has been placed outside the building, sheltering may be the most appropriate course of action. (see subheading "Sheltering in the School -- Potential Explosive Device Outside the Building" of this regulation) If the threat indicates that the device is in the building or is non-descript in nature, building evacuation procedures are to be immediately activated.

The building-level school safety plan(s) for bomb threats should establish a process for determining who will be responsible for performing an initial search of the stairwells, lobby, entrances, exits, and evacuation areas for suspicious objects. The immediate checking of these areas prior to evacuation is necessary so that a safe and expeditious evacuation may proceed. Simultaneously, all school employees should take a quick look around their work areas for any suspicious items. Such school safety plans should make it clear that any suspicious items found must be left alone and must be immediately reported to the school administrator. Under no circumstances are school personnel to touch or move any suspect items.

Based upon information known or not known about a bomb threat, and after it has been determined that reasonably safe passage of students and other occupants can be made to exit the building, an immediate evacuation signal must be given. The building-level school safety plan(s) should identify the type of signal(s) used to denote a building evacuation in case of a bomb threat. Staff, teachers, and students are to be familiar with such signals so they can respond without hesitation or confusion. Local law enforcement officials should be consulted as to options for signals during a bomb threat.

- 1) Persons evacuating the building should remain calm and orderly in order to prevent panic and confusion, which may result in an increased evacuation time, endangering lives, and increasing the chances of injuries occurring.
- 2) The building-level school safety plan(s) shall identify volunteer floor wardens and alternate volunteer floor wardens to ensure an orderly process for clearing each floor, including restrooms. When floor wardens have cleared their areas of responsibility, they should report to the command area in the evacuation assembly area.

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- 3) Elevators are not to be used for evacuation purposes.
- 4) Occupants are to proceed to the designated safe evacuation assembly area. After accounting for all students and staff, the Principal will determine next steps, as the situation requires. Designated evacuation areas should not be located near areas of incoming emergency responders. Open play fields, removed from the activity, are suitable evacuation assembly areas.
- 5) The Superintendent/Principal should designate an easily accessible location and known position as a command post for coordination with emergency responders and receiving information and communications related to the incident.

Evacuation of Students, Staff and Teachers with Disabilities

School safety plans must provide evacuation procedures for all persons with disabilities. Assigned responsibilities and procedures to assist those individuals with disabilities should be identified in the school safety plan(s). Local emergency responders must be familiar with the school's plan for persons with disabilities and the school safety plans as a whole.

Evacuation Areas

Evacuation areas must be identified in the school safety plans. School safety plans should address procedures for informing parents and/or guardians of actions to protect and provide safety for their children. Teachers and staff should know the location of evacuation areas where students will be taken, if necessary, during emergencies until dismissal time and/or parental/guardian pick-up. Students and parents should only be notified of that location, as needed, due to security considerations and confidentiality.

Weather Conditions and Evacuation

The possibility always exists that students, faculty and staff may have to evacuate a school during inclement weather conditions. School safety plans should address procedures for prolonged outdoor exposure. Students must not be permitted to access their lockers to obtain their coats. Therefore, administrators at each school must determine how best to provide temporary shelter should the time outside be prolonged.

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)****Reoccupancy of a School Building**

After a bomb search has been concluded, by or with law enforcement, the school administrator is the person responsible for making the decision to reenter the school building. Unlike fire chiefs during a fire, police officials have no legal authority to declare the building safe for reoccupancy. They will not be able to conclusively state that there is no bomb, only that the search did not reveal any.

Based upon information received from the building search, one of three (3) decisions may be considered by the school administrator:

- 1) Reoccupy the building and resume classes;
- 2) Relocate the building occupants to another facility (sheltering); or
- 3) Activate the plan for early dismissal.

**Sheltering in Sanitized and Cleared Areas**

School administrators have the option of "sanitizing and clearing" an area in the school building, such as a gymnasium, to subsequently shelter students, faculty and staff while a full building search is conducted. This option is most appropriate in the following circumstances:

- 1) An assembly space, such as a gymnasium, is thoroughly searched by volunteer school personnel and law enforcement personnel for suspect objects. This includes searching areas such as bleachers, locker rooms (including lavatory facilities), equipment storage areas, etc.
- 2) Inclement weather conditions are such that a full-scale building evacuation may endanger students, faculty, and staff. Severe cold weather is an example of such a condition.

It is strongly recommended that school officials carefully coordinate this option in cooperation with local law enforcement officials.

**Pre-Clearance and Security Screening in Lieu of Evacuation**

This option may only be implemented prior to the receipt of an actual bomb threat. This option is appropriate when a school reasonably anticipates the receipt of a bomb threat or if there is a particular concern over the possibility of a bomb threat. An example of this may be during the administration of Regents examinations or during other school-wide events, such as dances, homecoming events, etc.

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This option may not be reasonable during other times. If the school administrator chooses to enact the prudent procedures outlined below, and there is reasonable accountability for ensuring the safety of students and other building occupants, then evacuation is not required. This approach may also be particularly helpful in the event of multiple bomb threats or bomb threats directed at all schools in a county, BOCES, or School District.

School administrators who choose this option must ensure that all steps for ensuring the security of the building are followed completely. Local law enforcement officials and the New York State Police are available for consultation in preparing such a plan and for training school staff on screening techniques.

- 1) Staff must be assigned to do a "walk-through" of the buildings and grounds prior to the arrival of students in the morning to assure that there are no suspicious objects in the building.
- 2) Staff who complete the "walk-through" must report findings to the School Principal. Monitors must also be assigned to walk around the outside of the building if State examinations are being administered.
- 3) A single point of entry to each building for students and staff must be established, and monitored by a school official.
- 4) School staff must monitor all exits.
- 5) In the case of State examinations, students must not be admitted to the building for a State examination more than thirty (30) minutes before the start of that examination.
- 6) Students may only be admitted to the building after passing through a checkpoint to ensure that they are bringing with them only lunch/snacks and other preapproved items. This includes items such as inhalers (for medical purposes), pens, pencils, and specific materials appropriate to the exam, such as a calculator or a compass. Student book-bags and knapsacks must be inspected. It may be appropriate to send a notice home prior to the event to clearly state that book-bags will not be permitted for that particular event.
- 7) During State examinations, exam locations are to be clearly marked. Except in those schools where regular interaction is occurring during the exam period, students must be allowed only in the specific areas of the building where the exams are being administered.
- 8) All lockers, including unassigned lockers, must have locks.

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- 9) A reporting procedure must be in effect for sighting any unusual object or behavior.
- 10) Parking adjacent to buildings is not permitted.
- 11) In the event it is necessary to evacuate the building, the steps outlined in the preceding sections must be followed.

In summary, evacuation is not required provided the building and grounds have been "cleared" at the start of the day and continually monitored throughout the day. Please note that if the procedures are not completely and correctly put into effect, then the building must be evacuated to a "sanitized and cleared" area or completely evacuated upon the receipt of a bomb threat.

**State Examinations**

If it is necessary to evacuate the building during State examinations, the students must not be allowed to talk to each other and they must be given extra time when they return to the examination to compensate for the time lost during the evacuation process. School personnel are advised to refer to the section on Emergency Evacuation of a School Building, in the booklet entitled, "Regents Examinations, Regents Competency Tests, and Proficiency Examinations, School Administrator's Manual."

**Sheltering in the School -- Potential Explosive Device Outside the Building**

A bomb threat which indicates that an explosive device is in a car, in the school parking lot, or somewhere else outside of the building, requires that building occupants remain inside the building. Building occupants should be moved to areas within the school which are free of glass, such as gymnasiums and auditoriums. Persons outside the building in parking lots, playgrounds, etc. should be moved further away or to a location that takes students out of harm's way. The New York State Police advise that there be at least one thousand (1,000) feet between individuals and the suspected area of a bomb.

**Preventive Measures Checklist**

Depending upon the needs of a School District, policies, procedures, and informational materials should be developed to discourage the reporting of any incident designed to threaten life and property, such as a bomb threat. Preventive measures may include the following:

- 1) Install a Caller ID System on school telephone lines and/or tape record incoming calls. Arrange to have the local telephone company provide for the immediate tap and trace of a telephoned bomb threat. (Cell phones are traceable.)

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- 2) Install a video camera in places where public telephones are located.
- 3) Make all employees responsible for scanning their areas of work for suspicious objects.
- 4) Establish an immediate reporting system for students and staff to report the presence of "strangers" in the building and/or unusual or suspicious objects.
- 5) Establish a policy whereby all "lost time" due to disruptive hoaxes will be made up.
- 6) To ensure testing integrity, develop contingency plans for bomb scares during times of academic examinations.
- 7) Train all persons in a school who would generally be the first recipient of a telephone bomb threat. Training should include the procedures established by the New York State Police. Law enforcement agencies are a good training source.
- 8) Conduct assembly programs on school safety plan procedures.
- 9) Invite law enforcement personnel to discuss the legal implications of calling in false alarms and bomb threats with students and staff.
- 10) Use trash receptacles of the wire basket type with clear plastic bags as liners.
- 11) Lock unassigned lockers with school locks turned backwards to identify those not occupied by students.
- 12) Lock custodial closets and rooms that are not occupied in order to limit access.
- 13) Keep lobby areas free of trash receptacles (other than wire mesh) and furniture that would allow for placing objects out of view.
- 14) Reconfigure display cases so as to prevent easy placement of explosive devices above or beneath them.
- 15) Place fire extinguishers in recessed areas with extinguishers in glass containers that require breakage to be used.

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- 16) Eliminate parking areas immediately adjacent to the building, except for official school vehicles.
- 17) Have school health and safety committees discuss with the State Police or the local law enforcement agency other measures to ensure the building security.

**School Employee Involvement**

To prepare for school emergencies such as a bomb threat, schools may form teams of volunteers from administration, faculty and staff to assist in looking or sweeping a building or grounds for suspect objects. Volunteer school teams familiar with the building would shorten the time needed to look for suspect items. Prior to an emergency incident, school officials should make certain volunteer personnel are trained and aware of their responsibilities and are willing to carry out such activities. School employees who volunteer or by job duty are assigned to assist should have access to building keys, floor plans, and information about shut-off valves for heat, electricity, and water.

**Reporting Bomb Threats**

School officials must inform parents and guardians as soon as possible of an incident that results in the activation of the applicable school safety plan(s), along with actions taken to protect the safety and well-being of students, staff, and property.

Section 155.17(h) of the Commissioner's Regulations requires that Superintendents not in a Supervisory District are to notify the State Education Department as soon as possible whenever the District-wide school safety plan or building-level school safety plan is activated and results in the closure of a school building in the District. A Superintendent of a school within a Supervisory District is to notify the BOCES District Superintendent as soon as possible whenever such school safety plans are activated and result in the closure of a school building. The BOCES District Superintendent is to notify the State Education Department of all school building closures not related to routine snow emergencies.

**Regulatory Basis for School Bomb Threat Actions**

Section 155.17 of the Commissioner's Regulations requires BOCES and School District Boards of Education to prepare and annually update the school safety plans as enumerated in law and Commissioner's Regulations to ensure the safety and health of children and staff, and to ensure integration and coordination with local, county, and State emergency plans. This Plan further requires annual instruction and drills to ensure its effectiveness. In updating the school safety plans, conducting drills and training, and providing education and notification, the following issues should be considered:

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)**

- 1) Formulating guidelines specifying how students and employees are to leave the school premises during an emergency.
- 2) Formulating guidelines regarding how to provide security for school premises during an emergency (i.e., public access, emergency responders, etc.).
- 3) Media intervention guidelines.
- 4) Communication procedures and access of details.

School emergencies have an impact on many people and other community operations. School administrators must cooperate and coordinate plans with their local and county emergency coordinators to ensure that the school safety plans are congruent with local and county plans and procedures. Issues of mutual concern might include:

- 1) Traffic routing for emergency vehicles;
- 2) Emergency area perimeter security;
- 3) Parents or guardians rushing to school; and
- 4) Telephone and communication overload.

Case law under liability and negligence has established that a Board of Education has the duty to exercise due care toward its students, as would a reasonable, prudent parent under comparable circumstance [Mirand vs. City of New York, 84 NY2d 44 (1994)]. Based upon Duty of Reasonable Care, a District's responsibility begins when a child is picked up and ends when a child is dropped off.

Section 807 of the Education Law\* imposes a duty on the "Principal or other person in charge of the school" to instruct and train the students by means of drills so that they may, in a sudden emergency, be able to leave the school building in the shortest time possible without confusion or panic. An Attorney General's opinion declares a bomb threat as a potential emergency.

\*Section 807 is headed "Fire Drills" but the section itself speaks to emergencies, not fires. A section heading does not restrict broader language contained in the body of the section. [People v. Long Island R.R. Co., 194 NY 130 (1909)]

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**SUBJECT: BOMB THREAT RESPONSE GUIDELINES (Cont'd.)****Criminal Penalties: False Reporting of Emergencies**

Schools need to educate the entire school community about the seriousness and penalties of reporting a false bomb threat. Information should be disseminated informing students and employees that the mere reporting of a false bomb threat is a crime that may result in imprisonment and/or civil penalties being imposed against the individual. When a person reports a false bomb threat on school grounds, they commit a crime that is punishable by up to seven (7) years imprisonment and a fine of up to five thousand dollars (\$5,000). (Falsely Reporting an Incident in the First Degree: Section 240.60 subsection 5 of the New York State Penal Law: Class "D" Violent Felony).

Recently, laws dealing with this issue have been expanded to include instances where someone places a device fashioned to resemble or contain a bomb on school grounds, when in fact it is an inoperative facsimile or imitation. In these circumstances, a person would also be guilty of a crime punishable by up to seven (7) years imprisonment and a fine of up to five thousand dollars (\$5,000). (Placing a False Bomb in the First Degree: Section 240.62 of the New York State Penal Law: Class "D" Violent Felony).