

LIGHTING THE FUSE ON

FEAR

SCHOOLS REACT, REFLECT ON RECENT BOMB THREATS

STAFF PHOTO BY RYAN MARSHALL

Ocean City Elementary students were evacuated after a bomb threat was called into Worcester County Schools on Friday, January 15.

JON BLEIWEIS JBLEIWEIS@DMG.GANNETT.COM

From Jan. 11-20, there was just one school day on Delmarva in which a local school did not receive a bomb threat.

The threats have given administrators a pop quiz on how to respond and react. Procedures and protocol have been tested on the spot daily.

The calls are made. Law enforcement rushes to the scene. Evacuations take place, in some cases. Nonetheless, the typically calm trials and tribulations of the school day are interrupted.

When an incident ends and students and staff

return to the schools — all of the recent threats have been deemed not credible — it's time to evaluate and think about what's next.

"It's extremely disruptive," said Mark Steele, assistant superintendent of the Indian River School District, which received bomb threats at four of its schools since Jan. 11. "It's kind of got people on edge."

Since the bomb threats started, some parents have voiced concerns about communication.

Rainy Hamrock, the mother of a Stephen Decatur High School student and two Showell Elementary School students, said while schools

have handled the situations well, there is a communication breakdown.

"I think we need a little bit more as far as what we're being told," she said. "If there's sensitive information, you can't disclose everything. But I think the biggest problem right now is the information that is being spread among the students. Because of that and we're getting so much mixed information, it becomes really difficult."

Worcester County Public Schools Superintendent Jerry Wilson said he wishes there was more

See **FEAR**, Page 2A

"It's obviously concerning and it's a shame because it does disrupt what students are there to do and what we're there to do."

ROBERT FULTON,
CAPE HENLOPEN SUPERINTENDENT

COVER STORY



STAFF PHOTOS BY RYAN MARSHALL

Ocean City Elementary students were evacuated after a bomb threat was called into Worcester County Schools on Friday, Jan. 15.

Fear

Continued from Page 1A

to tell the community.

"We'd like to have more information," he said during his scheduled remarks at the Worcester County Board of Education meeting Jan. 19. "Candidly, there isn't much information to give."

Lessons learned

In the Indian River School District, each school has an armed security monitor on duty at all times, while some of its secondary schools have a school resource officer on site. Since the threats started, additional daily security measures have been implemented.

The events have served as a test of the district's safety and security protocol, which has been four years in the making.

"Bricks and mortar, an armed safety monitor and an almost immediate response time, I think the kids are just as safe as they could be in that building," Steele said, adding he was pleased with how staff and the community have reacted and reached out to help.

"The actions of our administrators and our staff at the schools and the kids is phenomenal," Steele said. "People know what they're supposed to do."

But the incidents don't come without lessons. After the first threat, which happened Jan. 11 at Indian River High School, nearly 900 students were evacuated to John M. Clayton Elementary School, about half a mile away.

"We were so focused on getting kids out to JMC, one thing we didn't do was ... alerted JMC parents to let them know that's what we were doing," Steele said. "That's something we learned."

If Steve Price has learned one thing, it's to expect the unexpected.

Price, the safety director for Worcester County Public Schools, describes the last two weeks of school as challenging. His school system has been the target of bomb threats for four school days since Jan. 11, including one on Jan. 15 in which all 14 schools were targeted.

"Things went probably as well as could be expected on Friday and even earlier in the week," he said during a Jan. 19 interview. "But I think it gave us the opportunity to look at what we had in place."

While all schools in the Worcester County Public Schools system have individual emergency plans, there is no plan set in case all of its 14 schools need to

evacuate at the same time, which was the case Jan. 15.

Many of the individual school emergency plans involve evacuating to a building within the school system, Price said.

Worcester administrators have been asked to reach out to community partners for alternate evacuation sites, in case other schools are not available, he said.

Ocean City offered buses to help with transporting students Jan. 15, but it was not needed, Price said, adding a formal agreement is possible in the future.

The Cape Henlopen School District received threats at Beacon Middle School in Lewes on Jan. 12 and Rehoboth Elementary School on Jan. 19. At Beacon, students left the building and stayed on site. In Rehoboth, students were escorted to the Rehoboth Fire Hall until the building was searched, as to not keep students waiting outside in cold weather, according to Superintendent Robert Fulton.

Fulton said the situations went as well as they could have, as far as execution.

"It's obviously concerning and it's a shame because it does disrupt what students are there to do and what we're there to do," he said.

Parental concerns

Fulton credited parents for handling the situations well, despite their concerns, in order to maintain order and safety. Administrators on the school and district level are evaluating plans but he does not anticipate any major changes taking place, as far as protocol.

"The fact that there are bomb threats in the school doesn't mean they're unsafe," he said. "We do the best we can to assure parents we have plans in place and we keep the students and their safety in the forefront."

Eric Mitchell is the father of two students, one at Ocean City Elementary School and one at Stephen Decatur Middle School. He was one of many parents in Worcester County who held his children from attending school because of the recent threats. He did so on Jan. 19 and 20, but planned to send his students to school on Jan. 21, if school — which was closed to due to weather — had been in session.

"I just can't keep them at home all the time," he said. "I have to trust the school. I have to trust they're going to be alright."

At Indian River, Steele has seen few requests to hold students back, while at Cape, Fulton said he has seen no



Ocean City Elementary students wait outside the school after the Jan. 15 bomb threat.



Ocean City Elementary was just one of many Delmarva schools to recently be impacted by bomb threats.

requests.

Worcester County Public Schools spokeswoman Carrie Sterrs said central administration will provide guidance to principals on how to handle any extended absences. Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, she said.

One concern of Mitchell's is the idea of not having alternative evacuation plans at each school, so as not to be predictable. Another is a lack of training for teachers on how to handle situations.

"Teachers are not trained for this type of situation as far as what to do and how to deal with it," he said. "They're trained to teach."

Worcester Assistant Superintendent Louis Taylor said the school system is working on alternative strategies.

"We're going to do everything possible to alleviate those anxieties and fears," he said. "It's a priority every single day for us."

Wilson gave kudos to school administrators and first responders for how they have handled what he called "a very difficult situation."

"We've done what we can to keep our students safe," he said. "That's what we do in Worcester County."

On Twitter @JonBleiweis and Facebook at Facebook.com/byjonbleiweis