Is Your School Prepared for a Bomb Threat and Evacuation?

There has been a growing threat of violence and evacuations in international schools around the world. Schools should be a safe haven, a place where children can learn without parents worrying about their safety. English and French schools around the world are most commonly the victims of hoax bomb threats.

“I'd say that international schools are often targets of threats, of all sorts, because of their relatively high profile within the community due to the makeup of the student body and parents,” says Bruce T. Mills, CPP and managing director for Clearpath EPM, which handles risk mitigation for schools worldwide. He adds that that makeup generally includes children of diplomats and people who work at international corporations, as well as children of political leaders and affluent people from the country.

“Persons making threats for whatever reasons, seek a response, and that is almost always guaranteed to come from international schools,” Mills says. “People believe that any threat made to these schools will generally be taken seriously and may often lead to press coverage in local and international media.”

Threats are being made to schools throughout the world, in Japan, Europe, Australia, and the United States. Actually bombs, or evidence of an explosive device, are rarely, if ever, found during these threats made to international schools. Furthermore, the people who make the calls are rarely caught, so determining the motivation behind the threats is difficult. They could be simple pranks, but in 2014, an ISIS online forum ran a post saying that teachers at International Schools are easy prey.

On Jan. 19, 2016, three British International Schools in three different countries (Sweden, Norway and Hungary) received bomb threats, nearly simultaneously. All three schools were evacuated and nothing suspicious was found at any of them. No evidence connecting the three threats was discovered.

- About 250 students and teachers were evacuated from the British International School of Stockholm in Sweden. Students were taken to houses in the area and a nearby gymnasium. The school educates kids from more than 45 countries, ages 3 to 13. After the school was evacuated, authorities conducted a search, and no bomb was discovered. Students were allowed to enter the building to retrieve their belongings, and were sent home. Classes resumed the next day.

- The British International School of Stavanger in Norway received a bomb threat on the same day. Kids from that school range from ages 2 to 16 and come from more than 40 countries. Similarly to the school in Sweden, students were taken to houses in the area, and a nearby school. The same school had another bomb threat a week later. Again students were safely evacuated and nothing suspicious was found.
The British International School in Obuda Hungary received a threat that day a well, its second in a month. Students were sent home, and nothing suspicious was found.

**Geneva** - In February 2016, a campus of the International School of Geneva, La Grande Boissière was evacuated after an anonymous bomb threat. The call was made as students arrived for school, and police evacuated the building, conducted a search for explosives and found nothing. Students were allowed back into the school by 9:45 a.m.

**Australia** - Schools in Australia have been dealing with daily threats being made in late January into February 2016. Dozens of schools across the country were evacuated on a daily basis. A hacking group called Evacuation Squad claimed it was responsible for many of the attacks, but also said some were done by copycats. The group claimed the threats were in protest of Australia being an ally of the United States and Britain. Prior to the group taking responsibility, police in Australia were on record saying they thought the threats were the work of hackers, not terrorists. No one was hurt during any of the threats and ensuing evacuations.

**United States** - Bomb threats at schools in the United States have been rampant. On Jan. 19, 2016 a school in Maine received a hoax bomb threat, and a call was made to an elementary school in Delaware claiming the caller was on the roof the school, was armed, and threatened to harm students and staff. Bomb and shooting threats were made to more than two-dozen schools in New Jersey that day.

In the fall of 2015, Ohio schools received threats, leading to the involvement of the Department of Homeland Security. December of last year saw a shutdown of 900 schools in Los Angeles as a result of threats. According to a report by “Mother Jones,” there is no comprehensive national data on school threats, and it’s not known if threats are on the rise, or if there is more coverage of threats because there is more media, and gun violence in schools, and elsewhere, has been a major issue in the U.S., so it’s getting more coverage.

**Tokyo** - In late January 2016, a bomb threat led to the evacuation of the International School in Tokyo’s Shibuya Ward. About 800 students and staff members were evacuated from the school, and from nearby buildings. No device was found. The caller making the threat was male, and spoke in a language other than Japanese. That evening, parents received a call from the school saying classes would resume the next day.

**How to Protect an International School**

International Schools have a reputation for instilling security measures that go well above what is found at typical. Here are some security measures that are often taken:
**Have a Plan** - You need to have a plan in place in the event of a threat. Teachers and other staff members need to know how to evacuate the school quickly and efficiently. Have a planned location (or locations) to bring students to.

Be sure to have contact information for parents. Once school is evacuated, word is sure to spread, so getting a message out to parents is vital so that you can inform as to what’s going on. A recorded message with a detailed explanation of what happened, and an updated status, will inform all parents at once.

**Train Your Staff** - One of the most important rules in regard to bomb threats made at international schools is to treat all threats seriously. If the bomb threat is made by phone, the person taking the call may be convinced it’s a prank, but should still act as if the threat is real. Furthermore, there are times of the year when such pranks are fairly common, especially when colleges are on break. That shouldn’t be considered when responding to a threat.

Teachers should be trained on how to keep students calm during an emergency, and administrative staff needs to know how to handle threatening phone calls and emails. For phone calls, training includes how to talk to the person making the threat, how to answer their questions, and how to keep them on the phone long enough for the call to be traced.

**Traffic Control** - Entrance and exit points at international schools are often limited, and security monitors people walking into, or driving to the school, all day long. The use of a closed-circuit video surveillance system also is helpful.

Mills notes that international schools should focus on having comprehensive and consistent “access control policies, practices and procedures” in place to ensure that each and every person who gains access to school campuses is permitted, known and to the extent possible, vetted.

“This is accomplished through a combination of physical and technical security devices and installations and complemented by consistent security practices by the entire school community,” he says. “Maintaining positive control of your campus environment mitigates against many threats, to include the threat of an explosive device being placed on/in your campus. To be most successful, access control measures should be supplemented with emergency protocols for the most likely scenarios and a regular regimen of campus wide training and drills.”

**Re-opening School** - Circumstances will vary from incident to incident, but you should have a general idea of how you want to approach a return to school. In the event of a false alarm, it’s common practice to send kids home and not resume classes on the day a threat is made. Students and staff members will need to calm down after the threat, and chances are classes won’t be productive if you try to jump into school mode as soon as the threat has been investigated.
Follow up - For many students, a return to school won’t mean the end of the effects of the bomb threat. Teachers should be on the lookout for students who are behaving differently after a threat is made. On the first day back at school, consider having counselors on campus who can speak with students who want to talk.

Have the Right Coverage – Find an insurance provider that specializes in protecting international schools and coverage for students, teachers, and staff. Insurance plans should provide coverage against evacuations, terrorist attacks with political violence extension and general liability.

Smita Bhargava, Vice President of Programs & Special Risks at Clements Worldwide, says “Bomb threats against international schools are not a new phenomenon. One of the biggest issues here is that bombs are considered a political violence event and many schools do not still get that extension. If they do, it is for property (still a minority) but not general liability. You would need the extension for general liability because if your school got sued because of an injured child that would be a general liability issue but would not be covered. Schools need to start understanding the criticality of investment in this coverage.”

By providing more than 200 international schools and universities with insurance, Clements Worldwide provides flexible insurance programs. Our plans protect students, teachers, and staff by providing coverage against evacuations, terrorist attacks, kidnappings, in addition to group health insurance plans. As a partner in risk mitigation, Clements can create a customized insurance plan for your international school that will help to keep your staff and students safe.