

# **Terrorism – How should our schools prepare for this threat?**

**by Bill Dolphin, M.A.**

Throughout the Middle East and in other parts of the world, schools have been the focus of terrorist activity in the past. Although we are not currently aware of specific threats against schools in the United States, intuitively, we believe that circumstances warrant that school administrators and their security personnel adopt a heightened state of awareness. Purely from a terrorist's perspective, there would be no more effective way to crush the heart of America than to target our children where they should be the most safe.

Without doubt, school administrators and security officials are examining their emergency preparedness and response plans for holes. If not, they should be. Minimally, written plans should be reviewed for adequacy and updated where necessary. All persons who play a key role in the plan should be refreshed on the nature of their roles and on the specific expectations their roles place on them. This, to be well prepared to react to a crisis should one occur, or, to an impending crises should an alert come.

What, however, can school officials do to be proactive? What can be done to detect signs of trouble early on, or, to potentially avert a crisis? Following are some precautions that school administrators should consider.

## **1) Review your employment screening policy & procedures (Personnel).**

- Make sure that your screening process includes volunteers; cafeteria workers; maintenance workers; mechanics; bus drivers; and security – in addition to educational staff.
- Your screening procedures should allow for actual courthouse searches rather than criminal "database" searches, which are generally not current. An exception to this might include sexual crimes database searches, which should be conducted in addition to courthouse, but not instead of.
- Have your background screening agency conduct Social Security Number searches on applicants to help determine where criminal court searches need to be done.
- Make sure that outside contractors screen their employees using industry standard procedures, or, that your school district screens contract workers who visit your schools regularly. Contract agencies should be forthcoming in telling you what procedures they use to screen their employees.

- Know and follow INS regulations for verifying employment eligibility. Legal requirements and sample documents may be downloaded through the INS Web-site at [www.ins.usdoj.gov](http://www.ins.usdoj.gov). If you need further support call your local INS office or the INS National Customer Service Center at 202-514-2000. Be alert for falsified documents.
- Check the Social Security Number and date of birth of all newly hired employees through the Social Security Administration. This is a free service available to employers on a post-hire basis and will help identify employees who have falsified documentation.

**2) Review the physical security of school bus yards and garages; review transportation security in general (Transportation, Maintenance & Security).**

- Are vehicle garages alarmed, and are alarm systems working? Test signals to central station or police.
- Are fenced in areas gated, locked, and well illuminated at night?
- Make sure that drivers do a "pilots inspection" of their vehicles before placing them into service each day, and, again after each time the vehicle has been left idle and unattended. This inspection should include the vehicle's interior and undercarriage. Drivers should be trained to know what to look for and what action to take if something suspicious is found. Your local police can assist with this training.
- Make certain that bus drivers are equipped with two way radios or cell phones.
- Train school bus drivers to be aware of and to report suspicious vehicles that appear to be following their busses during their routs.
- Keep a student roster for each bus route, to include student name, parental contact number, address, and medical authorization information.

**3) Review the adequacy of physical security in and around campus buildings (Maintenance & Security).**

- Make sure alarm systems have been tested recently. Conduct a walk through with your alarm service provider to make sure that all detection devices are working properly. This should include main campus buildings as well as maintenance and storage facilities.
- Review the adequacy of key control for each campus building.
- Make sure that exterior lighting is working and that illumination is adequate.
- Make sure that interior (night lighting) is working and that illumination is adequate.

#### **4) Review access control procedures and heighten employee awareness (everyone).**

- Make sure that educational staff and other key employees are aware of doors that must remain locked from the outside during the day, and that everyone is trained to check these doors periodically. In addition, specific individuals should be assigned to check these doors throughout the day.
- Train all staff members to approach and to "assist" strangers of any age who are observed in and on school property. Report people who have difficulty explaining their presence.
- Implement a visitor ID log and badge system, if one is not already in place.

#### **5) Train staff to report suspicious activity on or about school property (everyone).**

- Be alert for strangers taking pictures of or filming campus activities. Question their intent and report those who have no authorization to do so.
- Be alert for suspicious vehicles that seem to have no apparent purpose for being on campus, or, that arrive, leave, and then reappear with no apparent purpose.
- Assign specific individuals to inspect the perimeter of campus buildings throughout the day, but train everyone to be alert.
- Report unattended packages or vehicles near building perimeters. Have a set plan to handle suspicious parcels or activities.
- Train everyone to report unattended or otherwise suspicious packages found anywhere on campus. Place this specific issue on routine checklists for janitorial and maintenance personnel. Train personnel what to do if a suspicious package or item is found.
- 6) Implement a tip-line program that allows users to report concerns anonymously, if they choose.
- Communicate a "no-joke" verbal threat policy. Within this context, let all members of the school community know that any threat, or information about a potential threat must be taken seriously and must be reported.
- 7) Work closely with the local law enforcement (Security & Administration).
- Local law enforcement agencies receive information and special bulletins from the Federal Bureau of Investigation that could potentially cause heightened states of alert. Develop a constructive relationship with local law enforcement agencies that supports the flow of the type of information you need to be placed on proper alert, when appropriate.

## 8) Train mailroom and other key personnel to recognize suspicious packages.

- Your county police, local police, or your Postal Inspector will be able to provide you with the basic awareness materials necessary to train your staff to know when a package should be considered suspicious. Or, visit the FBI Web-site at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov), and download the current FBI Advisory on suspicious letters and packages. It is General Information Bulletin 2000-3. The link to the document is located at the bottom of the first page of the Web-site and you will need Adobe Acrobat Reader to view the document. If you do not already have Reader, it can be downloaded from within the FBI web-site. The document is a full-color awareness poster suitable for posting in mailrooms or other areas where incoming mail is handled.
- Look for: mail without return addresses, or with return addresses from foreign locations from which you typically do not receive mail; mail with restricted delivery instructions ("Personal", "Confidential"); addresses with misspelled words; mail addressed to someone's title only (such as "Chairman"); mail that has the wrong title for the name it is addressed to; mail with way too much postage applied, typically stamps; mail having a strange odor coming from the letter or package; mail with oily stains, discoloration, crystallization, or other strange substances on the wrapper; mail with excessive taping or string; mail with protruding wires; and, mail that is lopsided or uneven in appearance.
- When a threat is identified: If school administration has reason to believe that the suspicious package contains a bomb, evacuate immediately and call 911. If you suspect that the package contains a biological or chemical hazard, isolate the package, do not handle it, call 911, and wash you hands with soap and warm water.

These recommendations are not intended to represent or to replace a comprehensive safe school program. Such programs include much more. Many of these procedures are routine in districts with full-time security operations. Even where this is the case, these recommendations can be used as a vehicle to build an increased level of awareness at a time when it is needed most. In school districts without full-time security operations, or in those having minimal security resources, these recommendations may be used as a focal point around which to build an appropriately renewed sense of awareness.

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