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# School security: Districts work to ensure safety in emergencies

## Districts work to ensure safety in emergencies

By CATHERINE BAUM  
Staff Writer

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Last Oct. 25, a suspicious package with a note saying it was a bomb delayed classes at the University of Massachusetts for hours and closed Mark's Meadow Elementary School in Amherst for the day.

Authorities later announced that a student had designed the empty 30-pack of beer to look like a bomb in a misguided interpretation of an assignment for a class on terrorism.

On the bright side, Amherst school officials were pleased with the school system's response to the incident. "It was a good test for us," then-superintendent Jere I. Hochman told the Gazette. "All the calls went out, and I think people got the message."

For David Slovin, the student services administrator for the schools who coordinates security for the district, it was a confirmation that the district's ongoing planning and preparations in the event of emergency are working.

Slovin works with the Amherst and UMass police and fire departments to ensure that the district has protocols in place to respond to emergencies ranging from a death on campus, a wild animal or intruder in a building or an explosion in a nearby laboratory.

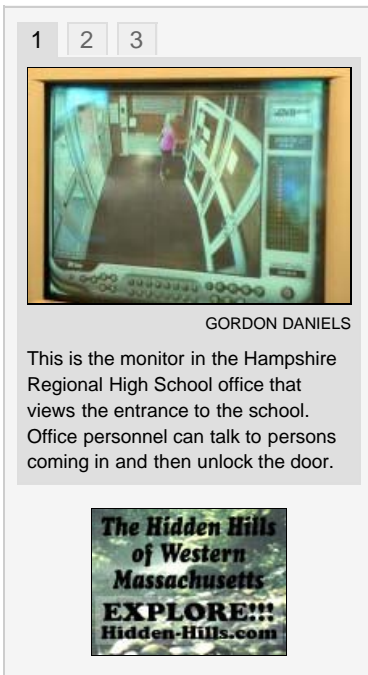
They hold what they term tabletop exercises, in which participants, including administrators, staff and public safety personnel react in real time to an emergency scenario.

Northampton public schools staff hold tabletop exercises several times a year in school buildings and as a district, discussing how they would deal with a given situation and running small-scale scenarios in crisis teams, said Karen Jarvis-Vance, director of health services. Parents and students are not currently a part of the exercises, but may be in the future, she noted.

Hampshire Regional schools are considering the feasibility of holding tabletop exercises this year, according to Hampshire Regional High School's assistant principal, Maureen Porter-Ecclestone.

Tabletop exercises are hypothetical examples that test the "nuts and bolts" of emergency plans, according to Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, an independent, non-product-affiliated national consulting firm that specializes in K-12 school security.

"It's the nuts-and-bolts details that will make you or break you, and oftentimes we still find a lot of



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gaps," Trump said by phone from Cleveland.

### **Advance planning**

The need to fill those gaps is greater than ever, according to Trump, as K-12 schools are more than just classrooms; they are community centers. High schools are typically used from morning to night, six to seven days a week, presenting a challenge for officials who want to establish basic security measures but who also want to provide a welcoming environment for student, teacher and community involvement. "It's a tough balance," Trump said.

"The reality is today's school administrators need to take an all-hazards approach to school emergency planning, from bullying to natural disasters to school shooting or even an act of terrorism," Trump said. "The threat continuum has continued to grow wider and wider, and the level of preparedness for a school and members of the school community has to be expansive and grow with that continuum of threats - you do that through planning."

But planning with all the players - schools, fire and police departments- presents a challenge in some school districts.

"Security in schools really needs to be some sort of collective decision about what level you need to be at and then unanimous decisions that everyone needs to participate," said David Pomerantz, director of central services in Northampton.

"There is sometimes a gap between understanding that there is a need and getting everybody to agree that these are the program perimeters," said Pomerantz.

Some rural school districts find location and lack of resources limiting to emergency response planning. The Fire Department and Police Department in Westhampton are part-time, making it difficult for schools to devote a lot of time to planning, said Hampshire Regional's Porter-Ecclestone.

"We're rural, we're not close to hospitals," Porter-Ecclestone added. She noted there is a lack of funding from the government for emergency planning, which, Trump said, is a problem throughout the country.

"Grants and overall funding have become increasingly tighter, and the enormous amount of pressure to improve test scores has taken away from the time and effort in emergency planning and staff training," Trump said.

Meanwhile, Hampshire Regional High School held its first emergency evacuation and relocation drill in April, following the Southampton William E. Norris School's offsite evacuation drill last school year. Both drills went smoothly, according to officials, who get together to critique the plan after each drill.

"There's a lot of logistics that go into this," said Kimberly Florek, technology director at HRHS. The challenge, she said, is "making sure that you've thought of everything and knowing that you may not be able to account for every situation."

In Amherst, Slovin credits Hochman with making emergency planning a priority four years ago and for introducing the PRISM conceptual model in thinking about security. An acronym, PRISM stands for planning and preparation, response, intervention, student support and monitoring.

In keeping with its principles, administrators have developed crisis-response teams and a checklist for safety. Every year they conduct safety walks with police, fire and school maintenance personnel. There are crisis-response cards in every classroom, describing what to do, whom to contact and how to lock down or evacuate the school, for instance, so people can respond appropriately to situations.

"We're having conversations that we would not have had four years ago. People have a greater understanding of the significance of emergency planning," Slovin said. "There is a real collegiality around it. People support each other, which I think is critical."

ConnectEd, the telephone alert system that Hampshire Regional, Easthampton and Amherst schools have in place, is key in keeping parents in the loop. Northampton schools are bringing the system online this year, according to Pomerantz.

PowerSchool is the software that Easthampton and Hampshire Regional schools use to account for student attendance and medical information.

"Without the technology, you could imagine the paperwork that you'd shuffle through to find a student or the phone calls you'd be making to reach out to 120 parents - it would be very time-consuming,

and in an emergency situation time is very valuable," Florek said.

Following the tragedies at Columbine High School in Colorado and the Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania, most area schools have installed cameras and entrance buzzers.

"Initially, there was the perception that nothing would happen in little Southampton," said William Collins, principal at the Norris elementary school, which has six cameras and an entrance buzzer. "But I think once the Amish school had that tragedy, it changed everybody's mind-set, and we very quickly picked up the pace and started to build our security system."

As school officials seek new products for "quick-fix solutions" to make schools safer, it is important to remember that the first and best line of defense is a well-trained, highly alert staff and student body, Trump said. Developing relationships with students so school employees can identify changes in student behavior and so students feel they can report threats is crucial, he added, as the number-one way school employees discover potential threats is when students report to an adult they trust.

"Security equipment can be a supplement to the human factor; it's certainly not a substitute for the human factor," Trump said.

Keeping school safe comes down to the "simple things," Trump said, like greeting and challenging strangers

"Saying 'good morning, how can I help you?' is one of the most important things to say," Trump said.

Staff Writer Mary Carey contributed to this report.

Catherine Baum can be reached at [cbaum@gazettenet.com](mailto:cbaum@gazettenet.com).

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