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Front Page

May 24, 2007

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Police respond to WRHS bomb hoax

BY MELISSA MCKEON MMCKEON@HOLDENLANDMARK.COM

HOLDEN - More than a dozen fire, police and Wachusett Regional High School staff swept the high school the morning of May 16 looking for anything suspicious after two students reported finding a picture of a bomb pencilled on a wall late in the day on May 15.

Police and fire searched the school early Wednesday before students arrived. Holden Police Sgt. David Armstrong, the school's liaison officer, said consideration was given to canceling school and bringing in dogs to sniff out anything unusual.

But such an action, the response team decided, wouldn't have helped, and may have hurt. WRSD Superintendent Thomas Pandiscio said such evacuations are more dangerous than the hoax itself.

The protocol when such threats are found, Pandiscio said, is "to assess the credibility of the threat and take reasonable precautions based upon what you find."

"We immediately go to the authorities and work it out with them," said Principal Hal Lane.

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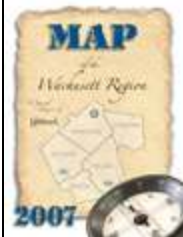
Part of the effort in finding anything suspicious was to draw on the experience of teachers and staff. They would know from daily experience if anything were different in their rooms and nearby areas, officials said.

Teachers were informed and staff members participated in the sweep.



Officials involved were relieved that the threat turned out to be a hoax, though administration was in "high visibility" all day, Lane said.

The vagueness of the drawing and the fact that it was found when school was getting out also contributed to the sense of relief.



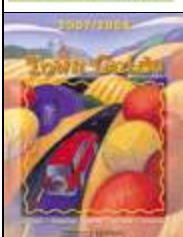
If the threat had targeted particular people or if the school had been full of students at the time the drawing was found, Lane said, it would have been a different story.

"If it had been a hit list, if the kids were in school at the time we found it, we would have locked it down," Lane said.



Students at the high school participated in a lockdown drill earlier this year.

While Pandiscio said there's no evidence that serious bombers warn of their threats in that manner, he admitted it was a difficult call.



The bomb drawing included no hit list or particular target, but did include other information the investigating team did not release. There was not enough evidence in the drawing to give much help to those investigating the incident to match handwriting, but the investigation is ongoing. Armstrong said police have some leads in the case.



If a more extensive search had been warranted, Armstrong said, school would have had to be closed for several days, extending the school year.

Though all admit they took the threat very seriously, they also acknowledge that current and



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recent past events have changed how everyone views such threats, and how they react to them.

"I think we're driven a lot by today's current events," Armstrong said.

Pandiscio said he wouldn't discuss how many such threats have happened at the high school.

Lane has a good basis for comparing the way schools react now, and the way they reacted years ago to threats. As WRHS principal from 1970 to 1994, he saw dozens of bomb threats, he recalled. Schools then were sometimes evacuated. In recent years, however, he doesn't remember a single such bomb threat, and protocols have gotten stricter.

It's possible, though, the students like the ones who reported finding the drawing, are more sensitive to such violence after the terrorism they've witnessed in their lives, Armstrong said.

"These kids saw 9/11, these kids saw Oklahoma City," he said.

A poignant reminder of the world they live in came from one of the students who found and reported the drawing, Armstrong said.

"One of the kids turned and said, 'You just don't know nowadays.'"

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