

# Bomb threats in schools costly

Police man-hours delay other investigations,  
while districts face lost time and resources

By Jennifer Smith Richards

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The threat was scrawled in black marker on the tile wall of the boys' bathroom:

*Boom Time = Bomb  
2:45 10/25/07*

The atmosphere at Thomas Worthington High School was electrified the day the threat was found, Oct. 24. Students were alternately terrified and angry; many were pulled from class to be interviewed by police detectives.

A couple of hours after the first message, another — "Boom Die" — appeared. The next day, "Boom Day is Here," appeared even as police were

scouring the building.

Worthington police detectives left 30 or so cases sitting mostly untouched on their desks for three weeks while they worked the bomb-threat case. Patrolling officers walked through the sprawling building once every hour overnight.

"We were coming up with security plans, putting officers on overtime," said Worthington Lt. Doug Francis. "It shut this entire agency down for several days."

The investigation cost the department upward of \$12,000 in man-hours.

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## Cost of threats

Students who threaten violence in schools cause disruption that takes a financial toll. Some examples from area high schools:

### UPPER ARLINGTON

- ▶ **The threat:** An online plan for an attack discovered in mid-May
- ▶ **The response:** Afternoon activities at the school were canceled one day, and school was closed the next. Teachers had to be paid, though they couldn't work, and the cafeteria lost money.
- ▶ **The cost:** \$71,500, not including police and FBI costs

### PICKERINGTON CENTRAL

- ▶ **The threat:** phoned-in bomb threat May 16

Sources: schools, police

- ▶ **The response:** Nine Pickerington police officers spent 22 man-hours on the case.
- ▶ **The cost:** about \$1,500 to police

### THOMAS WORTHINGTON

- ▶ **The threats:** a phoned-in bomb threat on Oct. 18, followed by a flurry of notes Oct. 24-31
- ▶ **The response:** The Worthington Police Department investigated and stepped up patrols. The school was evacuated briefly on one of the days.
- ▶ **The cost:** at least \$12,000 to police, at least \$3,800 to the schools

## BOMB THREATS

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Teachers couldn't teach during the 45-minute building evacuation. If you put a price on that time, it would amount to about \$3,800.

Schools can't ignore bomb threats, which waste thousands of dollars, law-enforcement resources and classroom time.

"Unfortunately, what students don't realize is that something that they may perceive as a prank can result in suspension and expulsion from school and a felony charge under state law, both of which will follow them for a very long time," said Ken Trump, a school-safety expert in Cleveland.

Statewide last school year, 501 students were disciplined by their school districts for making false alarms or bomb threats. About 84 percent of the time, they were suspended or expelled. The most happened in the state's largest districts, Cleveland and Columbus.

But bomb threats happen just about everywhere. Take Upper Arlington High School, which shut down May 14 after a student made an online threat.

Students lost a day of

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school, and the district had to pay its teachers for a day they couldn't work. Some food in the cafeteria that was to be served that day was wasted. The cost to the school district: \$71,500.

Both the FBI, which discovered the threat, and Upper Arlington police were involved in dealing with the incident.

"You are faced with sometimes a lot of work by different agencies. You feel they're causing taxpayer money to be used needlessly," said FBI agent Harry Trombitas.

When there's a threat at Pickerington High School Central, students often evacuate to nearby Ridgeview Middle School, disrupting class at two schools. During a threat this month, nine Pickerington police officers spent 22 man-hours searching the high school at a cost of about \$1,500.

The culprit in that threat wasn't caught. Nor was the one leaving the messages at Worthington in the fall. But in

general, it's easier for police to track down students who leave handwritten messages — which can be analyzed — than people who phone in threats.

That's how police caught a student who left threatening notes in two girls' lockers during the chaos caused by the bathroom bomb threats in Worthington. Andrew Crowe, who was 16 at the time, was convicted of menacing by stalking and aggravated menacing. He was sentenced to counseling and a year of probation, and told to pay \$300 in restitution.

The most common charge for students who make bomb threats is inducing panic, a felony, said Anthony Pierson, an assistant county prosecutor who handles juvenile cases. He sees one or two each month.

"They are subject to being sent to prison until they're 21," Pierson said.

But students tend to realize the consequences too late, experts say.

"We've caught a bunch of kids in the past that made bomb threats," Francis said. "It's always the same thing. We ask, 'Why'd you do it?' (They say,) 'I wanted a day off school.'"

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