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Bomb threats halt classes at Irondale, Mounds View

By Jen Hass
Dec 16, 2003

Bomb threats cut classes short twice last week, first at Mounds View High School on Dec. 9 and then at Irondale High School on Dec. 11. This is the third time in two months that district buildings have been evacuated under such circumstances.

Mounds View students were excused at 10:45 a.m. last Tuesday because a teacher found a note under her door that included a racial reference. Specifically, it made a threat to black students. Ramsey County Sheriff's Office deputies and a K-9 unit dog searched the school grounds and failed to find a bomb, according to a police report. The building was deemed safe by 11:45 a.m. It was the fourth threat to violence made at the high school this year.

At Irondale two days later, a threat was made that said a bomb would go off in a specific location. This time no racial reference was made, however. Principal Colleen Wambach announced just before noon that teachers should keep all students in their classrooms. Students were allowed to drive or take a bus home shortly thereafter and teachers were dismissed from their posts. The New Brighton Police Department and its K-9 unit were not able to find a bomb of any kind in the building, but all evening activities and sports were canceled nonetheless.

"They didn't say it was a bomb threat but we heard there was a kid in the boys' bathroom in second hour who saw a note that said. 'At noon the bomb goes boom,'" said Irondale junior Emily Zisla.

Another junior, Kendra Shelland, added that she thought most students were calm about the situation. "People know that the school people will keep us safe," she said. "If people are going to set off a bomb, they wouldn't write it in the bathroom beforehand. It seems like it's just a prank."

But Wambach said that the police and the district are taking the incident seriously. "We needed to get these kids out of the building, out of the school and make sure they were safe," she said. "We'll do a thorough search and we will once again review our plans and how we respond to these situations and make sure we're doing everything we can to find the people responsible."

Some students and parents see the threats as an excuse for a break from school, while others think it signals that students — or certain minority groups — are in danger.

"Everybody was pretty rushed and pretty scared to be led out to the buses waiting outside," said Mounds View junior Blake Carlson, a member of the school's Student Council. "Mounds View is a predominantly white, upper-class school," he added, "although no one I've been around sees racism as a problem."

About 84 percent of the student body at Mounds View is white, 7 percent is Asian, 5 percent is black, 3 percent is Hispanic and 1 percent is Native American.

Mounds View Principal Julie Wikelius said, "There are certainly concerns, and I think they aren't particular just to one segment of the population. Everyone is concerned, and what we want to do is make sure that Mounds View is safe and productive to everyone, regardless of their ethnicity."

She went on to say that the school is reaching out to students of color to allay fears among students and parents. A minority parents group may be formed if there is interest in doing so.

District spokesman Colin Sokolowski said that school officials, Ramsey County deputies and New Brighton police are investigating the matter, not only because it is a threat to those in the building but also because such incidents disrupt school and student learning. Although extending the school year at either school has not been officially announced, it remains a possibility — especially if the bomb threats continue.

"We've talked more about how everyone is treated, and we want to make sure it's a nonthreatening environment for all students," Sokolowski said.

The event at Mounds View has led Ramsey County and New Brighton to place more deputies on school grounds at certain times of the day. The district has responded by speeding up plans to place cameras in its schools.

"The plan for the cameras was developed long before any threats rose to the surface at any of our schools this year," Sokolowski explained. "It's not in response to these threats. But it's being fast-tracked now."

Here's a brief rundown of what Mounds View High School's staff and students experienced when other threats were made this year:

On Oct. 21, a student wrote a note saying that a bomb would go off at a specific location. Students left the building at noon that day, waited outside and were allowed back inside shortly before the school day ended after K-9 unit dogs failed to find any bombs.

On Oct. 22, a 15-year-old was arrested after allegedly writing a threatening note. It said she would shoot and kill people at Mounds View High School "the same as the freshman boy did in St. Cloud," referring to the death of two students at Rocori High School in Cold Spring, Minn. That student has not returned to the high school.

On Nov. 12, a different bomb threat was made. At that time two students found a written message on a lunch table that included a racial reference. The building was not evacuated that day, however.

The Ramsey County Sheriff's Office said that no link has been made between the December event and previous written threats to violence.

Mounds View High School officials are offering a \$1,000 reward to anyone with information that leads to the arrest of a person or persons involved with the threat. To report anything to authorities, call the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office tip line at 651-266-8090. Irondale High School officials are also offering a reward, though the amount of that award was not announced by press time. Anyone with information about the bomb threat there should call the New Brighton Police Department at 651-638-2100.

Those responsible for making such threats, whether done in jest or as a legitimate threat to violence, face both criminal charges and consequences as deemed appropriate by school authorities, including expulsion from the building or the entire district.



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