

Educators, police take steps to quell threats against schools

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When Bryan Bender heard his daughters' school in Phoenix was locked down because of a threat, he tried to remain calm, but it was still distressing, he said, especially for his children.

"It's traumatic for everyone. But I think particularly for the students who are in lockdown and soon realize that this is not a drill and that something is

really going on. But they don't know very much, if anything at all, or just rumors about what was happening," Bender said. "It was definitely traumatic for my two daughters, who are students there."

The school was locked down for about an hour-and-a-half on Aug. 31 after social media posts and a note describing threats were found. Phoenix

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police determined there wasn't a credible threat at the time and the lockdown was lifted, according to communication sent to parents from the school.

The following morning, Bender learned school activities were canceled because of the threats. In a letter sent to parents, the school principal said a student had sent a message that included the threat of bringing a weapon to school to harm others.

Police contacted and detained two students suspected of being involved in the threats, according to Sgt. Brian Bower, a spokesperson with Phoenix police.

Bender said he doesn't recall any other incidents at his daughters' middle school that resulted in a lockdown in the last couple of years.

Have threats increased?

From Aug. 11 to Sept. 6, the Phoenix Police Department recorded 53 threats directed at the school or school staff that have been documented by detectives, according to Bower. Although the department is still determining if there has been a definitive increase in school threats lately, Bower said that number is alarming.

That number does not necessarily represent all of the incidents in Phoenix schools during that period of time, Bower said, since sometimes charges aren't pressed, or the incident stays at the school level so detectives aren't contacted and it is not documented.

Some of the threats that have occurred recently in Phoenix schools include:

- On Aug. 31, a handwritten threat was found at Veritas Preparatory Academy.
- On Sept. 1, Central High School went into lockdown while police investigated threats.
- On Sept. 7, a student was arrested for allegedly drawing graffiti on the Horizon High School campus about a school shooting.
- On Sept. 9, Central High School went into lockdown after students heard "popping noises."
- On Sept. 13, Betty H. Fairfax High School was locked down after officers received information that someone brought a gun to campus.

Between August and September, there have been at least three arrests of minors in connection to social media threats to schools. The three minors

were charged with suspicion of making terroristic threats, which is a class 3 felony.

Richard Franco, marketing and communications director for Phoenix Union High School District, said they are confident with the protocols that are in place at the schools when there are threats, and they make decisions in partnership with authorities. For security reasons, specifics about the protocols were not released.

"One thing that we are proud of is that although the recent events at Central High School and Fairfax High School have created emotional distress, they've proven that our systems work and that our protocols work," Franco said.

After the lockdown at Central High School, the school held online classes for one day and offered emotional support resources, including counselors and social workers. Franco said that day they also had meetings with staff to offer them support.

Carl Hermanns, clinical associate professor at ASU at the MLF Teachers College, said some might think that having more police at schools and metal detectors can help avoid these situations, but he believes helping schools foster positive environments could make more of a difference.

"I believe we need to give our schools the resources to really create school communities in which every child that comes to that school feels like they're truly seen, like they truly have a voice, and most importantly, that they feel like they truly belong to that school community," he said.

Based on his experience as a teacher and researcher, Hermanns said he believes schools should be supported with counselors and social workers so that if a student needs mental health care, they can get it there.

Effective threat assessments can only occur in a setting where there is respect and connection between adults and students, Hermanns said, referencing a 2002 threat assessment guide released by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education.

He said that while doing structural changes around school safety is important, focusing on mental health resources is also key.

"I think the most important thing, what the research shows and what the threat assessment documents says, is putting more resources into mental health ... because when children become alienated, when children become hurt, when children feel like they don't belong to the school, that's when the

spiral can start," Hermanns said.

A positive environment also allows children to feel comfortable in notifying someone if they feel threatened or if one of their peers seems to be struggling, Hermanns said.

Jean Ajamie, the deputy associate superintendent for school safety and social wellness with the Arizona Department of Education, said through the school safety program, the department supports schools across the state with guidance and training to respond to situations like threats.

With that program, Ajamie said they place trained individuals on campuses to prevent any issues involving violence. Those individuals can be school counselors, social workers or school resource officers. Ajamie said they also provide training to schools on how to respond to students' mental health needs.

Responses to threats

Bower said Phoenix police are constantly training for active shooter scenarios. Detectives have been spending more time investigating the social media aspect of threats recently.

"I think that is probably one of the biggest changes to recent times is digging in, conducting full investigations into a social media post of threats," Bower said.

The intentions behind the 53 threats that Phoenix police were investigating are unclear, but Bower said detectives were "closely monitoring every single one."

He said the Police Department takes every threat seriously and does extensive background research and follow-ups to learn about the validity of the threat and see if it can be tracked to an individual.

After the school was locked down and classes were canceled, Bender said he spoke to his two daughters about their experiences. He said they talked about how the school's reaction shows it is safe and that they have protocols to follow.

He also said the school was very communicative and kept the community informed on the threats.

However, he believes schools could do a better job in the aftermath of these types of events and create more opportunities for students to ask questions or talk about their feelings.

Bender said after the lockdown and the two threats, classes resumed normally, and his children didn't hear anything else about these events other than reminders of school policies on threats, which he said felt "abrupt" and made

some students feel bewildered.

"I think the takeaway for the students was don't make threats like this or you'll get in really big trouble. But I don't think the students had much of an opportunity to sort of talk about the experience and ask questions and that sort of thing," Bender said.

Talking about the school resources that are available for those who might want to discuss the events further could be helpful and reassure them that the school is prepared for those types of events, he said.

"I just think ... that if people want some emotional support, or want to talk about this, that there's people that they can avail themselves of," Bender said.

Bender said it's important to be aware of the impact threats and lockdowns can have on children.

"They're trying to learn and study and deal with the whole mess of making friends and growing up. And it's hard enough to do that in a safe place, let alone do it in a place where you feel like you're always on a razor's edge, potentially, because something's going to happen and throw off the day."

Recent mass shootings and reported school threats have put students, police departments and the community on edge, Bower said.

The Phoenix Union High School District launched a safety division this spring that reviews the safety systems that are in place. Franco said they are constantly working on safety and reaching out to families to receive feedback.

Franco said at Phoenix Union schools, staff members discuss the repercussions and consequences of making threats to prevent students from spreading false threats and from making a threat. He also encouraged parents to get involved in school safety and offer recommendations and feedback to the district at Safety@PhoenixUnion.org.

Bower advised parents and guardians of students who attend local schools to be aware of what the minors are taking to the school, bringing home from school and posting on social media.

Bower also said that students who think of threatening the school or staff as a joke should be aware of the serious consequences.

"This is not a situation that should be held lightly, and students that believe it would be a funny joke need to be aware that this has huge and significant ramifications on their discipline, on their records," Bower said. "We highly recommend that the students just not even put forth any type of threat."