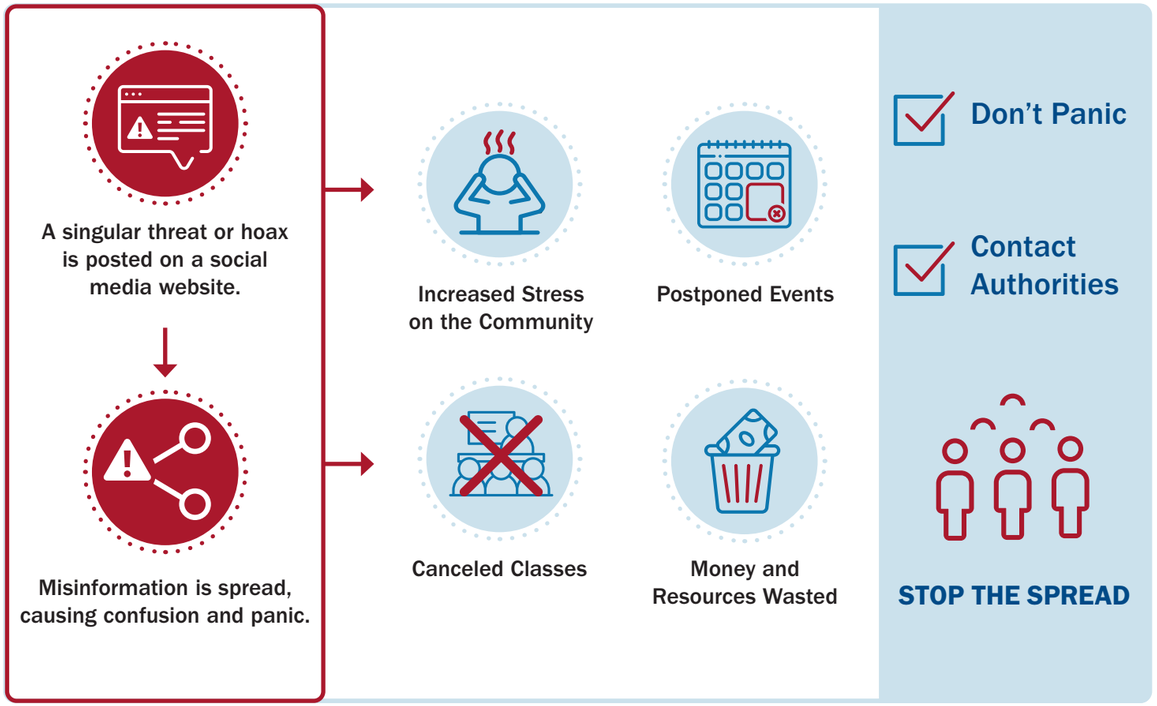
SOCIAL MEDIA THREAT GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND AUTHORITIES

Technology has revolutionized the American school system, making education more accessible than ever before. However, the advancements and accessibility of various social media platforms continue to reveal new vulnerabilities and security gaps within the school threat landscape. In the United States, social media-based threats to school districts continue to rise; in 2022, school districts reported closing more frequently due to social media threats than for COVID-19 outbreaks. To support school safety stakeholders, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) created this infographic to provide actionable considerations for reporting and responding to social media threats directed at school districts.

All threats need to be taken seriously and treated as credible until law enforcement and a threat assessment team determine otherwise to keep the community, school, students and staff safe.



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the country have experienced an increase in threats of violence that originate on social media.[1] In many incidents, these threats are unfounded, likely the result of a joke, hoax or prank by a student(s). Whether credible or not, a singular threat can lead to the spread of misinformation as well as an influx of threats in an area, possibly resulting in canceled events and an increased stress on the community, residents and resources.[2] This cycle–interspersed with an actual increase in school violence–impacts the mental health of students, often resulting in psychological problems such as depression or anxiety.[3]

RECENT SOCIAL MEDIA THREATS

December 2021 – Various U.S. Cities
Threat: Shooting and bomb threats were made across social media. Officials later reported that they were not credible.
Result: Schools across the nation closed for a day resulting in the arrest of students in several states.

March 2022 – Louisiana
Threat: A 15-year-old posted a threat against their high school.
Result: The 15-year-old was arrested and charged with obstruction of justice.

March 2022 – Maryland
Threat: A 14-year-old student from a Maryland high school posted a threat on social media involving mustard gas.
Result: The student ended up bringing bleach to school, resulting in the students's arrest and the evacuation of the building.

March 2022 – New York
Threat: A 15-year-old girl made threats on social media.
Result: Middle and high schools had remote learning for three days while police investigated the threat. Police charged the 15-year-old with four counts of making a terroristic threat (felony) and arrested an 11-year-old girl for allegedly posting a threat on social media.

March 2022 – West Virginia
Threat: A 17-year-old student allegedly posted on social media that another student had brought a gun to school.
Result: The school was placed on lockdown and the student that made the false claim was arrested and charged with threats of terrorist acts.

June 2022 – Illinois
Threat: A juvenile posted threats of violence against students at their middle school on social media.
Result: The middle school was placed on lockdown and the juvenile was charged with disorderly conduct.

March 2023 – South Carolina
Threat: A student reported receiving a social media message from a middle-school student threatening to "blow up" two local high schools.
Result: The high schools implemented secure safety responses and later resumed normal activity once the student that made the threat was found. The student was charged with disturbing schools.

RESOURCES

CISA School Safety
cisa.gov/topics/physical-security/school-safety

Mitigating the Impacts of Doxing on Critical Infrastructure
cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/cisa-insights-mitigating-impacts-doxing-critical-infrastructure

The Personal Security Considerations Fact Sheet
cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/personal-security-considerations-fact-sheet

Review Training, Exercises, and Drills for Additional Strategies and Resources
SchoolSafety.gov

CISA Tabletop Exercise Packages (CTEPs)
cisa.gov/resources-tools/services/cisa-tabletop-exercise-packages

Fusion Center Locations and Contact Information
dhs.gov/fusion-center-locations-and-contact-information

Safe and Sound Schools
A nonprofit founded by Sandy Hook parents, educators, and community members.
safeandsoundschools.org

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)
rems.ed.gov

What to Do - Bomb Threat
cisa.gov/news-events/news/what-do-bomb-threat

The Priority Telecommunications Services (PTS)
cisa.gov/resources-tools/programs/priority-telecommunications-services

[1] The School District of Philadelphia. 2021. "A Response to Threats of Violence on Social Media." Office of Communications. Accessed Aug. 29, 2022. philasd.org/blog/2021/12/16/schoolviolence/
[2] Zalaznick, Matt. 2022. "Social media threats are now closing schools more often than COVID." District Administration. Accessed Aug. 29, 2022. districtadministration.com/student-behavior-on-social-media-is-now-a-bigger-threat-than-covid/
[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2016. Understanding School Violence. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed Aug. 29, 2022. cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school_violence_fact_sheet-a.pdf#:~:text=Not%20all%20injuries%20are%20visible.%20%20Exposure%20to%20youth,can%20result%20from%20school%20violence.%20Understanding%20School%20Violence

MITIGATION MEASURES[4,5]

Every school is unique, so there is no "boilerplate approach" plan or process that schools should follow. However, developing an **Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)** is a critical step for each school in creating a culture of readiness.

- **Utilize the Readiness and Emergency Management in Schools (REMS) Toolkit** to receive free training on developing EOPs and Resilience Strategies. Training should include how to respond to social media threats for students and staff. This should include education and awareness about the seriousness of social media hoaxes.
- **Develop relationships with local law enforcement and emergency services** as a part of the School Core Planning Team. Establish clear roles, responsibilities and expectations.
- **Build on prior knowledge, experience, and federal data to identify possible threats** and hazards and assess the vulnerabilities and risks associated with these threats and hazards. Decide which of these threats and hazards need to be addressed in the school and develop goals and objectives for each one.
- **Develop detailed courses of action to address each of the goals and objectives decided upon by the school**. This includes identifying who is responsible for the action, how long the action will take and what needs to happen before and after the action, as well as considering how these actions will affect individuals that require special needs, access, evacuation and other services.
- **Acquire official approval of the EOP** and ensure its distribution amongst all community partners.
- **Continuously test and evaluate security protocols and EOPs.** This involves ensuring the staff understands and is trained on protocols surrounding reporting threats to social media and law enforcement before an incident occurs.
- **Enroll in Priority Telecommunications Services** to ensure first responders and school administration can utilize potentially overwhelmed telephone networks.

[4] U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice. 2013. *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Federal Emergency Management Agency. Accessed Aug. 8, 2022. rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf

[5] Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. n.d. K-12 School Security Guide Product Suite. Accessed Aug. 8, 2022. cisa.gov/k-12-school-security-guide-product-suite

[6] U.S. Department of Justice. n.d. *FBI Threat Intimidation Guide*. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Accessed Aug. 8, 2022. fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/threat-intimidation-guide

[7] U.S. Department of Justice. 2018. "Think Before You Post: Hoax Threats are Serious Federal Crimes." Federal Bureau of Investigation. Last modified Oct. 5, 2018. fbi.gov/news/stories/hoax-threats-awareness-100518

Establishing mitigation and response protocols is an important part of a school's security planning strategy and reinforces a culture of preparedness that can enable early threat identification to protect the community, school, students and staff.

RESPONSE MEASURES[6,7]

Fortunately, many social media threats can be traced, allowing law enforcement to follow up with the individual who posted the threat and conduct an interview to determine credibility. **It is a criminal offense to make a threat against a school system and it is possible that the person in question could be charged with a felony.** Police advise treating every threat seriously.

FIRST STEPS

1 Implement Your EOP

- **Activate the EOP** determined by the Core Planning Team made up of school staff and stakeholders (local law enforcement, community organizations, families, etc.).
- **Determine the type of threat** (bombing, fire as a weapon, shooting, etc.) and follow the necessary protocols as indicated by the EOP.
- **Alert school authorities, personnel, parents,** etc. of all threats via the proper communications channels and keep them up to date until all threats have been resolved.
- **Follow procedures for appropriate response** (lockdown, evacuation, school closing, etc.).

2 Treat All Threats Seriously

- **Report to local authorities** as quickly as possible.
- **If there is a possibility of immediate danger, call 9-1-1.**

ADDITIONAL ACTIONS

Threats of Violence on Social Media

- **Immediately notify law enforcement** that a threat was received.
- **Do not delete or share the post and preserve all electronic evidence.** Print, photograph, screenshot or copy the message information (subject line, date, time, sender, etc.).
- **Follow authorities' instructions and be available for interviews**. Law enforcement will assess the situation and provide guidance regarding facility lockdown, search and/or evacuation.

Bomb Threats Received via Social Media

- **Remain calm.**
- **Notify authorities immediately:**
  - Call 9-1-1.
  - Notify facility supervisor, administrator, or follow the facility EOP.
- **Refer to the DHS Bomb Threat Checklist** for guidance.
- **Follow authorities' instructions and be available for interviews.** Facility supervisors and/or law enforcement will assess the situation and provide guidance regarding facility lockdown, search and/or evacuation.

After The Incident

- Take appropriate disciplinary and criminal enforcement steps.
- Document threats and actions taken for internal evaluation.
- Enhance security measures and planning procedures, as appropriate, to ensure the safety of all students, staff and facilities based on evaluation.
- Debrief emergency services and assist in coordinating further actions.
- Site Decision Maker(s) should remain on-scene until the situation is resolved or until relieved by another administrator.