Discovery of note in bathroom prompts search of building by MPD dog unit

Authorities are continuing to investigate a bomb scare that forced the evacuation of Grafton High School on Tuesday.

Grafton police and the Milwaukee Bomb Squad responded to the school at about 7:45 a.m. after school officials making a routine security check of the building discovered a message in a first-floor restroom stating a bomb would be detonated at 12:33 p.m.

Police and school officials quickly decided to evacuate the building, with more than 780 students and 80 staff members sent to St. Joseph's Catholic Church less than two blocks away. Using its K-9 dog unit and technicians, the bomb squad searched both floors of the school and found no suspicious devices, police said.

Students and staff, who walked to the church, returned to the school at about 10:30 a.m. and resumed classes.

"It was clearly an emergency situation, but the evacuation was exceptionally orderly," Supt. Jeff Pechura said.

"Everyone took this very seriously, and we followed our protocol for an evacuation. Fortunately, no one was injured and we were able to resume classes the same morning."

There was no evacuations at other buildings, including the district offices and Grafton Elementary School, which adjoin the high school in a campus setting on Washington Street, Pechura said.

"We were told by police to keep everyone in those buildings, and we did," he said.

Grafton Police Capt. Joseph Gabrish said that when school officials discovered the threat, they notified Sgt. David Podewils, a school liaison officer. Police contacted the bomb squad, which arrived with two dogs and searched school lockers, restrooms, classrooms, the cafeteria and gymnasium.

"Fortunately, nothing was found, and this is considered to be a prank," Gabrish said.

Gabrish said the investigation would include a check of closed-circuit cameras inside the school.

“This is taken very seriously,” said Gabrish, who noted that if the person who made the threat is found, he or she could face federal charges as well as expulsion from school.

School Principal Ken McCormick said there have been security threats at the school in the past, but this was the first time the building had to be evacuated in response to one.

“Our kids were fantastic through the whole thing,” McCormick said. “They understood the seriousness of the situation and conducted themselves very well.”

Pechura said he and McCormick spoke to the students while they were gathered at the church to assure them that everything was being done to protect them and secure the school.

“You could hear a pin drop when we were talking,” Pechura said. “Everyone was very concerned.

“It is a compliment to our community and the police department that everything was handled as well as it was.”

Gabrish also said he was impressed with “the orderly fashion in which the staff and students were able to proceed” to the church. He noted that returning a sense of normalcy for students was important after the building was determined to be safe.

“We wanted to make sure that they went back to class because we wanted to give students the message that this isn’t a free day off,” Gabrish said.

McCormick said Tuesday’s incident would not change homecoming activities planned this week at the school.

Also on Tuesday morning, the Milwaukee Bomb Squad was called to Racine Park High School, where students were evacuated after a suspicious device was discovered in the building.

The device was removed, and students were returned to class after about 30 minutes, officials said.

Reporter Sarah McCraw contributed to this story.

Image Information: A POLICE OFFICER guarded the front doors of Grafton High School Tuesday after students were evacuated because of a bomb scare. Photo by Sam Arendt