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Verbal threat at school prompts 'threat protocol' in Wallowa

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Officers from the Sheriff's Department and Enterprise Police Department continued their investigation of a perceived threat at Wallowa High School on Thursday morning.

Kathleen Ellyn/Chieftain

A classroom conversation during normal school hours at Wallowa High School on Wednesday, Jan. 27, prompted school officials to contact law enforcement agencies and to initiate the school's "threat protocol."

The perceived threat was verbal. A student who heard the conversation called his or her parents, who reported the incident to the school, Superintendent Bret Upton, said Thursday.

Chat

Privacy - Terms

The student who allegedly voiced the threat is senior Thomas Jamerson, who turned 18 on Feb. 2. Jamerson and his parents, Ed and Marilyn Sparks, agreed to allow The Chieftain to identify him in this article.

Uptmor said it was quickly determined that Jamerson did not have access to a weapon and had not brought any weapon to school. At no time was a “lockdown” of the school in effect. Following protocol, Jamerson was immediately removed from the general population and his parents were contacted along with law enforcement officials.

Wallowa County Sheriff’s Deputy Kevin McQuead responded, as did Enterprise Police Officer George Kohlhepp.

School officials initiated extra safety measures — increased security at the building’s entrances, and a locked-door policy for all in-session classrooms — but classes continued uninterrupted.

As of Tuesday morning — nearly a week after the incident — Jamerson had not returned to school and no official disciplinary decision had been issued. His parents said Monday that the district had provided the means for Jamerson to continue his classwork outside of the school while he’s suspended. And while a criminal investigation is yet to be closed, the Sparks said they’ve been told by authorities that no crime has been committed.

According to the school district, when there is a perceived threat, the administration will:

- Investigate allegations
- Search the building
- In cases of perceived threats a student is removed until a threat assessment process is complete and administration is able to evaluate recommendations.

In the aftermath of the incident, there was very little communication between school officials and the general public. The district quickly determined that its automated phone system was not equipped to deliver mass calls notifying parents of the threat protocol. Neither the district

nor the Sheriff's Office issued an official press release. And while the Sheriff's Office did issue a short statement Thursday morning on its Facebook page, no officials contacted The Chieftain.

The lack of official communication helped foster rampant speculation regarding what had happened, and soon there were unsubstantiated reports on social media of a weapon being involved, and in some cases an actual shooting taking place at the school.

On Thursday, Uptmor told The Chieftain that he has extensive training in handling threats from both inside and outside the facility and felt confident that proper protections were in place.

"Parents need to know their kids are safe here," he said. "We're taking good care of them. We're watching out for them. We love them."

Many parents remained unconvinced. With rumors running rampant and parents on edge, school officials scheduled a public meeting for Sunday night (Jan. 31) in the school gymnasium. By Friday they had modified the automated phone system and distributed calls to several hundred numbers to notify the community about the meeting.

About 100 people attended the Sunday night meeting at the school. Seated at a table in the middle of the gym facing the audience in the bleachers were: School board chairman Jeff Devore, Superintendent Uptmor, Principal Beccy Nordtvedt and Deputy McQuead.

Details of the incident and the students involved were not up for discussion. Rather, officials called the meeting to answer questions and assure parents that their kids were safe.

Uptmor acknowledged that the school should have done a better job communicating with parents from the start and apologized for the lack of information,

"I know that fear has power, and I'm sorry that it has taken over our lives," Uptmor said.

Deputy McQuead advocated responsible communication in such instances and likened what happened on social media last week to a game of Telephone, in which a story is retold down a line of people and ultimately reshaped to an entirely different story. Chat

“You know how this goes,” McQuead said. “It started out I added a strawberry and by the end someone did something to a pink elephant. That’s what Facebook does to us.”

“I got calls from Arizona. People were convinced there was a mass shooting. Be careful what you put out there.”

Parents learned few specifics, however, regarding what safety measures would be in place Monday morning.

“I need to know the temperature outside,” Uptmor said. “Not hot or cold — the temperature of our community.”

Asked whether there was still a perceived threat, McQuead said, “There’s a situation under investigation. I don’t believe the school is under threat.”

Principal Nordtvedt assured the audience that her own children would be returning to class.

“I’m sitting here because I have to answer questions,” she said. “But I just as easily could be sitting with you as a concerned parent. I will tell you that my kids will be here Monday morning.”

On Tuesday, Superintendent Uptmor said many of the security measures that were put in place Thursday had been relaxed. Classroom doors no longer are locked, outdoor recess has resumed and campus is open again.

Regarding locked classrooms, Uptmor said, “We felt we were disrupting education that didn’t need to be disrupted,” since all other entrances other than the front doors are locked as well.

Uptmor said the school is slowly returning to normalcy.

“(Monday) was better, and today was even better.”

“Our school community is one of the best in the state. ... We have great kids leaving us to go to college, we have outstanding graduation rates. And we have the type of kids who will wrap their arms around each other to get through times like these.”

The Sparks say their son deeply regrets having caused such alarm and disarray, and they regret that things got so out of hand.

“I feel for the parents,” Ed Sparks said. “If it was me on the other side of this, I’d want some answers, too.”

They insist that their son is not a threat to anyone and want him to be allowed to return and finish out his senior year at the school. They also acknowledge that their son has been in trouble in the past.

“But he’s always owned up to it and taken responsibility for his actions,” Ed Sparks said.

For his part, Jamerson also wants to return, according to his parents, and he issued the following statement to The Chieftain on Monday:

“My name is Thomas Jamerson and I am a student at Wallowa High School. On Wednesday (Jan. 27) I said some things at school that were taken out of context and perceived to be a threat, and for that I am sorry. I did not threaten anyone and I do not have any intentions of harming anyone. I think it is sad that rumors spread so quickly and caused panic in the community. I would like to apologize to my classmates for what I did say, and should not have said. I think my classmates know that I would not cause them harm. This is a small community and we should pull together instead of letting rumors pull us apart.”