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Norfolk 7th-grader charged with threatening school shooting, police investigate similar incidents in area

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Norfolk police arrested a seventh-grader at Lake Taylor Middle School on Monday, charging him with threatening to shoot students at the school. It was one of a string of such threats around the region, with others aimed at Western Branch High in Chesapeake and Nansemond River High in Suffolk.

Dozens of similar incidents have been reported nationwide since last week's in Parkland, Fla., in which 17 people were killed. The shooting has renewed national concerns over school safety and gun violence.



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A Norfolk police cruiser sits outside Lake Taylor Middle School in Norfolk on Monday, Feb. 19, 2018. Police were investigating social media threats against the school.

Someone called 911 about a possible threat to Lake Taylor about 6:30 a.m. Monday. By late afternoon, Norfolk police said they had arrested an unnamed 14-year-old Lake Taylor student, charging him with threatening his classmates with death or bodily injury while they were at school.

Norfolk school officials didn't respond to a phone call and email late Monday afternoon asking about whether the threat and arrest would affect scheduling and security at the school .

On Monday in Suffolk, students alerted Nansemond River High staff about an Instagram post that talked about shooting students on Tuesday. Police immediately began working with division leaders, principal Dan O'Leary said [in a letter to parents](#). Extra police will be at the high school, he added.

In Chesapeake, police learned Friday night of a threat to harm Western Branch High students and staff on Tuesday, when schools reopen after the Presidents Day holiday.

Police had not filed any charges but continue to investigate, Chesapeake police spokeswoman Kelly Elliott said Monday afternoon. Extra security will be at the school when classes resume, she said.

Likewise, extra officers were patrolling the area around Lake Taylor Middle School on Monday. School officials searched children there as they walked in that morning, a seventh-grader at the school said. By then, some students had already heard about a threatening Instagram post.

A screenshot of the post widely circulated Monday showed a user threatening to shoot anyone in "this building" on Tuesday, along with a photo of Lake Taylor Middle. The post appeared to have been deleted from the Instagram account by late Monday morning.

Norfolk Public Schools sent messages to parents at the middle school and nearby Lake Taylor High to "quell fears," spokeswoman Khalilah LeGrand said in an email. Monday was a snow makeup day at Norfolk schools.

The school system "is aware of a disturbing social media post circulating about Lake Taylor Middle School. We take any threat such as this seriously and are working closely with Norfolk PD as this matter is investigated," system officials said in an emailed statement.

Anyone with information on the threat was asked to call 1-888-LOCK-U-UP.(tncms-asset)307a8599-4268-5541-ab10-d950d1e8e535[1](/tncms-asset)

Some relatives arrived at Lake Taylor to take students home for the day because of the threat. Between about 11 a.m. and noon, at least a dozen people walked into the school and came out with a child.

Debbie Conquest came to get her 12-year-old granddaughter about 11:30 a.m. Conquest was at a doctor's office when she got a call from her daughter, who'd gotten a call from the girl. Conquest caught a bus and walked about a half-mile from the nearest stop to the school.

She said her granddaughter won't go to school on Tuesday, the day the threat was supposed to be carried out. She won't go on Wednesday, either. Conquest said she worries a would-be shooter might wait until then to attack, knowing parents will hold children out of school Tuesday.

In Chesapeake, School Board member Christie New Craig posted about the Western Branch incident on Facebook. She said the division is working with police to determine appropriate discipline.

"Please emphasize to your children the importance of the 'see or hear something, say something' practice," New Craig wrote.



In September, a Great Bridge High student was charged with multiple felonies stemming from a Molotov cocktail that was thrown in the school's parking lot and a nearby port-a-potty fire. The charges came after police investigated social media posts that they described as inappropriate.

Hampton police have investigated multiple recent threats, according to a news release.

One made Sunday night against Bethel High School, and another against Kecoughtan High School, were deemed not credible, police said Monday. Security was increased at both schools as a precaution.

”With the speed of social media, rumors and inaccurate information can spread very quickly,” Hampton police said in a statement. “There have been similar hoaxes being disseminated via social media throughout the country.”

Gates County Public Schools officials in northeastern North Carolina were also looking into a social media threat, according to a Facebook post from the school system.

”With the ongoing and growing number of school shootings in the country, we can never take any threat lightly,” Superintendent Barry Williams said in a letter to the community.

Over the weekend, police investigated a “specific threat” against a high school in Elizabeth City. Officials went to the home of the student who made the threat and determined “the student was unable to carry out the threat,” according to a [Facebook post from Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools](#).

And elsewhere in Virginia, school threats were investigated in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Mechanicsville.

Across the country since the Florida shooting, social media threats made against schools have met with swift responses from law enforcement. Police in Fayetteville, Ark., arrested a student who threatened online to “shoot up the high school like they did in Florida.”

Brian Van Brunt, a threat assessment expert and executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, said so-called copycat threats are common after a mass shooting, but he’s seeing more this time – “drastically more.”

”I think we might be hitting a tipping point,” he said. “If there’s a shift, it’s in volume.”

Van Brunt said there are two main kinds of threats – what experts call hunting versus howling. The first refers to people with plans in place, attacks planned weeks or months in advance. At the last minute, they may “leak” their plan by releasing a manifesto via social media to explain their motives, or tipping off a friend.

Howling, however, refers to those threats that are essentially “trolling behaviors, posting things just to get an immediate reaction.”

“What we’re seeing is younger people, not always aware of the consequences for their actions, posting these things but there’s no planned attack,” said Van Brunt, who compared it to a “modern day fire alarm.”

The problem is everyone has access to this “fire alarm” on their phones. And it’s hard – and dangerous – for law enforcement to distinguish which are real.

Van Brunt said 75 percent of direct threats don’t lead to any action. But that’s not necessarily reassuring for parents.

“I’d be worried too to send my kids to school,” he said.

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