

Michigan students charged with attempted murder in alleged school massacre plot

By Jerry White
20 May 1999

Four students—ages 12 through 14—are being held in jail after being charged with conspiracy to commit murder at their middle school in Port Huron, Michigan, about 60 miles northeast of Detroit. The students were arrested May 12 and 13 after a 14-year-old classmate told police she overheard some of them talking about planning a school massacre similar to the one at Colorado's Columbine High School last month.

St. Clair County Assistant Prosecutor Michael Wendling said Tuesday the four students at Holland Woods Middle School were planning to steal weapons for a massacre that would “kill more people than Columbine.” “This was a calculated plan,” he told a judge at the arraignment of the two youngest boys. “There were maps obtained and there was a discussion in relation to the maps as to how this incident would take place.” Wendling added that the boys were also planning to commit rapes.

Police earlier said the girl who overheard their conversation said the boys' plan was to go on a shooting spree in a gym assembly and detonate a bomb afterwards, acts aimed at killing the school's “preps,” a particular clique of students.

All 21 schools in the 12,000-student district were closed Friday after a pipe bomb was discovered by a custodian near Holland Woods Middle School. The bomb was found shortly after school officials had told parents, gathered to discuss the alleged plot by the four students, that the school was safe. Police said the bomb was unrelated to the alleged plan.

Schools reopened Monday, despite fears of parents and students. A third of the students at the middle school did not show up, even though school officials tightened security by banning backpacks and using guards, police and parent volunteers to examine bags and search students' belongings.

The accused boys are facing adult charges and, if convicted, the 14 year olds would automatically draw life prison sentences without possibility of parole. A judge would have the option of sentencing the younger suspects to adult prison, juvenile rehabilitation or both. Port Huron Area Schools Board President David Devendorf pleaded for the 13-year-olds to be held in custody before the trial, saying, “the parents and children of this community are afraid.” A judge ordered all the boys held in detention on a \$100,000 bond.

One of the boy's attorneys argued unsuccessfully for a low bond, saying the Colorado massacre had created a climate of “hysteria,” and that his client's record had never included anything more than “talking in class and running in the halls.”

Little is known about the background of the youth except that they apparently live under oppressed conditions. The family of the 12 year old lives in a hotel room and was planning to leave Michigan at the end of the school year, while one of the 13 year old's father is unemployed and blind, and most live in run-down homes. The school is reportedly located in a comfortable middle class neighborhood.

Two seventh graders in New Jersey were charged Tuesday for stealing chemicals from a science classroom, allegedly to make a bomb to detonate at their school. One of the students was arrested last Friday on charges of theft, weapons possession and terroristic threats and was placed in the county juvenile detention center. Another student was arrested Monday on similar charges and released to his parents. Both boys are 13 and attend Emerson Junior-Senior High School.

Since the April 20 massacre in Littleton, Colorado, which left 15 dead, there has been a wave of real and

imagined “copy-cat” threats at schools throughout the US. According to the National School Safety Center of Los Angeles there have been at least 200 cases of classes cancelled across the country, taking place in virtually every state. This is an indication that the social tensions and level of alienation felt by wide layers of youth that led to the Colorado tragedy is endemic.

On Tuesday authorities in Commerce City, Colorado—an industrial suburb just north of Denver—charged two teenagers, ages 15 and 16, with attempted first-degree murder for allegedly planning an attack with two other youth on a local high school. Like the Michigan case, they are being charged as adults and held on \$100,000 bond each. Police said an informant tipped them off about the alleged plan to storm Adams City High School. The school was locked down for several hours until the four teens were apprehended May 7.

School officials in the Dallas suburb of Allen, Texas, who last week said they were suspending the final two weeks of classes after repeated bomb threats, said students would return later this week for staggered classes. Officials said Sunday that they only wanted to confuse those calling in the threats and weren't canceling the rest of the school year outright. A total of 9,800 students at three elementary, middle and high schools in Allen were sent home after 11 bomb threats and 8 evacuations in 10 days. Since then school officials have removed payphones and installed metal detectors at all secondary schools, and have begun tracing all phone calls they deem threatening.

In West Palm Beach, Florida, last Saturday's prom at Palm Beach Lakes High School ended early when a nail-studded pipe bomb was found hidden inside an indoor tree planter by the hotel's ballroom entrance. Police bomb-sniffing dogs found nothing after a search of the high school Monday and classes began on schedule.

With little understanding of the societal and psychological causes of school violence and the wave of threats, let alone any serious answers to address them, school officials and the authorities have turned to ever more repressive police measures as the solution.

The American Civil Liberties Union says they are being inundated by complaints that authorities are trampling students' constitutional rights. “I think there's

tremendous pressure on schools to do something, to do anything, to prevent another Littleton,” said Raymond Vasvari, legal director of the ACLU of Ohio. “As a result, kids who dress differently, kids whose hair is dyed unnatural colors, some who seem to be brooding or alone are being singled out for discipline.”

The ACLU reported cases of a student being sent to a police station for wearing black clothing and another being interrogated about the chemistry book that he was carrying.

Some other complaints included:

- Eleven Ohio students expelled for posting a satirical essay on their Internet web site that administrators called “threatening”;

- A 14-year-old Pennsylvania girl suspended for telling a teacher in a class conversation on the Littleton shootings that she could understand how someone who is teased endlessly could snap;

- An Illinois student who was questioned by a psychiatrist for one and a half hours about the video games he plays, and asked if he ever looks for bomb-making instructions on the Internet;

“These administrators, in a panicked response to one tragedy, may be laying the seeds of another tragedy by creating schools that are not open, not tolerant, but suspicious, fearful places,” Vasvari of the ACLU concluded.

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