

## Sharp rise in Montgomery County school threats taken seriously, county attorney says

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Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff Photographer

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County Attorney J D Lambright is letting parents know his office along with district officials countywide are remaining vigilant when it comes to threats made to schools, students and teachers -- after around a dozen threats have been made throughout the county over the past couple of weeks. The increase in threats followed the mass shooting by a 19-year-old that killed 17 at a Parkland, Fla., high school Feb. 14.

"Unfortunately, our office has always received two or three threats of violence at local schools each month, but that number has skyrocketed following the February 14th shooting in Florida," Lambright said. "Even before that incident, our local school districts and police agencies were always quick to contact our office anytime a student made a threat, and our office regularly approved the detention of those juveniles. That vigilance has certainly continued in the wake of the Florida shooting."

There have been 10-12 arrests, with the students charged with either terroristic threat or harassment, depending on the case. Lambright did not know the specific schools involved.

The County Attorney's Office has jurisdiction over all Class B and higher offenses committed by children under the age of 17 in Montgomery County, making Lambright's office the recipient of most student-based school threats around the county.

What has typically been two or three threats a month, Lambright said, has increased to two or three a day at schools across the county. "As always, our prosecutors have been authorizing the detention of the students making such threats," he said. "There have been over a dozen such cases since February 14th. We have had incidents from almost every school district in the county."

Lambright could not discuss details of any specific juvenile case but said the threats being made have ranged from alarming but non-specific comments like "there is going to be a school shooting" to the very specific threat, "I am going to blow up the school bus." But with the increase in threats, Lambright said the community is not being apathetic.

"Students are speaking up when they hear classmates make threatening remarks," he said. "That is the first step in ensuring an appropriate law enforcement response, and Montgomery County police agencies are following up on every report, as they always have."

Lambright said the first step in the cases is to make sure the community is safe. "First and foremost, we determine whether the juvenile has access to any weapons at home," he said. "Most parents are perfectly cooperative and will allow police to enter their home and ascertain whether weapons are present and how they are secured. In the unusual event they are non-cooperative, our juvenile court can order such an inspection before contemplating whether to release the child from detention."

The other critical piece, Lambright said, is the mental health of the juvenile. "Here, again, we have found most parents to be quite helpful in providing information about any mental health treatment," he said. "Regardless of what information the parents provide, we also request a court-ordered psychological evaluation on each child and seek disciplinary and special education information from the schools to give us as complete a picture as possible. All of that information is presented to the juvenile court."

Montgomery County isn't the only area dealing with an increase in threats. Last Friday, the Houston Chronicle reported that Harris County prosecutors confirmed they had filed more than 60 cases against county juveniles for threatening shootings at their campuses in the ten days since the Florida shooting.

The Feb. 20 arrest of a 14-year-old accused of threatening to shoot up a Fort Bend County junior high marked at least the fourth time in that week that a school in that county has been targeted by hoax threats, according to a Houston Chronicle article.

A student at Needville Junior High posted a photo of a long gun on Snapchat with the message "Dont come to skoo tm (sic)," implying he was going to bring a firearm Feb. 14 and open fire on students, authorities with the Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office said.

Officials with the school were made aware of the message and promptly notified the sheriff's office, who helped identify the student and bring him in for questioning. The student is facing felony terroristic threat charges.