Schools use social media to watch for threats of violence

EDUCATION   By Janel Davis - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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It happened last week in Oregon, leaving nine victims dead. On Friday, it happened again, in Arizona and in Texas, leaving a total of five shooting victims on college campuses.

In an age when school-related shootings are not unsual, Georgia colleges and school systems are preparing for the worst.

When Cobb County school police got a tip last week that a middle school student had threatened to "shoot up" a school the day after the Oregon college campus killings, they acted.

Officers went to the student's home to investigate. The student denied he made a threat. No weapons were found. No charges were filed.

In today's world, you have to take threats seriously, explained Ron Storey, the school district's chief of police. "You never know how it's going to turn out," he said.

Authorities at Georgia's college and public school campuses are constantly alert and training for the potential of mass shootings or violence. Carroll County officials, for example, held an "active shooter" drill Friday morning at Villa Rica High School.

And in a shift to technology, local schools have begun using social media, where most young people have a presence and share much of their lives, to pinpoint potential problems before they

start.

Attackers sometimes lay out their plans — or at least hint at them — on popular social sites, such as Facebook, said Brian Van Brunt, president of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association and author of "Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches to Prevention."

"We are seeing an increase in the type of media we have now where people are upping the ante," Van Brunt said.

A University of Georgia student was indicted in February for posting threats of violence last fall on the anonymous Yik Yak social media app. The student allegedly warned others at the school to stay away from UGA's Zell B. Miller Learning Center "if you want to live," and "I'm coming with an AK," in reference to an AK-47 assault rifle.

This week a 15-year-old Fairfield, Calif. high school student was arrested for a tweet, in which he was pictured holding a rifle and threatening to hurt people at his school. Colleges in Philadelphia were on high alert after an anonymous social media post on a message board warned of an attack on an unspecified campus in the area. In metro Atlanta, school officials stepped up security following unspecified social media threats of school violence related to the 9/11 attacks.

A national study found school threats increased 158 percent during the first five months of the 2014 school year compared to the same period in 2013. Most of the increase in threats came via electronic devices and on social media. Threats posted on sites like Twitter, Facebook and Yik Yak accounted for 231, or 28 percent, of the 812 threats reviewed, the study says.

In DeKalb County a handful of employees sit in a darkened office tracking frequent searches by students or faculty on the district's wireless network. The district uses software that alerts watchers when someone uses words such as "gun", "kill" or "explosives."

"It's provided a proactive safety measure for our students," said Gary Brantley, DeKalb's chief information officer.

Like DeKalb, other schools are experimenting with social media monitoring. The Fulton County School District's smartphone app includes a way for people to anonymously send tips about threats. Two Kennesaw State University employees monitor social media chatter as part of their duties. Georgia State University uses management systems like Hootsuite to monitor social media conversations for threats or safety risks.

UGA is in its first year of using a location-based social media monitoring platform they are testing at special events and with the school's alert system. Using GPS coordinates, the system, costing about $4,000 a year, allows the school to place a virtual barrier around a particular location and monitor the social media chatter of people in the area attending the event. The "geofencing" system does allow UGA officials to monitor for key words, said Steve Harris, UGA's director of emergency preparedness, and to refute rumors that may be circulating about safety risks.

Georgia Tech, chose not to discuss with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution the work it is doing in this area.

There can be positive outcomes to the monitoring as well. Last week, the system may have saved a life after DeKalb learned a middle school student was doing searches about "how to kill myself." They notified the student's parents and the family is getting help.

School officials haven't abandoned traditional methods to secure campuses. Many are hiring more officers and installing surveillance cameras. Campus security has been tightened at some schools where visitors must use an intercom and buzzer system to gain entry. Colleges have implemented safety alert systems to quickly notify students of any danger, and schools at most every level have adopted active shooter protocols.

And the Oregon shooting reinforced the ongoing push by pro-gun advocates to allow school staffers and college students to carry guns on campus. Campus police at Georgia's public colleges do carry firearms, unlike officers on the campus in Oregon. And the General Assembly is expected to debate one more the aspect of opening up colleges to carrying guns.

For parents like Josh Evans, the additional security, whatever the method, is needed.

Evans' stepson, who attends Forsyth Central High School, left the school one day in August and returned later, and no one noticed, he said.

"What if a kid decided to get a gun?," Evans asked. "No one is paying attention.

Some of Georgia's gun-related incidents at schools

Sept. 4, 2015: An 18-year-old student and a passerby were shot after a Grady-Carver high school football game.

Aug. 27, 2015: A 22-year-old student from metro Atlanta is shot to death in the student union of Savannah State University.

Oct. 3, 2014: A Fulton County high school student was fatally shot in a school parking lot after a football game.

Sept. 5, 2014: A Savannah State University student shot another student.

May 8, 2014: One person was shot in the parking deck of Georgia Gwinnett College.

May 5, 2014: A Paine College student was shot in the head after a drug deal gone bad, police said.

May 4, 2014: A Paine College student was injured by flying debris when someone fired into a dorm.

Nov. 3, 2013: A Stephenson High School football player was shot during a fight with teenagers who were not students. He was treated and released.

Sept. 21, 2013: A 20-year-old man was killed on the Savannah State University campus. The victim was not a student, police said.
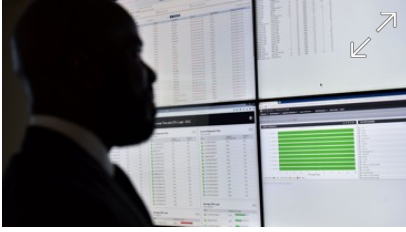
Aug. 20, 2013: A gunman fired shots at DeKalb County's Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy. No one was injured.

Feb. 1, 2013: A Clark Atlanta University student was charged with shooting a Morehouse College student after a fight. The victim's wounds were not life-threatening.

Jan. 31, 2013: A 14-year-old boy was shot in the neck at Price Middle School in Atlanta. He was treated and released. A 15-year-old boy was charged.

May 20, 1999: A 15-year-old student at Heritage High School in Rockdale County wounds six students with a .22-caliber rifle on the high school campus.

Sources: Everytown for Gun Safety and media reports

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JANEL DAVIS

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