


**Threat Assessment to Manage
Threatening Situations and
Create Safer Schools**

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Why Threat Assessment?


“In their quest to avoid becoming the next statistic or headline, school officials have focused preventive resources primarily on increasing physical security (e.g., installing cameras and metal detectors), hiring school security officers, and developing tactical plans for responding once a shooting has occurred. Unfortunately, these responses are not likely to be effective in preventing planned school-based attacks.”

EVALUATING RISK FOR TARGETED VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: COMPARING
RISK ASSESSMENT, THREAT ASSESSMENT AND OTHER APPROACHES
US Secret Service and US Department of Education



Purpose of Threat Assessment

- A threat assessment process provides school personnel with the ability to review a potential threat and determine the appropriate response
- It helps to prevent two major errors in regard to potential threats:
 - under responding
 - over responding
- Its purpose is not to predict violence but to prevent violence



Understanding Violence

- Violence is a process, as well as an act
- Violent behavior does not occur in a vacuum
- Violent acts often are the culmination of long-developing, identifiable trails of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures



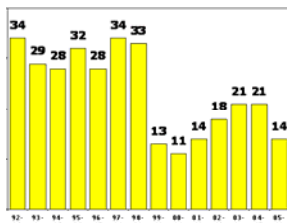
Perception of Growing School Violence

Most parents believe that school violence is more prevalent today than in years past. Reasons are:

- Media coverage has increased
- Sensationalism by press
- School safety is a hot topic



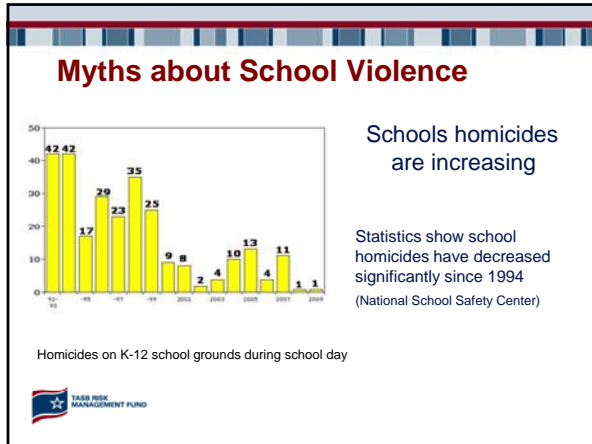
Myths about School Violence



Schools are more violent today

Statistics show that actual violent incidents in schools have decreased (National Crime Victimization Survey)





Schools homicides are increasing

Statistics show school homicides have decreased significantly since 1994 (National School Safety Center)



- ### Dark Side of Zero Tolerance
- A five-year-old in California was expelled after he found a razor blade at his bus stop and carried it to school and gave it to his teacher
 - A nine-year-old in Ohio was suspended for having a 1" knife in a manicure kit
 - A seventeen-year-old in Chicago was arrested and subsequently expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band
 - [Eight-year-old suspended for Jesus drawing](#)
- TASB RISK MANAGEMENT FUND

Zero Tolerance Problems

- When students and staff know there is zero tolerance they don't report incidents because they don't want students to be expelled
- After four years of implementation, the National Center for Education Statistics found that schools employing zero-tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies

The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?
Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson



American Bar Association says:

Zero Tolerance makes Zero Sense

"...the ABA opposes, in principle, "zero tolerance" policies that have a discriminatory effect, or mandate either expulsion or referral of students to juvenile or criminal court, without regard to the circumstances or nature of the offense or the student's history."




Threat Assessment Makes Sense

- Threat assessment considers the context and meaning of a student's behavior, not just the behavior itself
- Threat assessment is designed to determine the seriousness or danger of a student's behavior, and to respond accordingly
- Threat assessment permits flexibility in how schools respond and does not require the same severe consequence for all infractions



Advantages of a Threat Assessment System


- Shared ownership, shared responsibility; decreased liability
- Multi-discipline, multi-agency
- Expeditious but methodical
- Community collaboration and ownership
- Identification of risk in clear terms
- Interventions and supervision strategies that fit the situation and accurately address risk
- Safely keeps many students in school who would otherwise be removed through expulsion or by other means
- Increases both the physical safety of a school and the psychological sense of safety
- Derived from research and is legally defensible
- Recommended by US Departments of Education, Justice, NAAG, IACLEA, NASPA, MHEC, and others



Targeted School Violence

THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS:
A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES


The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Services' "Safe School Initiative" made the following key findings:



Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 1:
 Incidents of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts


- Student did not just "snap"
- There was a plan



Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 2:
Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack


- In most cases, those who knew were friends, schoolmates, or siblings
- This information rarely made its way to an adult



Targeted School Violence


Key Finding 3:
Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack

- The *Safe School Initiative* found that most attackers did not threaten their target directly and some made no threat at all
- Instead, other behaviors and communications that may prompt concern should be investigated



Targeted School Violence


Key Finding 4:
There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence



Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 5:
Most attackers engaged in some **behavior**, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help

- A student's family, teachers, friends, and others may have information regarding aspects of a student's behavior that has raised concern
- Educators and other adults can learn how to pick up on these signals and make appropriate referrals




Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 6:
Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.

Key Finding 7:
Many attackers **felt** bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack


- Feeling bullied is not the same as being bullied



Targeted School Violence


Key Finding 8:
Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack



Key Finding 9:
In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity



What would you do if...?

- Several teachers report that a student's writing as well as his classroom behavior is disturbing
- He has been investigated for harassing female students
- He has a documented mental illness
- He refuses to talk much of the time
- He has not broken any school rules






Connecting the Dots

The Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel to Governor Tim Kaine (Aug. 2007), included key findings:

“Although various individuals and departments within the university knew about each of these incidents, the university did not intervene effectively. No one knew all the information and no one **connected all the dots.**”



Connecting the Dots

Report to President Bush on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy (2007, June 13), included key findings:

“improved **awareness and communication** are key to prevention.”

- Also, that referrals for individuals needing mental health services is critical



School-based Threat Assessment



Connecting the Dots

What is Threat Assessment


- Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the risk of violence posed by someone who has communicated an intent to harm someone
- Threat assessment considers the **context** and **circumstances** surrounding a threat in order to uncover any evidence that indicates the threat is likely to be carried out
- Threat assessment includes **interventions designed to manage and reduce the risk of violence**



What is the Purpose of Threat Assessment?

1. Reduce the risk of violence
2. Identify educational needs and support services and provide interventions for students who have made a threat or display behavior of concern
3. Reduce legal liability by following reasonable and accepted practices for violence prevention


A threat assessment process provides school personnel with the ability to review a potential threat and determine the appropriate response



Who Conducts Threat Assessment?


A ***multi-disciplinary team*** consisting of respected members of the school faculty or administration.

- School-based law enforcement assigned to the school and/or Local Law Enforcement
- A mental health professional- School Psychologist
- A social worker or guidance counselor
- Other professional-teacher, nurse, etc.
- Consider using an existing team:
 - Crisis team
 - Response to Intervention Team




What is a Threat Assessment Team?

- Consultative in nature and designed to “**Connect the Dots**”
- Meets at least monthly or as necessary for high risk cases
- Creates synergy among team so goal of helping student is central, communication flows easily
- Recommends appropriate action per case
- Follows established policies & protocols



What is Involved in a Threat Assessment?


1. **Identification** of threats made by students
2. **Evaluation** of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous)
3. **Intervention** to reduce risk of violence
4. **Follow-up** to assess intervention results



What is a Threat?

- A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone
- Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured
- Threats may be direct or indirect. They do not have to be communicated to the intended victim or victims.
- Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise
- When in doubt, assume it is a threat

---Browning-Wright



Continuum of Threats




- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech



School-based Threat Assessment

We need to determine whether:


The student made a threat
vs.
The student poses a threat



Making a Threat vs. Posing a Threat

Remember –
 Most perpetrators of school violence did not threaten their victim prior to advancing the attack


The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Services'
 "Safe School Initiative"



School-Based Threat Assessment


Training provides a threat assessment team the ability to:

“...gather information, evaluate facts, and make a determination as to whether a given student poses a threat of violence” to self or others




6 Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

1. Targeted violence is the result of an understandable process, not a random or spontaneous act
2. Consider person, situation, setting, & target
3. Maintain an investigative, skeptical mindset
4. Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits
5. Use information from all possible sources
6. *Making* a threat is not the same as *posing* a threat. Ask "Is this student on a path toward an attack?"



Assess for Student Needs

Reaction Error
Sole focus on punishing



Threat

Assessment Error
Sole focus on nature and severity of threat

Inconsistent Discipline

Mistrust of Staff and Adults

Alienation

Poor Anger Management

Abuse or Neglect

Parent Conflict

Drug/Alcohol Problems

Poor Coping Skills


Lack of Empathy

Bullying

Sexual Abuse

Depression

Suicidal Ideation




What Happens Next

Intervention is Key!

May be legal or behavioral or both depending on the outcome of the assessment

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF SUPPORTIVE BEHAVIOR PLANS:


- Description of the behavior of concern
- Behavioral goals
- A plan for teaching and supporting the new behavior
- Description of success
- Plan for implementation
- Timeline for review



What Happens Next


Threat Intervention Continuum:
Solution Equal to the Level of Concern

- Build the plan as a team
- Interventions, Treatment, Monitoring, Protection
- Give consequences, but also build skills and support *(Removed student will return to school someday)*
- Document your plan
- Monitor, monitor, monitor



Monitor Success of Plan


- Is student making progress towards goals?
- Does plan need to be revised or adjusted?
- Is the time-line realistic?
- Continued oversight by team



FERPA Concerns

“FERPA does not prohibit a school official from disclosing information about a student if the information is obtained through the school official’s personal knowledge or observation, and not from the student’s education records.”


<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.html>



In an Emergency:

“In an emergency, FERPA permits school officials to disclose, without consent, education records, including personally identifiable information from those records, to protect the health or safety of students or other individuals.”


<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.html>



HIPPA


HIPAA allows disclosure of protected health information, including psychotherapy notes, concerning a patient when it is considered necessary to prevent a serious and imminent threat to others. This can include disclosure to law enforcement, family members, potential victims, and others if the disclosure can be justified as reducing the risk of violence.

•See CFR § 164.512(j).
<http://www.publichealthlaw.net/Reader/docs/HIPAA.pdf>



Liability Protection

- Follow recognized standards
- Make reasonable decisions (Perfection is not required)
- Maintain adequate documentation (Post hoc records are inadequate)
- Liability is shared amongst all team members




In Other Words ...

- The consequence for a toy gun is not the same as for a real gun
- The punishment should fit the crime
- Intent is always considered
- Supportive interventions are applied and monitored

We may not be able to predict who will commit a violent act, but we can reduce violence by helping troubled individuals and responding to threatening situations.

Dewey Cornell Ph.D. U. of Virginia



Questions?

References:

Threat Assessment in Schools: *A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES* The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Services "Safe School Initiative"

The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools? Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson

The Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D. University of Virginia

Student Threat Assessment System
John Van Dreal, School Psychologist Salem-Keizer Schools

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US Secret Service and US Department of Education

Threat Assessment Process Diana Browning-Wright California Department of Education

National School Safety Center <http://www.schoolsafety.us/>

