

# WHO'S ON THE TEAM?

## MISSION, MEMBERSHIP, AND MOTIVATION

### *K-12 EDITION*

The NABITA 2021 Whitepaper

BY: TIM CASON, M.ED. AND MAKENZIE SCHIEMANN, M.S. WITH ALLISON FROST, M.P.A.

ADAPTED FROM THE 2015 WHITEPAPER, WHO'S ON THE TEAM? MISSION MEMBERSHIP, AND MOTIVATION,  
BY BRIAN VAN BRUNT, ED.D., AARON "CHIP" REESE, ED.D., AND W. SCOTT LEWIS, J.D.

This whitepaper is being shared as a free resource and is published by the National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment (NABITA).

*Additional copies are available for free at [www.nabita.org](http://www.nabita.org).*



# Table of Contents

- Introduction..... 3**
- Mission Statements ..... 3**
- Membership ..... 6**
  - Duplicated Teams and Decentralized Referral Process ..... 6
  - Core, Inner, Middle, and Outer Circle Membership ..... 8
  - School vs. District Team ..... 9
- Motivation ..... 9**
  - Chair ..... 10
  - Principal/Assistant Principal..... 11
  - Mental Health Representative ..... 12
  - Law Enforcement/School Resource Officer ..... 13
  - District Representative ..... 14
  - Special Education Representative ..... 14
  - Title IX ..... 15
  - Risk Management/Emergency Response ..... 15
  - Legal Counsel ..... 16
  - Teacher/Academic Representative ..... 16
  - School Nurse/Health Representative ..... 16
  - Student Activities ..... 16
- Conclusion ..... 17**

# WHO'S ON THE TEAM? K-12 EDITION

## INTRODUCTION

As behavioral intervention teams (BITs) become increasingly common in K-12 schools and districts, it is important for administrators to carefully and intentionally build teams with the mission, membership, and motivation to meet the needs of the school or district, and that align with the principles of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS),<sup>1</sup> Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS),<sup>2</sup> and/or other effective practices in the field. The team's mission statement and composition form the foundation for the work and the team's motivation (or purpose). A strong mission statement and clear guidance about team member responsibilities allow a team to sustain its efforts through staff turnover, position changes, and other unexpected events that could easily derail its service to students. In this whitepaper the authors discuss the development of K-12 BIT missions, membership, and motivations. Similarly, we aim to provide important considerations and decision points for K-12 BITs to ensure the team has a strong foundation for success.

## MISSION STATEMENTS

One of the initial tasks for a team is the development of a mission or purpose statement. For the purposes of this whitepaper, we will use the term "mission statement." A mission statement should drive the BIT's actions and serve as a compass for those times when the team begins to drift off course. A mission statement communicates the team's commitment to the intentional action of ensuring safety and wellbeing to the school and local community. A team's mission statement should be deliberate, connected to the school's/district's strategic plan, embedded with the principles of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and communicate the types of referrals the BIT addresses. An exemplary mission statement identifies "the scope of the team, balances the needs of the individual and the community, defines threat assessment as well as early intervention efforts, and is connected to the academic mission."<sup>3</sup>

**"A mission statement communicates the team's commitment to the intentional action of ensuring safety and wellbeing to the school and local community."**

The mission statement is one of the most direct ways a team can communicate to the broader community who they are and what they can do and, alternatively, what they cannot and/or do not do. Mission statements should encompass the breadth and scope of the work in which the team engages. Furthermore, mission statements should not be overly focused on just threatening behavior or just preventative work. NABITA recommends that BITs focus on preventing high-level concerns by identifying lower-level warning signs of distress in addition to

---

<sup>1</sup>What is MTSS? PBIS Rewards. (2019, March 5). Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/what-is-mtss/>.

<sup>2</sup>What is PBIS? PBIS Rewards. (2021, August 9). Retrieved from <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/what-is-pbis/>.

<sup>3</sup>NABITA Advisory Board. (2018). NABITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams. Published by the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

assessing high-level incidents involving threats of harm to self or others. The MTSS framework “provides a method of early identification and intervention that can help struggling students,”<sup>4</sup> which aligns perfectly with the BIT’s goal of “prevention, intervention, and management of identified and concerning behavior.”<sup>5</sup> Because the MTSS model is “based on principles of prevention, the [three] tiers of support layer on one another so that students with higher-level needs continue to receive supports.”<sup>6</sup>

Deisinger, Randazzo, O’Neill, and Savage offer the following sample mission statement: “Identify a student, [teacher], or staff member who has engaged in threatening behaviors or done something that raised serious concern about their well-being, stability, or potential for violence or suicide.”<sup>7</sup> Given that this sample mission statement primarily focuses on responding to potential or existing threats, it is more appropriate for a Threat Assessment Team (TAT) than a BIT. The BIT’s mission should be more preventative and educational in nature, while still including components of threat assessment; thus, a mission statement that only focuses on addressing behaviors of a threatening nature is not sufficient for the BIT. Alternatively, a team that has the mission statement, “To identify and assist at-risk and struggling students become more connected to services,” may create confusion or overlap with existing services/teams at the school because it is unclear for what a student would be “at-risk [or] struggling” and sends the message the team is only focused on student assistance. Although many of the mission statement examples provided by NABITA members in past NABITA Member Surveys were limited by focusing on threat assessment, NABITA has observed a shift in mission statements over the years to include a prevention and educational focus in addition to addressing concerns of threat.

Seventy-two percent of teams have a mission statement that is publicly shared on their website.<sup>8</sup> A 2014 analysis of over 200 mission statements submitted via the 2014 NABITA Member Survey found the majority of the mission statements included the following elements:

- Scope of team reach (e.g., teachers, staff, and students).
- Discussion of the balance between the needs of the individual and the safety of the community. Defined focus on threat assessment.
- Defined focus on early prevention and intervention.
- Mention of connection to the institution’s academic mission.

---

<sup>4</sup>What is MTSS? PBIS Rewards. (2019, March 5). Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/what-is-mtss/>.

<sup>5</sup>NABITA Advisory Board. (2018). NABITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams. Published by the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

<sup>6</sup>National Center for School Mental Health and MHTTC Network Coordinating Office. (2019). Trainer manual, National School Mental Health Curriculum. Palo Alto, CA: MHTTC Network Coordinating Office.

<sup>7</sup>Deisinger, G., Randazzo, M., O’Neill, D., and Savage, J. (2008). The Handbook for Campus Threat Assessment and Management Teams. Applied Risk Management, LLC.

<sup>8</sup>Schiemann, M. & Van Brunt, B. (2018). Summary and Analysis of 2018 NABITA Survey. Journal for Campus Behavioral Intervention Teams, 6(42-59).

While drawing upon existing mission statements could be a useful place to start, we encourage BITs to consider how the BIT should be defined against the backdrop of the individual school and/or district in which it operates. According to the Jed Foundation, “Each school will have unique needs that a... team may meet, depending on its size, history, resources, and potential overlap with other existing [school and district] committees and procedures.”<sup>10</sup> Developing a mission statement serves as an opportunity for a team to engage in a discussion of defining the team’s scope and focus, and to help guide future actions.

The scope, or who the BIT assesses and intervenes with, can and should reach beyond only actively enrolled students. Additionally, the scope should expand beyond behaviors that occur on school grounds, including behaviors occurring off site and in the virtual/online environment. Once the scope is clearly defined, the mission statement should emphasize the BIT’s responsibility to balance individual needs with community safety.

Additionally, the mission statement should clearly articulate the team’s focus on both threat assessment and preventing high-level concerns through early intervention.

Just as the mission statement defines the scope of the team, it also communicates what the BIT is not. Teams may want to use their mission statement to

## **New BITs beginning to craft their own mission statements may find the following examples helpful<sup>9</sup>:**

1. The Behavioral Intervention Team is a schoolwide team of appointed staff responsible for identifying, assessing, and responding to concerns and/or disruptive behaviors by students, staff, and community members who struggle academically, emotionally, or psychologically, or who present a risk to the health or safety of the school or its members.
2. The BIT engages in proactive and collaborative approaches to identify, assess, and mitigate risks associated with students exhibiting concerning behaviors. By partnering with members of the community, the team strives to promote individual student well-being and success while prioritizing community safety.
3. The BIT is a schoolwide team that provides consultation, makes recommendations, and coordinates the school’s response in situations involving students who engage in concerning, disruptive, and/or potentially harmful behavior. The team serves as a resource to the school community and is designed for early intervention regarding behavioral issues to help support the health, safety, and success of students.

<sup>9</sup> The mission statement examples provided were submitted via the NABITA Member Survey. Team names and identifying school information have been deleted to protect the privacy of the institutions. Individual team names were replaced with the term “Behavioral Intervention Team” or “BIT” for consistency.

<sup>10</sup> Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA). (2013). Balancing safety and support on campus - Jed Foundation. Retrieved from <https://jedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/campus-teams-balancing-safety-support-campus-jed-guide.pdf>.

guard against the perception that they are labeling students or categorizing them throughout their K-12 education.

## MEMBERSHIP

Similar to the team’s mission statement, it is important that team membership also reflects the unique needs and characteristics of the school or district the team serves. The NABITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams state that teams should be “comprised of at least [five], but no more than [ten] members and should at a minimum include: principal or assistant principal, a mental health care employee, a student conduct or discipline staff member (which may be the assistant principal), and a law enforcement or school resource officer (SRO).”<sup>11</sup> Effective teams will, at minimum, have these areas represented. Furthermore, these areas should have appropriately trained backups who can step in and maintain continuity in operations in the event that a member is unavailable or leaves the school/district.

**“When team membership is diverse, the team benefits from various knowledge, skills, perspectives, and resources to inform each of the three phases of the BIT process (i.e., gather data, rubric/analysis, intervention).”**

The NABITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams only cite four specific areas that must be represented but recommend a team of at least five members. This allows schools/district’s flexibility to identify additional roles that should be represented on their team based on their mission, staffing, and structure. For example, if a school/district has a large population of students participating in special education, the team should include an administrator or staff member from special education. Similarly, if the BIT is operating at a school that has a residential component (e.g., boarding school), it would likely be beneficial to add a representative from residence life to the team. When team membership is diverse, the team benefits from various knowledge, skills, perspectives, and resources to inform each of the three phases of the BIT process (i.e., gather data, rubric/analysis, intervention).

### *Duplicated Teams and Decentralized Referral Process*

“Whether it is to combat bullying, prevent violence, support individuals with disabilities, empower the success of those suffering from mental health challenges, or assist those who are in crisis,” BITs should be comprised of school officials that have the capacity and authority to effect change within their school or district.<sup>12</sup> One common practice in the K-12 space is to have multiple or duplicative teams with similar, but varying missions, goals, and procedures for responding to referrals. The often-overlapping membership of these teams is consistently cited as creating challenges for school administrators and for deploying support resources effectively. Because these varied teams, such as a Critical Response Team (CRT) tasked with responding to incidents of suicide, or a Threat

---

<sup>11</sup> NaBITA Advisory Board. (2018). NaBITA Standards for Behavioral Intervention Teams. Published by the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

Assessment Team (TAT) tasked with responding to incidents of threatening behavior, are joined in the common purpose of supporting individuals and preventing violence, NABITA recommends folding separate, overlapping teams into one team. “This collaborative effort [of one team helps] to reduce the silo-effect, simplifies marketing and advertising, ensures inclusive training, and streamlines database management.”<sup>13</sup> One team “reduces duplication of efforts often found when maintaining [multiple] separate teams,” and keeps early identification and prevention work closely aligned with the work of violence risk and threat assessment/management.<sup>14</sup> As noted previously, the MTSS framework uses three tiers of assistance to support students at various levels. Each student should receive the appropriate instruction, support, and interventions based on the severity of their needs. Having one team responsible for consistently assessing and coordinating these interventions within the appropriate tier is most effective because doing so avoids duplication, fosters efficiency, simplifies marketing, and builds partnerships.

**“By having a singular, multidisciplinary team with a centralized referral process, administrators should be able to reduce siloed communication so that they may effectively and holistically assess behavior and conduct appropriate interventions.”**

An important function of the BIT is to improve coordination and communication of support and intervention across various departments. Often, schools or districts have a decentralized referral process (e.g., teachers referring directly to the school counselor, parents calling the principal, the assistant principal addressing a disciplinary referral), which can result in isolated communication. Isolated communication occurs when each individual or area/department focuses on its own individual mission, policy, or procedures without seeing themselves as part of a larger, more complex community. Individuals that do not communicate outside their own administrative procedures are often referred to as operating in a “silo,” which is a detriment to school-wide threat assessment and behavioral intervention. Meloy et al. describe the danger of siloed response systems: “There is always the risk of a ‘silo effect’ — different domains of behavior are never linked together or synthesized to develop a comprehensive picture of the subject of concern, conduct further investigation, identify other warning behaviors, and actively risk-manage the case.”<sup>15</sup> By having a singular, multidisciplinary team with a centralized referral process, administrators should be able to reduce siloed communication so that they may effectively and holistically assess behavior and conduct appropriate interventions.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Meloy, J., Hoffmann, J., Guldemann, A., and James, D. (2011). The Role of Warning Behaviors in Threat Assessment: An Exploration and Suggested Typology. Behavioral Sciences and the Law.

### *Core, Inner, Middle, and Outer Circle Membership*

One challenge of BITs is ensuring that all relevant school or district departments are represented while also ensuring that the team is not so large that meeting, decision-making, and tracking responsive actions becomes impossible. To help streamline operational efforts, while also making sure the right people are part of the discussion, teams should consider categorizing members into one of four membership levels: core, inner, middle, or outer circle.

#### **Core Members**

Core members are essential to the team's functioning and never miss a meeting. In instances when they do have to miss a meeting, they have a trained backup that is prepared to serve in their absence. They should have easy access to other core members and should have access to all records and databases. The core members of a K-12 team are likely the four key areas: principal or assistant principal, a mental health care employee, a student discipline staff member, and a law enforcement officer or school resource officer. For multi-level schools (e.g., K-8, or grades 6-12), teams will likely want to have a principal or assistant principal for each traditional academic level (i.e., primary/elementary, middle, and secondary). At boarding schools, a residence life professional will likely be a core member as well.

#### **Inner Circle Members**

Inner circle members attend every meeting and represent special demographics or constituencies that are critical to the team, such as the school/district disability services representative, a special education teacher, or a school social worker. While they do not have a formal, trained backup, inner circle members may have a proxy that can attend meetings or provide information on their behalf. Inner circle members should have access to all the same records and databases as core members. The combined total of core and inner circle members should be no less than five members, but no more than ten members.

#### **Middle Circle Members**

Middle circle members are not standing team members, but they are invited to the meeting when needed or when they have information to share regarding a referred to the BIT. They bring insight to a referral due to their area of expertise or the department they represent, such as a representative from the school's/district's Title IX team or athletics. Generally, middle circle members have limited to no access to the BIT database unless their non-BIT-related job duties require access. To facilitate the middle circle members' participation, they should receive the BIT agenda in advance of the meeting (just like the core and inner members) so that they may review the list of names to be discussed and alert the BIT chair if they have information that should be shared with the team. Additionally, middle circle members should be well trained in making referrals to the BIT when they have an individual of whom they are aware that should be discussed by the BIT.



## Outer Circle Members

Outer circle members are not official members of the team but are consulted when they can assist in providing necessary follow-up or intervention. Essentially, all individuals connected to the school/district community could serve as an outer circle member if the BIT utilizes them to collect data regarding a student or provide direct intervention to a student, like a teacher checking in with a student at the request of the BIT. They do not attend meetings, do not have access to the database, and do not receive the BIT agenda in advance of the meeting.

While there is a distinction between membership levels, teams should consider bringing core, inner, and middle (and maybe even some select outer) circle members together regularly to engage in training and tabletop exercises, discuss protocols, or partake in other professional development activity.

### *School vs. District Team*

In the K-12 setting, BITs can be implemented as a school-based team and/or district-based team. Smaller districts tend to have a school-based BIT at every school level (e.g., primary, elementary, middle, secondary). With this type of structure, team chairs should communicate and coordinate regularly, and ideally share an electronic database system of some kind, to allow for monitoring students of concern as they progress through grade levels or identifying siblings at different levels that are being referred to the BIT for familial difficulties or other needs. This will allow the new school to be aware of prior concerns and/or provide continuity for ongoing interventions.

Larger school districts may need to be a bit more creative in how they structure their team(s) given the scope and size of their constituency. Depending on the district's structure and resource allocation, BITs can be implemented at every individual school, across school levels (e.g., all elementary schools have one BIT), or by school zone/area (e.g., all the elementary, middle, and high schools in one zone/area form one BIT). Regardless of how the BITs are structured, larger school districts should have a regularly scheduled centralized BIT meeting, comprised of representatives from each individual BIT, to address higher-level cases that impact the district and/or to coordinate continuity in monitoring at the district-level (e.g., a student of concern's family moves and it results in the student of concern being zoned for a new elementary school in the same district). The structure of the team (e.g., a school-based team or district-based team) will influence the membership of the team. BITs that serve multiple schools will need to ensure that they have representation from each school and each critical unit.

## MOTIVATION

After determining the BIT membership composition and structure, it is helpful to review the motivation (or purpose/focus) and challenges faced by each of the various individuals who may serve on the BIT. This section describes the central purpose and motivation that should influence individual members of the BIT based on their professional role. Additionally, this section outlines some of the participation challenges members may face. While this is not an exhaustive list, it represents some of the more common team members, or those positions that require additional explanation in order to be as effective as possible. Please note that each of the team members described below should have practical experience in their respective area and have the authority to take independent action when needed.

## Chair

Team leadership is a crucial element of BIT success. Leading the BIT must be a priority for the chair and this priority should be well understood and supported by school/district leadership. Moreover, a school/district must ensure that the chair is not overcommitted in other areas.<sup>16</sup> A BIT chair must possess the authority to address academic concerns, compel students to complete mandated assessments, and refer students to the student conduct process for disciplinary action, if necessary. A team chair without the authority to act on these issues, or the backing of district leadership, runs the risk of identifying a high-risk situation, but not having the ability to mitigate the risk by responding with appropriate action.

**The team leader should be a senior... administrator who has high-level authority to manage student behavior and who has a solid understanding of the... school and district's administrative structure, ... policies and procedures concerning student conduct, and the complexity of managing difficult student situations.<sup>17</sup>**

Irrespective of position title, it is imperative that the BIT chair have the time and authority to lead the team by fulfilling a host of responsibilities including, but not limited to, facilitating meetings, engaging in ongoing training, ensuring policies and procedures are up to date, supervising members of the BIT in their BIT roles, overseeing the development of educational outreach, and more. The chair must have the charisma and requisite knowledge to garner the respect and confidence of the team and the larger institutional community. A leader who does not have the respect and the ability to persuade and motivate others lacks the necessary skills to properly manage the BIT. The team leader should be “well respected and have outstanding communication skills and judgment.”<sup>18</sup>

Operationally, the chair must understand that they are leading a team and not holding a regular briefing or update on what has taken place since the last meeting. By assembling the right team members, providing training related to each of their positions, and having a system of communication in place that allows lead time for gathering data, BIT members should arrive at meetings ready to share their information and expertise.<sup>19</sup> In the midst of focusing on the operational components, the team leader should also have a commitment to the team's mission statement, vision, and strategic plan. The team leader has the responsibility to keep the team

---

<sup>16</sup> Warrell, M. (2012). Over-Committed? 3 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Saying Yes. [www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2012/09/26/over-committed-3-questions-to-ask-yourself-before-saying-yes/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2012/09/26/over-committed-3-questions-to-ask-yourself-before-saying-yes/).

<sup>17</sup> Dunkle, J. H., Silverstein, Z. B., and Warner S. L. (2008). Managing Violent and Other Troubling Students: The Role of Threat Assessment Teams on Campus. *Journal of College and University Law*, 34 (3): 585–636.

<sup>18</sup> Eells, G.T. and Rockland-Miller, H.S. (2011). Assessing and Responding to Disturbed and Disturbing Students: Understanding the Role of Administrative Teams in Institutions of Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 25:8-23.

<sup>19</sup> Reese, A. (2014). Coaching for the BIT Chair: Creating an Environment of Clam and Directed Leadership. 6th Annual NaBITA Campus Threat Management Institute, Bonita Springs, FL.

sharp and ready to perform, even during the rare “quiet” times when cases are not pressing or when the activity at the school or district have slowed. During these “quiet” times, the meeting should be dedicated to tabletop exercises and/or other professional development opportunities. Because preventing school violence and reducing the potential for at-risk students to escalate requires a certain level of vigilance and dedication, the chair must lead the BIT in sustaining these traits in the face of the BIT being tired, overwhelmed, or unmotivated. The chair should not cancel meetings because there are not many pressing cases to discuss.

The most common question NABITA receives regarding the role of the BIT chair is whether there is a specific position that should lead the team. For the K-12 environment, a principal or assistant principal often fills this role. However, the recent trend of hiring case managers or team chairs as a stand-alone position may become the most common practice, especially at schools where the caseload warrants a full-time position. Schools should track time spent on case management to determine and demonstrate need for a full-time case manager and/or BIT chair position.

NABITA recommends selecting a single chair for the team. If the team utilizes a co-chair model, it can be unclear who has BIT decision-making authority. Choose one person that can lead the team and lead the team well. Additionally, NABITA recommends having a backup for the chair who can step in and maintain continuity in operations in the event that the chair is unavailable or leaves the school/district. In the event the chair is away during a regularly scheduled meeting, or it is necessary to call an emergency meeting, the backup chair must have the ability and authority to act in the chair’s absence. The chair should look for opportunities for the backup chair to demonstrate leadership as part of their work on the BIT. This can be done by allowing the backup chair to distribute the agenda, take a leadership role with particular cases, and/or develop and deliver training to the team.

#### *Principal/Assistant Principal*

Both of these positions are commonly involved on BITs, often filling the role of chair or as another core member. The principal and/or assistant principal are often involved in the creation and leadership of the team, bringing together the various departments and school representatives needed to identify and manage referred students, and are often a first line of contact for those who are concerned about students who may present a threat and/or are displaying other signs of distress or concern. The principal or assistant principal should be able to bring expertise in child/student development theory, professional practice, and policy.

The principal’s participation on the team is critical for multiple reasons. First, it ensures they are aware of concerns and interventions occurring within the school. Membership on or chairing the team guarantees the principal has a “finger on the pulse” of the student population. Another reason for principal participation is the optics for both internal and external stakeholders. As the recognized leader for the school, the principal’s commitment to the BIT shows the importance of the team and ideally creates a sense of trust within the school community. The leadership’s support and engagement validates efforts to promote the safety, well-being, and

success of students. Furthermore, principal involvement often bolsters the level of commitment from other team members, as they feel supported and valued by leadership.

In the K-12 setting, the assistant principal is often responsible for student discipline. The overlap and interplay between BIT and student discipline is common, with both areas well-situated to support and reinforce the processes and goals of the other. Because participation from student discipline is vital to the BIT, both the principal and assistant principal should be core members of the BIT.

### *Mental Health Representative*

Mental health professionals serve on BITs to provide mental health consultation and facilitate connection between counseling resources and the team. For schools that have a licensed mental health counselor providing treatment to students within the school, this counselor should serve as the mental health representative on the BIT. However, for many schools, in-house counselors tend to provide general support and guidance, but refer out for mental health treatment. In these cases, the district's school psychologist could serve as the mental health representative.

The role of the counselor on the BIT can be difficult to navigate given clinicians' confidentiality concerns. It is important to note that mental health professionals do not jeopardize confidentiality simply by serving on the BIT, and often have critical information to share with a team. The JED Foundation notes that, "[w]ithout a student's consent, a clinician is rarely able to discuss information learned as part of the therapeutic relationship with [school] administrators or even acknowledge that the student is in treatment... In contrast, a clinician can always receive information from any source (e.g., a [teacher]) about a student who is currently in treatment."<sup>20</sup> Mental health professionals must balance disclosure with professional ethics and legal standards. In order to assist in alleviating some concerns around disclosures, mental health professionals could consider having students of concern with whom they have a clinical relationship sign an Expanded Informed Consent (EIC) or a Release of Information (ROI), which would allow them to share information with the BIT more freely. The [\*Role of the Counselor on the BIT\*](#) Whitepaper is a useful resource in navigating the competing concerns between privacy and community safety.

Confidentiality concerns often raise the question of how a licensed mental health professional can contribute to a BIT other than to gain information about a student of concern or notify officials of a student who poses a direct and imminent threat to self or others. BITs must remember that counselors can be great storytellers. Without providing any identifiable characteristics, licensed mental health professionals can share relevant case studies and tendencies of similarly situated individuals, which can be of great assistance to the team. In fact, mental

---

<sup>20</sup> The Jed Foundation. Student Mental Health and the Law: A Resource for Institutions of Higher Education. New York, NY: The Jed Foundation, 2008.

health professionals should be consistently speaking in hypotheticals on all cases the BIT discusses in order to ensure their professional perspective is incorporated into the objective risk assessment and intervention decisions. If the mental health professional only offers information when a student is not their client, they are tacitly admitting when a student is their client. Alternatively, if licensed mental health professionals just sit in the room without saying anything, then they are not a contributing member of the team.

Due to potential conflicts with confidentiality laws and professional ethics, NABITA recommends that the mental health professional not serve as the chair of the BIT. A possible exception to this may be at a school where the school psychologist, or similar position, is purely administrative and sees virtually no clients. Even then, that individual should likely not be the chair, but may have to if no one else is a more appropriate fit for that role.

#### *Law Enforcement/School Resource Officer*

A law enforcement or school resource officer (SRO) should be a core team member because they are often the first responders to incidents involving violence, potential violence, and threats, and likely have valuable relationships with local and state law enforcement. They bring knowledge of incident command systems and threat assessment and can be useful in reviewing and/or accessing law enforcement reports and records, concealed carry permits, or other relevant information. The events at Columbine High School in 1999 and the Virginia Tech tragedy in 2007 forced police to tactically change from primarily a containment model to actively responding and intervening when addressing active-shooter situations. As a result, law enforcement personnel today tend to receive training in risk and threat assessment and look for cooperative ways to deescalate situations before they become deadly.<sup>21</sup>

SROs have a unique ability to build relationships of trust and connection with students because they are often perceived to not be associated with the academic administration of the school or district. Additionally, because SROs often represent a level of authority that is more approachable for students than other law enforcement personnel, SROs may learn of information or concerns that could otherwise go unreported at the school. Their training and experience in subject and witness interviewing also provides them with a wealth of skills to navigate these relationships with students while collecting beneficial information for the BIT.

---

<sup>21</sup> Dowis, D. and Reese, A. (2015). Analysis of the Involvement and Contributions of Criminal Justice Programs and Public Safety Departments to Threat and Risk Assessment Teams in Higher Education. Paper presented at the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Annual Conference, Orlando, FL.

### *District Representative*

Depending on the size and structure of a team, a supervisory district leader may participate on the BIT to offer district-level insight and resources; however, consider whether the district leader carries too much gravitas to serve on the team. For example, if that individual's presence prevents other members from speaking freely, the team's effectiveness will be greatly diminished. Additionally, a BIT may determine that a district leader should not be on the team to ensure there is a buffer between a potentially upset student/family member who may quickly contact upper-level administrators and district leadership. When the district-level administration does not serve as a core or inner member, the district leader should be a middle circle member providing support and insight on cases as needed.

A cautionary note: Although upper-level administrators are often separate from the BIT, they must be careful not to become mired in the politics of a case. Instead, upper-level administrators must remember that the BIT utilizes objective criterion in its assessment process to determine appropriate interventions. Upper-level administrators should be advocates for the BIT's decisions at the senior level. For example, consider the case of a student whose objective risk assessment determines the student's risk level meets the threshold for a mandated assessment, but the student's parents complain to the principal or school board and claim nothing is wrong with their child and threaten to sue the district. This student and their family should not find an advocate in the upper-level administration for avoiding the mandated assessment. Instead, upper-level administration should explain to the student and their family that a mandated assessment, or other course of action, is a decision that was reached objectively and is important to the student's success and the safety of the community. Teams should also ensure various stakeholders are informed about how certain decisions are reached and that granting arbitrary exceptions to BIT interventions poses a risk to the school or district, both from threat and liability perspectives.

### *Special Education Representative*

There is often a significant overlap between students referred to BIT and students that are served through special education, are on an individualized education/504 plan, or otherwise have a disability. Many mental health issues and disabilities, such as Tourette Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and schizophrenia, can have symptoms that may be viewed by members of the school community as being concerning or threatening. When receiving a referral for behavior potentially related to a disability, it is helpful for the BIT to consult with a representative from special education. Confering with professionals that provide support to individuals with disabilities allows the BIT to have a greater understanding of why a behavior may be occurring, what intervention techniques may be best, and who might be the most appropriate individual to conduct those interventions. Please note, there is no disability accommodation that allows for behavior to violate the student conduct code, threaten individuals or the community, or overtly disrupt the school/district.

Teams should thoughtfully consider having a representative from special education as a core member, as this may send the message to the community that all students referred to the team have some disability or mental illness. Similar concerns exist by including counseling and student discipline staff on the team—the referred students must have mental illness or are “problem kids”—but adding special education as a core member may

accentuate that perception of the BIT. Instead, consider having a special education representative serve as a middle circle member. This will allow them to have limited access to the database, receive the agenda, and attend meetings when needed. However, the core members should always check to see if a student is being served by special education during the data gathering phase.

### *Title IX*

Although necessary prior, the 2020 Title IX regulations reaffirmed the need for collaboration between the BIT and Title IX. Because BITs are prevention-oriented, as is Title IX, schools should capitalize on the partnership between these two entities in order to ensure effective and holistic support of individuals participating in the Title IX process. BITs and Title IX staff will likely interact in three primary ways: (1) BITs referring cases to Title IX that involve parties being targeted, (2) BITs needing to conduct Violence Risk Assessments (VRA) for individuals that are engaging in sexual and/or gender-based violence or harassment, or threats of such, and (3) Title IX referring those participating in the Title IX process to the BIT for supportive measures.

Unless a person on the team is also the Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator as part of their other job duties (e.g., assistant principal), the Title IX Coordinator should be a middle circle member. This recommendation is derived from the fact that many of the cases discussed by the BIT are not Title IX-related, space on the BIT is limited and there is likely a department that represents a larger population of the community, and attendance for every case discussion could possibly present a conflict of interest for the Title IX representative.

With that said, the Title IX Coordinator should be well trained in the BIT's philosophy and the process to make appropriate referrals, when necessary. Additionally, all school/district employees are mandated reporter and must be trained on Title IX-related matters including, but not limited to, what behaviors to refer, how to make appropriate referrals, and available resources to support individuals involved in the Title IX process. Remember, reporting, personally experiencing, or being accused of engaging in behaviors prohibited by Title IX may be difficult. NABITA, in collaboration with the Association of Title IX Administrators (ATIXA), will continue to provide guidance on what and how this information should be shared without violating privacy, re-victimizing anyone, or causing a chilling effect on reporting.

### *Risk Management/Emergency Response*

If schools are fortunate enough to have staff dedicated to emergency crisis response and prevention at the district level, a representative from risk management or emergency response may be included on the BIT as a middle or inner circle member. There may be personnel in these roles who are also tasked with responding to or managing environmental disasters, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), or fire response. These individuals may be beneficial in providing information related to school-/district-wide emergency response efforts or command systems.

### *Legal Counsel*

Individuals from the legal department are less frequently directly involved on a BIT, although some schools choose to include them with the hope that their early involvement will assist the team in avoiding potential lawsuits. Nevertheless, having counsel providing advice or contribute to the team's decisions is fraught with potential risk, including diluting attorney-client privilege. Generally speaking, including legal counsel as the "guardian of the institution's liability concerns" can impede the team's decision-making process. Frankly, who wants to be the one to disagree with the person charged with defending the school or district in a future lawsuit? Instead, BITs can mitigate potential liability by training its members to apply an objective risk rubric effectively and consistently, with associated interventions, to each and every case referred.

### *Teacher/Academic Representative*

Teachers or other academic representatives are commonly involved with the BIT to provide information regarding grades and academic performance. These individuals often serve as the primary contact in working with teachers or other academic administrators. The teacher or academic representative could be a well-respected teacher, department head, academic counselor, or other academic administrator who carries enough positional leadership and influence to assist the team with gaining community buy-in for training and reporting. Additionally, it is best if this person has a good understanding and appreciation for the school and district structures and child/student development theory.

### *School Nurse/Health Representative*

The school nurse, or other relevant health representative, may also be involved on the BIT and can be a valuable asset to the team. Much like the mental health representative, the health representative may best serve the team by sharing relevant case studies and tendencies of similarly situated individuals that help inform the team without providing personally identifiable information for individuals they may be seeing. Additionally, given their frequent contact with students in situations that involve a health concern, stress, or other difficulty, they may have valuable insight and information to share with the team about student of concern when a release is in place. Most often, the health representative serves as an inner circle or middle circle member.

### *Student Activities*

A member or advisor for student extracurricular activities may be included as a BIT member, depending on the school setting and culture. One example may be a coach or athletic staff member if the school has a large proportion of students participating in athletics. For schools that have a high level of involvement with student government/council or other extracurricular groups, the advisor or coordinator for that group/area may be a helpful addition to the team.

While the connection and information they bring may be useful, inclusion of a student activities representative as a core or inner member may raise concerns that a team is too large to quickly and privately address risk. Instead of adding a student activities representative as a core or inner circle member, it may be more appropriate to invite these individuals to a specific meeting when they have a vested interest (i.e., middle circle member). If this



is the case, it is imperative that the student activities representative understand the function, role, and expectations of the BIT and their role within it prior to participating in any meetings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Creating a BIT is often a daunting task to undertake for school or district leaders. It is our hope that this whitepaper provides a useful starting place for schools/districts to create a BIT that fits the school's/district's needs and is aligned with established national effective practices for the team's mission, membership, and motivation. While there is no perfect mission statement or exact membership roster due to the unique features each school or district, this paper provides insight and guidance necessary make informed decisions when forming a new or restructuring an existing BIT.