National Center for School Safety

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School Threat Assessment TOOLKIT

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The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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Dewey Cornell, Ph.D. is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia. He holds the Virgil Ward Chair in Education. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Virginia Youth Violence Project. During his clinical and academic career, Dr. Cornell has worked with juvenile and adult violent offenders, testified in criminal proceedings and legislative hearings, and consulted on violence prevention efforts. He has authored more than 300 publications in psychology and education, including studies of juvenile homicide, school safety, bullying, and threat assessment. He is the principal author of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, which is an evidence-based model of school threat assessment used in schools across the United States and Canada. He also led the development of the Authoritative School Climate Survey as a student and staff measure of school climate and safety conditions. His work has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice.

Jennifer L. Maeng, Ph.D. is a Research Associate Professor in the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development. Her research focuses on the role contextual factors in the educational setting, such as school climate and safety, play in supporting effective teaching. Dr. Maeng is a former high school science teacher and is currently the principal investigator of the U.S. Department of Justice funded "Statewide implementation of school threat assessment in Florida" (GMS Award 2020-RF-CX-0002). Her work has been funded by agencies including the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Justice, National Science Foundation, and Virginia Department of Education and has been disseminated through Psychology in the Schools, Journal of School Violence, School Psychology Review, School Psychology Quarterly, and Teaching and Teacher Education.

DISCLOSURE

Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng are the primary authors of this toolkit. The toolkit was created through an iterative process with multiple stages of external review and input from many sources. Cornell and Maeng acknowledge the contributions of their research team at the University of Virginia and the National Center for School Safety's staff at the University of Michigan.

In order to draw upon the knowledge of the field of school threat assessment, Cornell and Maeng recruited a cadre of 188 experts in school threat assessment (see Appendices for more about the experts). These experts represented different disciplines and occupations, including many prominent authorities who contributed to research, development, and training in school threat assessment. These experts were surveyed twice about priorities and best practices for the field of school threat assessment and were given the opportunity to review and comment on a draft of this toolkit.

Finally, the toolkit was reviewed by the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice. The contributions from all of these sources are gratefully acknowledged, but the opinions, findings, and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice or the reviewing experts and colleagues. This toolkit identifies some examples of resources for schools to consider but does not endorse them. Other resources not found in this list also may be useful. Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in school threat assessment training as principal developer of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines and director of a training business, School Threat Assessment Consultants, LLC.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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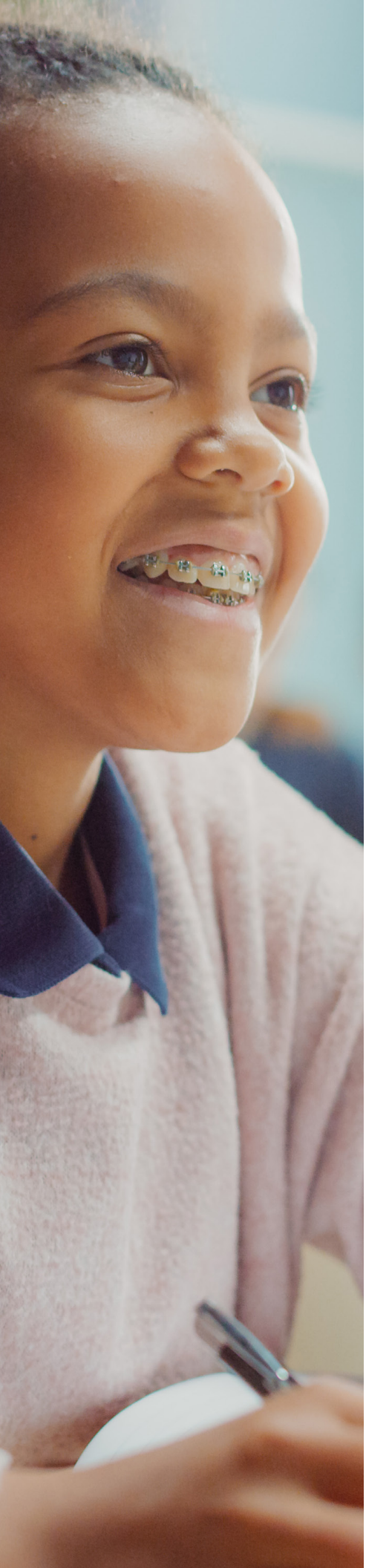

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School Threat Assessment Toolkit
INTRODUCTION

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SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

This toolkit is authored by University of Virginia professors Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with input from school safety leaders, experts, government agencies, and the National Center for School Safety.

To access all three sections of the toolkit, as well as the introduction and appendices, visit our website at nc2s.org or visit the toolkit's web page directly.

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INTRODUCTION

Using This Toolkit

This toolkit is intended to assist schools when using behavioral threat assessment (TA) and management as a part of a comprehensive approach to violence prevention. Elements of a comprehensive school safety plan can include anti-bullying programs, clear rules and consistent discipline, conflict resolution, mental health services, positive behavioral interventions and supports, restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and special education.

This toolkit provides technical assistance on the training, implementation, and evaluation of school TA teams to ensure that students' rights are protected and that the program is done with fidelity. It includes documents, forms, links to videos, and other resources.

Resource

To obtain a complete list of references and abstracts, visit the School Threat Assessment Literature Resources web page.

The principal authors of this document are Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with the assistance and input of multiple parties, including the leadership and staff of the National Center for School Safety, surveys of 189 school threat assessment experts, reviewers for the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education, and feedback from 50 threat assessment experts.

This toolkit is intended to provide action steps to implement threat assessment teams, identify challenges teams may face in protecting student rights and maintaining fidelity, and highlight important research findings. Action steps, challenges, key findings, and resources structure each section and offer different approaches for understanding and utilizing the information. These appear throughout the toolkit in color-coded call-outs. The color key is on the page 8.

This toolkit is organized into the following four sections:

Introduction:
Provides an overview of threat assessment and its history, as well as identifies the current need for threat assessment.

Section 1: How to Select and Train Your School Threat Assessment Team
Identifies appropriate team members and their roles, team training topics, and standards.

Section 2: How to Implement Threat Assessment at Your School
Describes general principles of threat assessment programs and identifies typical pathways to violence.

Section 3: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Your Threat Assessment Program
Explains general procedures and a scoring protocol that can be applied across threat assessment models.

Callout Box Color Key

Key Term		Defines important terms and concepts used throughout the toolkit.
Challenge		Identifies common challenges or barriers that might be faced when implementing threat assessment.
Resource		Shares resources that can be used when conducting threat assessments.
Research Finding		Highlights important threat assessment research findings.
Action Step		Identifies actions that schools will want to take when implementing threat assessment programs.

What is School Threat Assessment

Behavioral threat assessment is a form of violence risk assessment that is concerned with individuals who have threatened to harm someone. The concept of threat can be broadly construed to include both communications of intent to harm someone and behavior that raises reasonable concern that the individual is preparing to harm someone (such as someone acquiring a gun and making plans to attack a school without necessarily articulating a threat). However, a threatening statement can reflect an expression of anger or frustration that does not necessarily indicate intent to carry out the threat, hence the need to assess the threat and determine whether the individual poses a threat. Teams must always consider the context and circumstances of an individual's behavior without placing too much weight on one observation or concern.

The full process, often termed "behavioral threat assessment and management," involves three stages: (1) identifying an individual as threatening violence, (2) gathering information to assess the nature and seriousness of the threat, and (3) implementing interventions to reduce the risk that the threat will be carried out. In some cases, the interventions should be extended over time and require ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness. These three stages are elaborated on in Section 2. Threat assessment programs also need to be regularly evaluated to ensure consistency, fairness, and equity. The evaluation of threat assessment programs will be elaborated on in Section 3.

Throughout the toolkit, the following key terms are used frequently. For additional key terms and their definitions, please refer to the glossary (Appendix 5).

Key Terms

Threat

Any communication or concerning behavior that conveys an intent to harm someone. Threats can be made directly to the target or indirectly to a third party. Threats can be explicit or implied. Threat assessment teams might investigate concerning behavior that suggests an individual is preparing to commit a violent act when an explicit threat has not been observed.

Individuals with the capability and intent to carry out a threat are described as posing a threat. Many threats are made without serious intent to harm someone physically but might be intended to express anger or cause a disruption.

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

A form of violence risk assessment that is concerned with individuals who have threatened to harm someone or pose a threat to harm someone. The behavioral threat assessment process encompasses identifying a threat, determining the seriousness of that threat, implementing interventions to reduce risk from the threat, and continuously assessing and monitoring the effectiveness of those interventions.

Adapting for Schools

For schools that choose to use threat assessment, it is most often carried out when a student has made a threat. However, threat assessment can also be used for adults, such as former students, parents, staff members, or other individuals. This toolkit will focus primarily on students.

Threat assessment was developed for individuals who threaten to harm others and differs from suicide assessment, although in some cases, both are needed. There is a large amount of literature on suicide assessment that is not covered in this toolkit.[1–4] **Behavioral threat assessment must be adapted for use in school settings.** Threat assessment must be adapted for the context in which it is used. Originally, law enforcement used it to identify potential terrorists and assassins, and the business world used it to evaluate disgruntled employees. In schools, the population of concern is primarily children and adolescents who span a wide range of development.

Action Step

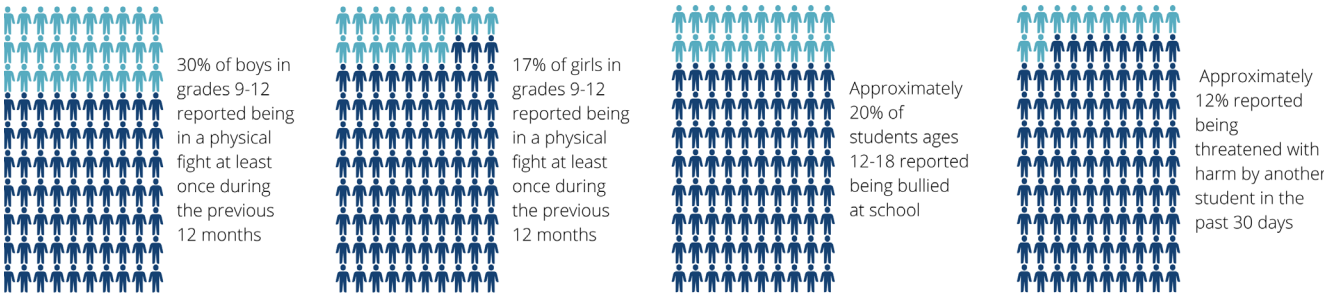
Every assessment should lead to some kind of intervention, whether it is a brief meeting or a comprehensive program, that is intended to help the student cope with whatever problem or concern underlies the threat.

Young people are developing their cognitive abilities and learning how to deal with their emotions and interact appropriately with others. They might engage in misbehavior involving threatening statements or behavior that does not pose a serious threat of violence. Accordingly, a school threat assessment typically is concerned with understanding why a student made a threat or engaged in threatening behavior and then identifying appropriate interventions that help address the underlying problem or concern that motivated the threat. For example, a student may be the target of bullying, upset over the end of a romantic relationship, or experiencing a mental health crisis. **School threat assessment teams are concerned with helping students who may be frustrated, angry, or distressed and in need of assistance to prevent an act of violence.**

Schools that use threat assessment should keep in mind that the primary goal is safety for everyone. The broader context is that educators want all students to be successful in school. Threat assessment should always be coordinated with the school's existing programs and services. This ensures that students with difficulties learning and behaving appropriately can receive needed support.

Children and youth are more impulsive and emotional than adults and engage in more frequent aggression. The results of a national survey on crime at school are in Figure 1 below.[5,6] Only a small portion of student threats come to the attention of school authorities, and most are not serious.

Figure 1: National Survey Results



There are at least three levels or forms of student aggression that need to be considered:

- ordinary student bantering and expressions of frustration that do not lead to physical attack
- physical fighting that does not lead to serious injury
- threats of violent attacks that could result in serious physical injury

Origins of School Threat Assessment

The shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999 was a watershed moment in the history of school safety in the United States. Although only one of a series of school attacks, the magnitude of this tragedy and subsequent media attention led to the mobilization of federal, state, and local agencies to search for prevention measures.[7]

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) held a conference in June 1999 that analyzed 18 completed or foiled school shootings.[8] **The FBI recommended the use of behavioral threat assessment as an alternative to criminal profiling.** Notably, the FBI also proposed that threat assessment could be a promising alternative to the use of zero-tolerance discipline. Concurrent with the FBI study, the U.S. Secret Service, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, conducted a study of school shootings called the Safe School Initiative. After examining records from 37 school shootings, the Safe School Initiative reached a similar conclusion that it was not possible to develop a useful profile or checklist of a homicidal student, because such characteristics could also be found in many students who were not violent.[9]

Challenge

Threat assessment is often confused with profiling. The FBI uses criminal profiling to identify the perpetrator of a crime by analyzing the crime, whereas threat assessment is concerned with a potential crime that has not occurred. **The intent of threat assessment is to objectively examine evidence and communications to evaluate a threat, and prevent violence** by connecting the person to appropriate resources.

For more information about threat assessment as an alternative to zero discipline, please see Appendix 2 in the full toolkit PDF.

Both the FBI and the Secret Service studies found that nearly all perpetrators had communicated or leaked their intentions through threats or warnings to others, most often to other students.[9–13] Over the next two decades, the concept of behavioral threat assessment evolved to include the identification, assessment, and management of persons who have communicated threats of violence or engaged in some form of threatening behavior.[14] In recent years, state governments have begun to encourage or require schools across the U.S. to use threat assessment to identify and assist students who threatened violence toward others in their schools.[15] By 2019-2020, sixty-four percent of all public schools reported having a threat assessment team.[16]

Key Terms

Leakage

An accidental or intentional communication that reveals intent to commit a violent act, such as making remarks that reveal hostility toward someone or plans of violence. Leakage might occur directly or indirectly and might not be a purposeful disclosure. Increasingly, leakage is observed in digital communications such as social media posts, texts, blogs, and emails.

Profiling

The practice of using a predetermined list of characteristics or signs to identify someone as likely to commit a crime or likely to have committed a specific crime.

For more information on profiling, see the glossary in Appendix 5.

Current Need for School Threat Assessment

According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there have been at least 514 homicides of youth at school between 1994 and 2018.[17] **Although this total represents less than 2% of youth homicides in the United States, the traumatic impact of these homicides is far-reaching and affects millions of students, parents, and school personnel.** Additionally, concern about school violence has had a tremendous secondary impact in generating the public perception that schools are not safe. This perception has motivated the expenditure of billions of dollars on building security measures and the institution of school shooting drills nationwide.[18]

The cost and effort devoted to these reactive measures contrast with the nationwide shortage of funding for school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers who work proactively to prevent violence.[19]

The use of school threat assessment can offer schools a prevention strategy that is far less expensive than the building security measures being undertaken after high-profile shootings.

Action Step

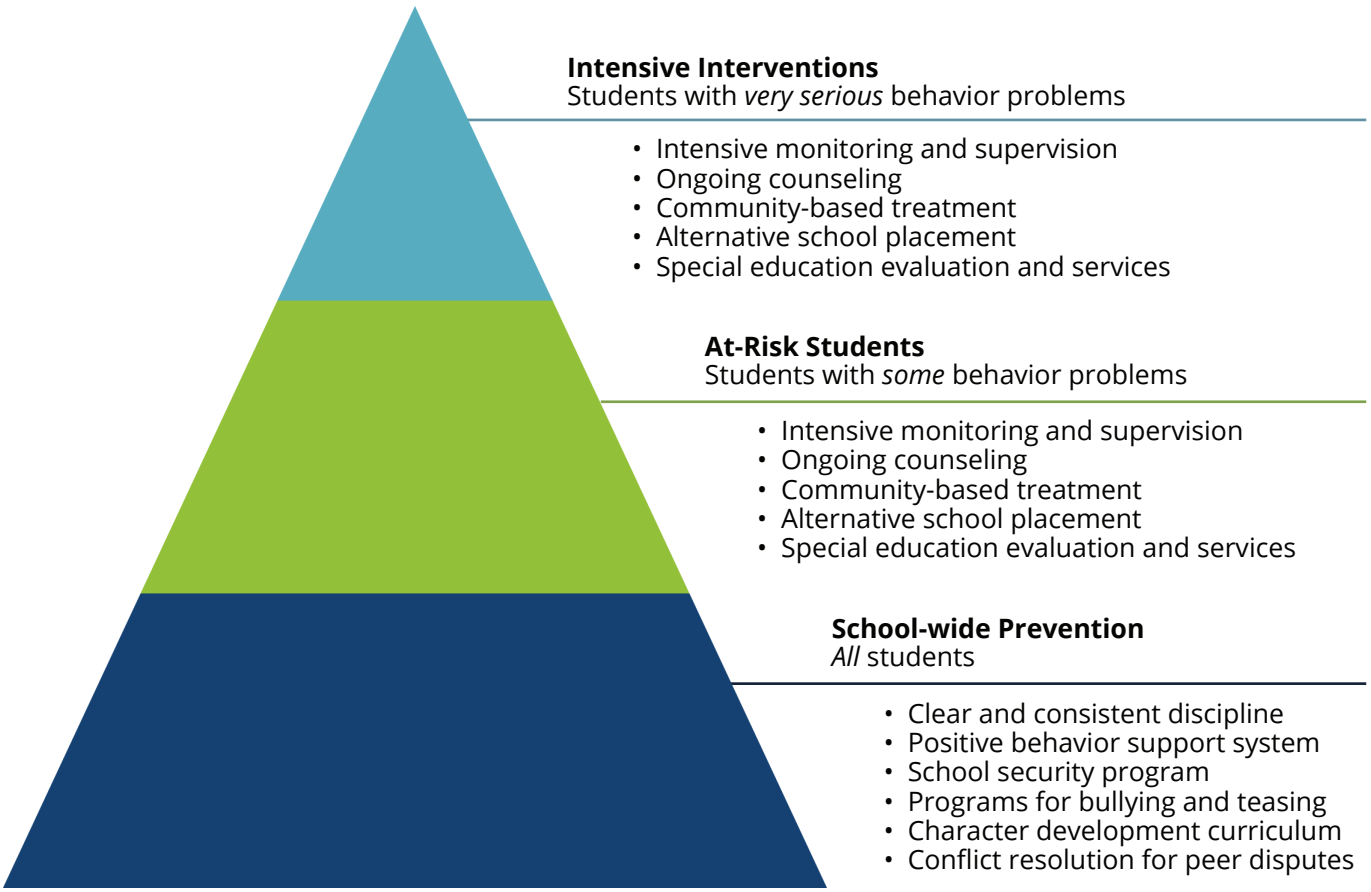
As more states require schools to use threat assessment teams, it is important that schools consider the definitions of threat assessment specific to their state or jurisdiction. Note that the term "threat assessment" might be used by emergency agencies to define vulnerabilities or sources of danger to organizations, communities, buildings, etc.

Threat assessment is a proactive strategy that, in conjunction with other evidence-based supports and services, can provide timely and effective intervention to students with a range of social-emotional and behavioral needs.

Threat assessment works best as part of a comprehensive approach to school safety. Many case studies have shown that threat assessments helped avert potentially violent events.[7,20] A threat assessment program can identify troubled or distressed students before their problems escalate into violence, either at school or in the community. The threat assessment process often helps reveal other concerns, such as bullying and harassment, substance use, or suicidality. Implementing supports to address these concerns can ease the stressors that led to the threat in the first place and can reduce negative behaviors that lead to poor performance in school.

Figure 2 below shows how threat assessment can fit into a multi-tiered system of supports. The text on the right of the diagram suggest interventions that can be put in place following a threat assessment depending on a student's particular context.

Figure 2: Threat Assessment as Part of a Comprehensive Approach to School Safety



Another harmful effect of school shootings has been the overreactions of school authorities to student misbehavior. Students who make threatening statements or post images of themselves holding weapons can arouse great concern by school authorities, who often invoke zero-tolerance policies to suspend or expel them regardless of the circumstances.[18,21,22]

Threat assessment can be an alternative to a zero-tolerance approach that relies on exclusionary discipline. School exclusion has been widely criticized in the educational field as an ineffective and often counter-productive disciplinary practice that fails to improve school safety and leads to higher rates of student failure and court involvement.[23,24] Whereas a zero-tolerance approach emphasizes the automatic administration of a punishment such as suspension or expulsion regardless of the circumstances or severity of the student's misbehavior, a threat assessment approach, when implemented correctly, considers the nature and circumstances of the student's misbehavior and makes markedly less use of school exclusion (for research on this topic, see Appendix 2 in the full toolkit PDF).[25]

Challenge:
Risk of Suspension

Suspended students are at risk for:

- falling behind in their classes
- feeling alienated and rejected
- continuing to misbehave and be suspended
- dropping out of school
- having juvenile court involvement

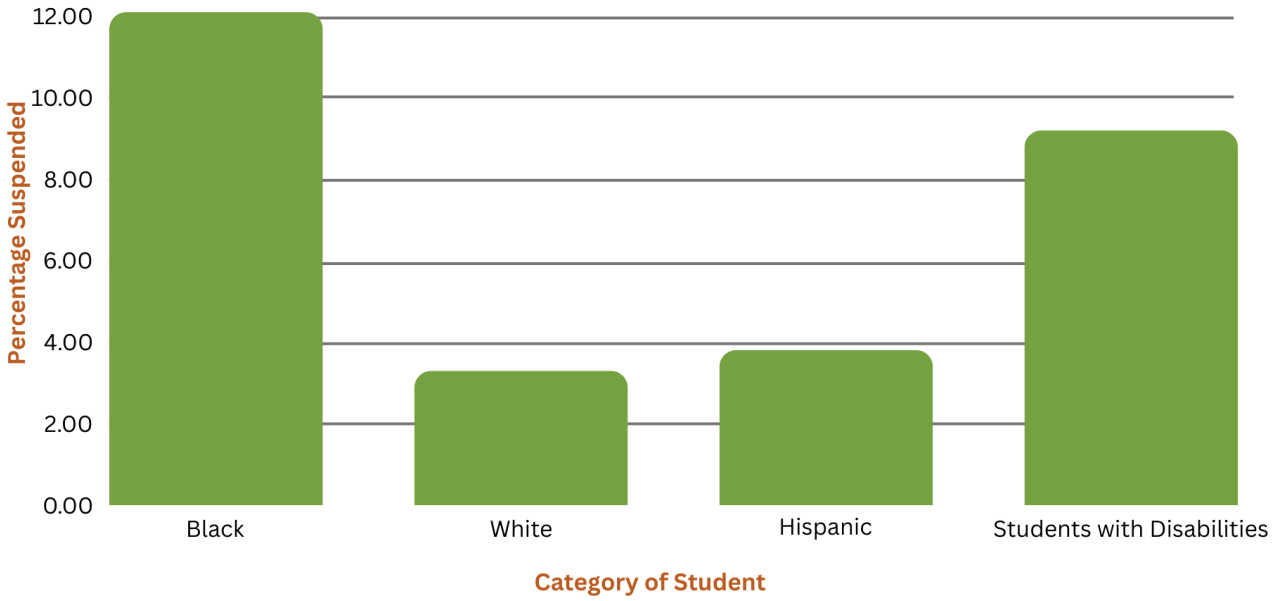
Although threat assessment teams typically do not make disciplinary decisions, they can provide information that informs disciplinary decisions. Supportive interventions are more effective in proactively addressing threats than disciplinary actions; severe disciplinary consequences should be used with caution because they promote disengagement from school and have the potential to escalate conflict.[26]

Research Finding: Threat Assessment and Exclusionary Discipline

Multiple studies have found that schools using threat assessment have lower suspension and expulsion rates than schools not using threat assessment.[6,27-31] The lower rates of school exclusion might be attributable in part to the emphasis in the training program on threat assessment as a non-punitive problem-solving approach to student threats and an alternative to zero tolerance. Several studies of threat assessment training have found that school personnel who participate in the program report decreased fears of school violence and reduced support for zero tolerance and school suspension.[28,32-34]

A major problem with school exclusion is its disproportionate application across racial and ethnic groups and students with disabilities.[24] The most recent national data available from the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education describe rates of in-school and out-of-school suspension for students by race/ethnicity (Figure 3).[35]

Figure 3: 2017-2018 Office of Civil Rights for the U.S. Department of Education Rates of Suspension by Race and Disability



School suspension is a prime contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities.[22] One important benefit of a threat assessment approach is that it leads school authorities to carefully consider the student's intentions and circumstances before making a disciplinary decision. Notably, several studies have found that racial and ethnic disparities are reduced or absent among students who have received a threat assessment.[36,37] There is also evidence that schools adopting threat assessment show a general decline in the use of school suspension and some reduction in racial disparities for all students (not limited to students receiving a threat assessment).[6,28,30] Although nearly all of this research has been conducted in Virginia, a statewide study in Florida and a study of three Colorado districts also found little or no disparities in disciplinary outcomes based on racial, ethnic, or disability status following a threat assessment.[30,38]

Comparison of Threat Assessment and Zero Tolerance

Threat Assessment

- Informs disciplinary process but does not determine it
- Concerned with preventing a future violent behavior
- Considers the context and content of student's behavior
- Multiple studies support it

Zero Tolerance

- Punitive and automatic form of discipline
- Concerned with administering consequences for past behavior
- Does not account for circumstances or seriousness of behavior
- Lacks scientific evidence of effectiveness

There is also a concern that students with disabilities are subject to higher rates of school exclusion than other students.[39,40] Although more research is needed, there are multiple studies finding that students with disabilities who receive a threat assessment are not subject to the disproportionate rates of school discipline found in studies of the larger school population. For example, one study specifically compared students receiving special education (SPED) services to students in general education programs and found that students in the SPED group were referred for a threat assessment at a higher rate but did not receive disproportionate disciplinary consequences compared to students in the special education group.[41] Other studies have found that students in special education are referred for threat assessments at a higher rate than students in general education but found that differences in school exclusion were small or statistically non-significant.[36] A high referral rate should not be considered problematic if it means that students with disabilities are being carefully evaluated in a threat assessment rather than being given disciplinary consequences. The Colorado study mentioned previously found no disparities in disciplinary outcomes based on disability status following a threat assessment.[42]

Challenge

Although unintended consequences are possible, teams should work to minimize the potential for biases or errors in judgment that could result in unfair outcomes for students of color or students with disabilities. The available research demonstrates that threat assessment does not lead to racial, ethnic, or disability-related disparities in school exclusion when teams follow evidence-based procedures. Although more research is needed (see the summary of research in Appendix 2 in the full toolkit PDF), the large disparities that are typically observed in general studies of school discipline are not observed in samples of students who have received a threat assessment.

Threat assessment research conducted in Colorado, Florida, and Virginia shows no statistically significant differences, or very small differences, between Black and White students, Hispanic and White students, and students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Some studies have found that students of color and students with disabilities are referred for threat assessment at a higher rate than other students. Although more research is needed to ensure that these students do not experience any harmful effects, higher referral rates are not necessarily problematic so long as the students are not receiving disproportionate rates of school exclusion.

Many programs designed to reduce harmful outcomes in at-risk students, such as court diversion programs, academic support programs, and reduced-price meal programs, might serve a disproportionate number of students of color or students with disabilities, similar to how more of those students may be referred for a threat assessment. Similar to those programs, the goal of threat assessment is to ensure that at-risk students are connected with services similar to the programs above.

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School Threat Assessment TOOLKIT

Section 1

How to Select and Train Your School Threat Assessment Team

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Implementation Tools

Checklist for establishing school-based threat assessment

Questions to ask when selecting a training program

SECTION 1 OBJECTIVE

Threat assessment can be one part of a comprehensive school safety plan. This section addresses what schools need to consider in deciding to use a threat assessment approach in an equitable way that protects student rights. This includes a review of existing safety practices and discipline policies, examination of staff resources, and administrative and school community support for threat assessment.

SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

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Readiness for School Threat Assessment

Implementation of a threat assessment program requires a clear commitment and active leadership from a school system's central administration. It may be helpful to create a mission statement for the program to guide policy development and implementation.[43] Consider the following items to assess your school system's initial readiness for a threat assessment program:

- Your central administration supports the use of a threat assessment program.
- Your central administration can identify and allocate sufficient resources to support a threat assessment process, including supporting the identification of 3 or more staff members in each school to serve on teams, providing them with training, and allowing them to allocate work time to manage threat assessment cases and attend team meetings (as needed, but at least monthly).
- Your school system is prepared to allow teams to evaluate the seriousness of a student's threatening behavior and advise the school administration on disciplinary actions and supports needed, if any are indicated.
- Your central administration will develop and endorse policies guiding the establishment of threat assessment teams as reflected in the sections listed below.

Steps for Establishing School-Based Threat Assessment

The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) of the U.S. Secret Service published their seminal work *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence* in 2018, which serves as one possible framework for threat assessment programs. The NTAC identified eight key steps in establishing school-based threat assessment. The eight steps are presented below, augmented with recommendations based on the threat assessment literature and our cadre of experts. A checklist including these steps and relevant recommendations is included in the tools for this section, which be found on the previous page.

1. Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team

Establishing a multidisciplinary threat assessment team is a primary step in preparing your school to conduct threat assessments. Team composition may vary depending on the resources and unique needs of school districts. It is recommended that teams include representatives from school administration, mental health (e.g., counselor, psychologist, social worker), and law enforcement, as well as other areas (e.g., special education).

2. Define prohibited and concerning behaviors

Before implementing a threat assessment program, your school or school district should have policies defining prohibited behavior requiring immediate intervention, such as bullying and fighting, as well as behaviors that may not be indicative of violence, but merit intervention, such as a marked decline in academic performance or increased absenteeism. School policies should define the kinds of communications or behaviors that warrant referral to the threat assessment team.[44] Communications of intent to harm someone and concerning behaviors such as getting into a physical fight or bringing a lethal weapon to school warrant a threat assessment. Behaviors such as expressing admiration for persons who committed a mass shooting raise concern and merit inquiry that also might lead to a threat assessment.

3. Create a central reporting mechanism

Schools using threat assessment should establish one or more mechanisms for all members of the school community to report threatening or concerning behavior. Reports should be confidential to protect the identity of the reporter. There also may be a provision for anonymous reporting to encourage individuals who would not otherwise make a report.

Resource

For more information on anonymous reporting systems, check out the Getting Buy-In for Anonymous Reporting Systems webinar.

4. Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention

Most threats can be handled by school personnel. However, schools using threat assessment should establish procedures and policies for involving law enforcement. A national group of experts recommended that there be a school resource officer (SRO) or law enforcement officer on each threat assessment team, especially for secondary schools. In addition, there may be state laws that determine when certain kinds of incidents must be reported to law enforcement. Law enforcement involvement in a threat assessment can range from consultation to direct action, such as investigation and arrest in the most serious cases. Schools can achieve greater collaboration and consistency in threat assessment practices if law enforcement officers are included in training.

5. Establish threat assessment procedures

Teams should have clearly defined procedures to guide their assessments. These procedures should lead teams to form a reasonably accurate understanding of the threat posed by the student or person of concern and to identify appropriate interventions. Having these procedures in place ensures that the threat assessment process can be evaluated to ensure that students' rights are being protected. Please see Section 2 for a discussion of record-keeping practices.

6. Develop risk management options

Once the team has completed their initial assessment of the student, they should develop risk management strategies that reduce the student's risk of violence rather than attempt to make a prediction of violence. Threat assessment teams should keep in mind that prevention does not require prediction. Teams can identify risk factors and appropriate strategies to reduce risk without making a prediction that labels a student as dangerous or likely to commit a violent act. Often, the most effective way to reduce risk is to address the problem or stressor(s) motivating the threat. Threat management should involve interventions and supports to help the student move on a more positive pathway. Threat assessment teams function more effectively as problem-solvers than fortune-tellers.

7. Create and promote safe school climates

A positive school climate can help prevent violence. A positive climate is characterized by mutual respect and trust and social and emotional support for students. Teachers and staff support diversity and encourage communication between faculty and students. They intervene in conflicts and work to stop bullying and harassment. Students feel comfortable seeking help from adults and share concerns about the well-being of their peers. This is a key piece of comprehensive school safety.

8. Conduct training for all stakeholders

As part of the threat assessment program, it is important to educate all stakeholders, including faculty and school staff, students, and parents. Each member of the school community should know about the threat assessment program and their role in reporting concerns and providing information relevant to a threat of violence.

Resource

For more information on creating and promoting safe school climates, check out Section 2 of the National Center for School Safety's Trauma-Informed Resilience-Oriented Schools Toolkit.

Team Membership

This section uses results from the survey of K-12 threat assessment experts and a literature review to examine the roles of school administrators, counselors, law enforcement officers, psychologists, social workers, teachers, and others who might be on a school team. It also includes a discussion of team membership recommendations for various threat assessment models.

Resource

The full survey results referenced in this section can be found in Appendix 3 in the full toolkit PDF.

There is substantial agreement that threat assessment is best accomplished via a team approach to draw on diverse perspectives and expertise and to facilitate prevention and intervention efforts.[9,10,43,45-47] Our experts, as well as several models, recommend a minimum of three team members:[8,9,26,43,45-48]

- **School administrator** is often a principal or assistant principal who may function as a team leader. This individual may be responsible for student discipline and safety and, in these roles, can coordinate threat assessment and disciplinary actions. The school administrator may be involved in an initial review of the seriousness of the case and bring in additional team members and resources as needed. The leader convenes and chairs regular team meetings.
- **School mental health professionals**, such as counselors, school psychologists, or school social workers, are staff who bring expertise in helping troubled students resolve personal problems and conflicts. They may be involved in an initial interview, as well as an assessment of mental health status and need for services. They may guide long-term follow-up and monitor the student's participation in the intervention plan and assess its effectiveness.
- **Law enforcement** or school security officer is, ideally, a school resource officer trained to work in schools. The officer can advise the team on relevant criminal law, conduct criminal investigations, contribute information from community sources and social media, and provide protective services in the most serious cases. More generally, the officer builds and reinforces positive school relationships.

Note that there is no expectation that teachers serve on a team, although this is an acceptable practice and is required in some states. Teachers are often less involved because they have instructional responsibilities, and threat assessment is regarded as a student support activity. Nevertheless, teachers should be asked to provide information and input in cases involving their students. A school staff member with expertise in special education can be a valuable member of the team, especially when cases involve students with special education needs. Teams will need to coordinate with special education teams or programs serving any student who receives a threat assessment.

Figures 4 and 5 present results from a survey of our K-12 threat assessment experts.[9,10] The team should have a designated leader and regular membership, although some models allow for a more flexible team composition.[10,46]

Figure 4: Who Should Be on a Threat Assessment Team?[49]

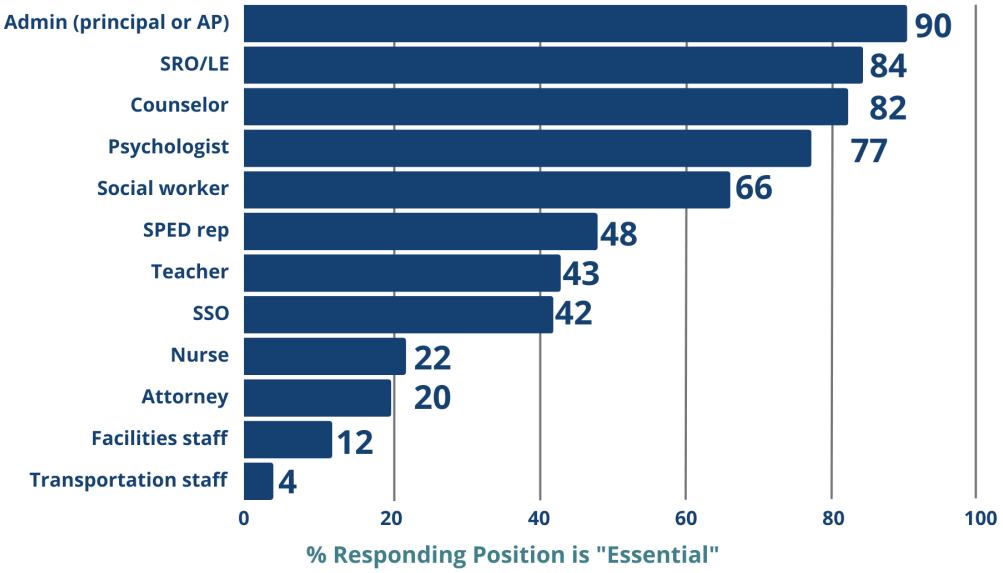
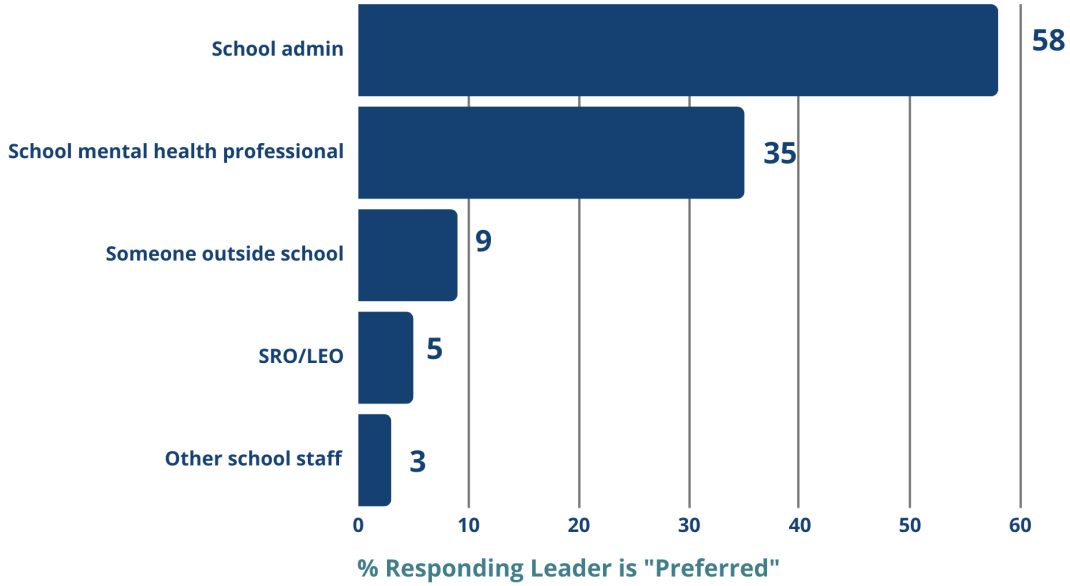


Figure 5: Who Should Lead the Threat Assessment Team?



Team members should train together with clearly defined roles and expectations. The Secret Service identified particular skills and training necessary for team participation, including a questioning mindset, strong interpersonal relationships within the school community, familiarity with child and adolescent growth and development, and discretion and training in information gathering and evaluation.[9,10]

Training

High-quality training is essential to the successful implementation of school threat assessment. A comprehensive training program includes specific training for the threat assessment team as well as educational programs for all members of the school community, such as students, parents, and all school staff.[10] For example, a statewide survey of threat assessment needs in Virginia schools found two primary needs: general education about threat assessment for the larger school community and case management training for team members.

Each member of a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team brings unique expertise and background to the table. However, the literature supports training team members collectively, so they have a common understanding of the threat assessment process.[9,10,43,45,46] Several studies have demonstrated that threat assessment training can produce similar knowledge gains and shared perspectives among administrative, mental health, and law enforcement disciplines.[34]

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that all threat assessment teams have training on how bias and racism would affect perceptions of student behavior and lead to discriminatory judgments or actions.[50] To help assure fair treatment of students with disabilities, there should be training on topics such as common characteristics and behaviors associated with certain disabilities, when and how to make reasonable modifications for students with disabilities, and how disabilities can affect student interactions with others. In addition, threat assessment training should cover student rights and privacy laws (see Section 2 of the toolkit) and how student information should be protected and not used for purposes outside the threat assessment process.[51]

Table 1 presents a list of 37 training topics that were rated by at least 75% of the experts as either essential or high priority (highly desirable, but not essential). This list illustrates the extent and variety of topics covered in initial threat assessment training, but it should be recognized that the topics overlap and do not require equal amounts of time to cover.

Table 1: Training Topics

Training Topic	% of Experts Rating Topic as High Priority or Essential
Basic principles of threat assessment	99.2
Determining when to conduct a threat assessment	98.3
Risk factors and warning signs for violence	98.3
Determining the seriousness, level of concern, or risk level of a threat	97.5
Role of multidisciplinary team and team members	97.5
Sharing information about threats within the school	96.7
Long-term strategies for students who need follow-up monitoring or services	96.6
Record keeping and documentation	96.6
Definition of a threat or other concerning behavior(s) that would merit a threat assessment	95.8
Case exercises to practice threat assessment process	95.7
Education of staff about threat reporting	95
Role of law enforcement	95
Use of threat management to reduce risk of violence	94.9
Definition of behavioral threat assessment	94.1
Mental health services and supports	94.1
Role of social media	94.1
Suicide assessment	93.3
Biases that can affect the threat assessment process	92.5
Duty to Warn/Duty to Inform (e.g., Tarasoff duties)	92.5
Interviewing strategies	92.4

Training Topic	% of Experts Rating Topic as High Priority or Essential
Behavioral pathways leading to violence	91.6
Education of students about threat reporting	91.6
Application of the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) to threat assessment	90.8
Ways to deal with inconsistencies from different sources	88.2
Considerations for students in special education	87.4
Education of parents about threat reporting	85.8
Research on threat assessment	85.8
Case studies of averted shootings or attacks	84.9
Case studies of shootings	84
Differences between threat assessment and profiling	84
Case studies of threats that were not serious	82.4
Reducing use of school exclusion as a disciplinary response	82.4
Data on the prevalence of school violence	81.6
Threats by adults	79.8
Frequency/purpose of team meetings	78.2
Liability concerns	76.6
Research on school shootings	75.6
Note: N=119	

Challenge: Threat Assessment and Suicide

There is no consensus on how suicide fits in with school threat assessments. Although some experts believe that threats to self and others should be distinguished, many states require that threat assessment teams consider all students who have made threats. In addition, many students who committed mass shootings had suicidal motives and it is regarded as a factor that increases risk when a student has also threatened others. Consider your state laws and make sure that there are policies and protocols for how to assess and support threats to self with a systematic process.

Research Finding

More than 75% of our experts rated the following as essential training topics for threat assessment team members:

- Basic principles of threat assessment
- Definition of a threat or other concerning behavior that would merit assessment
- When to conduct a threat assessment and how to determine the seriousness of a threat
- Role of the multidisciplinary team and team members

Experts endorsed the use of case practice and tabletop exercises to practice the threat assessment process, both in initial and advanced training.

Training and practice standards need to be adapted to the different needs, circumstances, and resources of schools. This is especially important because schools vary in staffing patterns, and the availability of potential team members from mental health and law enforcement fields may differ across schools.

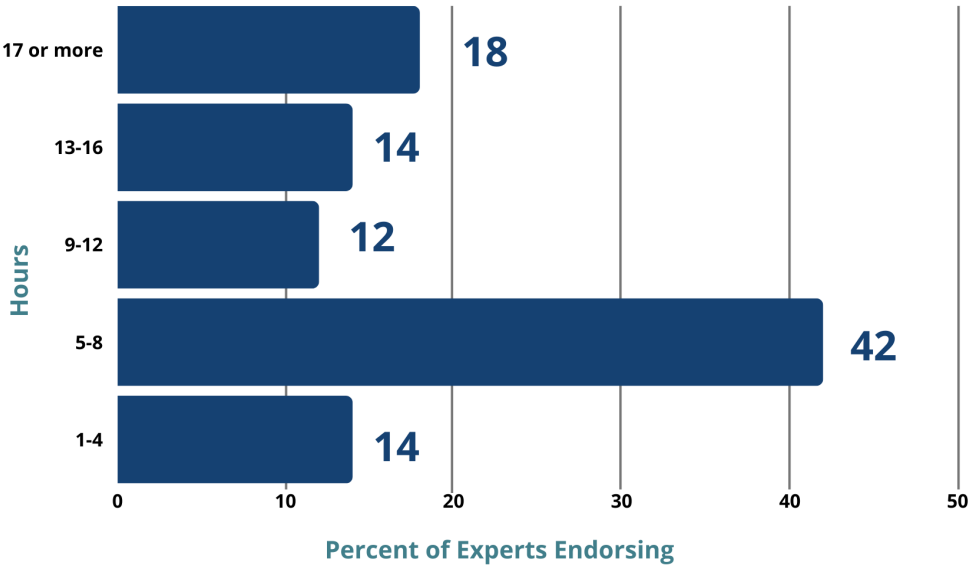
Questions to Ask When Selecting a Threat Assessment Training Program

Here are questions for school authorities to consider when selecting a threat assessment training program. These questions do not represent necessary or sufficient criteria but are intended to help educators make an informed decision. The selection of a training program must consider the context, needs, and resources of the school system, as well as program features. Therefore, these questions are intended as guidance rather than a prescription for making a selection.

- Who will provide the training and what are their credentials in the field of school threat assessment?
- How long is the training, and what topics are covered? Does the training cover the following topics?
  - Principles of threat assessment as an investigative and preventive process, including specific guidance on when to conduct a threat assessment and how to determine the seriousness of a threat
  - The role and functions of a multidisciplinary team
  - The role of law enforcement in threat assessment
  - The role of interventions and risk management options in reducing the risk of violence
  - Threat assessment records, information sharing, and FERPA
  - Protection of student rights, including equity of outcomes across students of different racial/ethnic groups and disability status
  - Case exercises that allow teams to practice using the model
- What is the evidence that the training program is effective in training school personnel, including the multiple disciplines that will be trained in your schools?
- What is the model of threat assessment covered in the training?
  - Is this model recognized in the field of school threat assessment?
  - Is there evidence the model has been field-tested and found to be safe and effective?
  - Does this model meet the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Department of Education standards for an evidence-based program?
- Does the program include a procedure or standards for evaluating the quality of implementation after training is completed?
- What is the impact of the program on student disciplinary outcomes?
- Does the program provide support or resources for the school to educate students, parents, and staff about threat reporting?

Figure 6 shows the amount of initial training threat assessment experts recommended. Our experts were asked how much training was needed for teams to begin conducting threat assessments. The largest number of experts (42%) endorsed five to eight hours of training, and 18% recommended seventeen or more hours. Beyond the initial training, the experts advised that effective, ongoing training was essential to maintaining a high-quality program.

Figure 6: Recommended Duration of Initial Training



How Should Training Be Evaluated

There are multiple ways to evaluate the quality of threat assessment training. The most common approach is to ask participants to evaluate their training experience with a series of post-training ratings. A more rigorous approach is to measure the participants' knowledge of threat assessment before and after training. Still more rigorous is to examine how well the participants retain their knowledge months after training, and how well they apply their knowledge in performance on mock cases. Ultimately, it is important to measure how well the team performs on cases conducted at their school. School districts should consider an annual review of each school's case data and examine how well the team followed its threat assessment procedures.

Resource

For more information on how to evaluate a threat assessment program, take the National Center for School Safety's Public Health Approach to Evaluating School Safety Initiatives self-paced training.

Education of School Community Members

Threat assessment cannot prevent violence if community members do not understand the need to report threats. Thus, it is essential that all members of the school community, including faculty, staff, administrators, law enforcement and security personnel, students, and parents understand the goals of threat assessment, as well as how and when to report concerning information.

The NTAC's threat assessment guide suggested some common training goals for all stakeholders, including:[10]

- Knowing that the school has a threat assessment team process
- Understanding the basic idea of a threat assessment
- Knowing how to report information to the team
- Learning what kind of information should be reported
- Understanding the difference between "snitching" and seeking help for a problem
- Learning ways they can support a safe school climate

Research Findings on Training Effects

Studies have shown the following training effects:

- Decreased fears of school violence
- Reduced support for a zero tolerance approach
- Increased knowledge of threat assessment principles and ability to classify threats
- Improved confidence in the school's organizational structure and feelings of safety

Free Online Educational Programs on School Threat Assessment

There are free online educational programs that schools can use to educate their community about threat assessment; alternatively, schools can create their own videos. Here are some examples, listed in alphabetical order, focusing on different aspects of school safety relevant to threat assessment:[8]

- Contra Costa County, California, Office of Education
- Educator's School Safety Network
- Ohio School Threat Assessment Training videos
- Pennsylvania K-12 Threat Assessment Training and Technical Assistance Network
- Readiness and Emergency Management (REMS) Technical Assistance Center Threat Assessment Training
- School District of Lee County, Florida
- Texas School Safety Center Threat Assessment toolkit
- University of Virginia, Youth Violence Project
- Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Threat Assessment video
- Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of School Safety

National Center for School Safety

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School Threat Assessment TOOLKIT

Section 2

How to Implement Threat Assessment in Your School

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Implementation Tools

SECTION 2 OBJECTIVE

This section summarizes some fundamental concepts of school threat assessment and typical pathways to violence.

SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

This toolkit is authored by University of Virginia professors Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with input from school safety leaders, experts, government agencies, and the National Center for School Safety.

To access all three sections of the toolkit, as well as the introduction and appendices, visit our website at nc2s.org or visit the toolkit's web page directly.

FUNDING DISCLAIMER

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Basic Principles of School Threat Assessment

Over the past twenty years, several key publications on school-based threat assessment practices have offered general principles and outlined specific procedures for application. The following fundamental concepts, drawn from work by the National Threat Assessment Center (2018, 2019, 2021), input from our experts, and other resources, should guide a school-based threat assessment process:[10,11,52]

Recognize that school shootings are not random or spontaneous.
Almost all school shootings studied by the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) were acts of targeted violence, meaning that the attacker planned and intended to harm a particular target, group, or organization. Studies of school shootings found that most attackers developed plans and prepared to carry out their attacks over a period of days, weeks, or months. Students do not "snap"; their attack is preceded by a period of planning during which they often share their thoughts and intentions with others. As a result, it is possible to identify and intervene to prevent this kind of violence. It is also important to recognize that threat assessment can be a useful way to prevent less severe forms of violence, such as bullying and fighting, that are preceded by threatening statements or behavior. Students who receive a threat assessment should not be seen as at risk for a school shooting.

Consider the context.
A threat assessment team must always consider the context in which the threat occurs. A threatening statement can have different meanings depending on the context. The team should account for the situation, setting, and target of the threat. The context of a threat will greatly influence whether the threat is serious or not serious and what actions should be taken.

Maintain an investigative mindset.
Teams must approach threat assessment with a critical mindset, avoiding quick conclusions or assumptions and seeking to gather information to corroborate and confirm hypotheses. Team members should be willing to question one another and discuss what they know to reach the most reasonable and defensible conclusions.

Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits or profiles.
There is no reliable profile of a violent student or traits that are specific to someone who commits a violent act. **Teams must be careful not to speculate or draw inferences about a "kind of person" who commits a violent attack. Instead, an assessment should be focused on objective facts and behaviors that indicate an individual is planning or preparing to carry out a threat.**

Use information from all possible sources.
Teams must not rely on a single source of information. They must take a systematic approach to information gathering. The student has relationships with people both within and outside the school system who may have information to share. Teams should consider gathering information from multiple sources, such as parents, classmates, teachers, counselors, mental health providers, coaches, and others. There may be valuable information available from other organizations, such as social service or law enforcement agencies.

Making a threat is not the same as posing a threat.
Any student can make a threat, but relatively few will engage in the planning and preparation necessary to carry it out. Threat assessment must go beyond the simple facts of what a student said or did to understand whether the student poses a threat, which means that the student has the intent, capability, and means to carry out the threat. Keep in mind that it is important to consider observable facts and behaviors rather than the perceived traits of a student when considering the seriousness of a threatening statement.

For more information:

- The FBI's initial report on school shootings recommended a threat assessment approach rather than a profiling approach and a subsequent report provided guidance on preventing targeted attacks in general.[8,43]
- Reports by the U.S. Secret Service (two with the U.S. Department of Education) described findings from their studies of school shootings and recommended the use of threat assessment.[8-11,52]

Challenge: Context Matters

A student says, "I'm gonna kill you!" Consider how context changes the significance of this threatening statement:

A. The student is playing chess with a friend and expects to win.
B. A football player is lined up to rush the quarterback.
C. A six-year old boy with Down's Syndrome is upset with his teacher.
D. A 4th grader is about to fight a classmate.
E. A middle school girl is angry with a friend for revealing a secret.
F. A high school student is brandishing a knife at a teacher.
G. A student is reported to have borrowed a handgun from a classmate.

Pathways to Violence

There is no single profile, checklist, or set of characteristics that indicates whether a student will carry out a violent act.[8] School authorities should be leery of claims that violence can be predicted with a formula or rating system.[53] Instead, school teams should be aware that there are many different behavioral pathways to violence. Research on juvenile homicide identified three common patterns of youth violence that are useful in recognizing the variety of backgrounds, motives, and risk factors leading to violence.[54-57] It is important to note that not all youth can be distinctly classified into one of these pathways. Youth on any given pathway may not demonstrate every common characteristic listed on that pathway. In short, this is a guide for teams to recognize different patterns of risk factors leading to violence and to help guide appropriate interventions to address the underlying contributing factors to targeted violence.

Studies of juvenile homicide occurring in any setting labeled the three groups as (1) antisocial, (2) conflict, and (3) psychotic.[58] Studies of juveniles who committed homicides at school used a similar categorization: (1) psychopathic, (2) traumatized, and (3) psychotic.[59] A more elaborate classification using six groups has some further distinctions.[54] Regardless of the number of categories, the relevance of threat assessment is to recognize that there are multiple pathways leading to violence and that no single profile is feasible. Instead, school teams should examine each case holistically to identify whether a youth is moving down a behavioral pathway toward violence and to respond with interventions and supports to prevent violence. These groups do not directly map onto special education categories, and there should be no implication that students identified with a disability would necessarily be more dangerous or threatening than other students.

The **antisocial or psychopathic group** consists of youth who have a childhood history of behavior problems, dishonesty, and defiance of authority. Their behavior includes many of the symptoms associated with the diagnoses of conduct disorder used for youth and antisocial personality disorder used for persons after the age 18. Typically, these youth show little empathy or concern for others, and lack remorse for the harm they cause others. They have narcissistic feelings of superiority and grandiosity and a desire to bully or dominate others that can include cruel or sadistic behavior. They most often engage in violent crime for predatory, goal-directed purposes such as acquiring money, drugs, or power. In many cases, they act in concert with other youth as part of a gang.

Most of the youth in this group commit multiple delinquent acts that escalate into serious violent crimes such as robbery and forcible rape. In the case of school shootings, a subgroup of these youth carry out an attack in a grandiose pursuit of infamy and to exert sadistic power over others without regard for the consequences of their actions. The antisocial/psychopathic group is the largest group of violent juvenile offenders and will come to the attention of school authorities most often for fighting and bullying others, but they are less prominent among the narrow group who committed mass attacks at their school.[54-57] Threat assessment teams working with students in this group should make use of evidence-based programs and practices for supporting and intervening with behaviors associated with conduct disorder.[60]

Resource

There are a few clearinghouses that rate evidence-based interventions and programs. To review these clearinghouses, visit

- What Works Clearinghouse
- Crime Solutions Clearinghouse

Challenge

Some of the behaviors listed may also describe some students with certain kinds of disabilities. Students in some disability categories may show characteristics such as impulsivity and low frustration tolerance that could lead to them making threatening statements. A threat assessment process can be a useful tool to help staff avoid overreacting to these behaviors by carefully examining the reason for the behavior and the role of the student's disability in it.

The **conflict or traumatized group** consists of youth who commit a violent act because of a conflict or dispute that is highly stressful and emotionally overwhelming. These youth typically do not have a history of serious misbehavior in school and lack the features of conduct disorder observed in the antisocial group. They may be attention-seeking and eager for peer acceptance that is denied to them by their tormentors. They might have a history of parental mistreatment or abuse and/or peer conflicts involving harassment or bullying. Their violent attacks are motivated by revenge and retaliation (as well as other factors).

These cases are prominent in school shootings in which the student attacker was a victim of severe and persistent bullying. Other cases involve youth charged with parental homicide in the home. However, it should be stressed that most youth who are victims of bullying or abusive treatment at home do not commit acts of homicide. Such cases involve dire circumstances in which other factors are often present, especially the youth's perception that their feelings of distress and humiliation are unbearable and that there are no other options available. Research on childhood trauma can be a helpful resource on this topic, although it must be emphasized that individuals with trauma histories alone should not be regarded as potentially violent.[61,62] Threat assessment teams seeing students in this group should make use of evidence-based programs for symptoms and behaviors associated with trauma, victimization, and depression.[63]

Resource

The National Center for School Safety has a number of resources on trauma-informed care. Visit these links to learn more about a trauma-informed approach:

- Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Toolkit
- Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Classrooms Self-Paced Training
- Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Leadership and Crisis Navigation Self-Paced Training
- Trauma-Informed Practices: Prevention and De-Escalating Disruptive Behavior On-Demand Webinar
- Trauma-Informed Practices Across School Settings On-Demand Webinar

The third group, **psychotic**, is the smallest but fuels the misconception that persons with mental illness are especially violent. In the small number of cases in which a person with mental illness commits a violent attack, the person's violent act might be motivated by delusional thinking, such as a paranoid belief that someone is out to get them or a grandiose belief they are on some kind of noble mission. They may experience auditory hallucinations in the form of voices that urge them to commit a violent attack. These cases are usually diagnosed with a severe mental disorder such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder with psychotic features (i.e., delusions and/or hallucinations). However, in many cases, the full extent of the person's mental illness was not evident to persons around them because signs and symptoms of psychosis (such as talking back to auditory hallucinations) were overlooked or minimized. Threat assessment teams working with these youth will make referrals for psychotherapeutic and psychiatric treatment.

Challenge:
Disrespectful and Defiant Behavior

A common concern in school discipline is determining when disrespectful and defiant behavior is more serious and should result in a referral to the school office, or, in some cases to the threat assessment team. The student's behavior must always be examined in the student's environmental and developmental context.

Key Term

Serious Misbehavior

Although schools may have slight variations in how behavior is classified, serious misbehavior typically includes behaviors such as fighting, carrying weapons, and selling drugs in school.

Steps Toward Violence

The classifications in the section above are most helpful in alerting teams to the variety of backgrounds observed in youth who commit violent acts and to avoid adherence to stereotypes. There is room for considerable variation around the antisocial, conflict, and psychotic themes. Yet, in the days or weeks preceding an attack, the three pathways can show convergence around typical behaviors that demonstrate planning and preparation for violence. There are at least five steps toward violence that can be distinguished, although they are not strictly sequential or mutually exclusive. All five steps need not be present, but are generally considered to be indicators of increased risk for violence.

1. Grievance

While grievances are not always present, a study released by NTAC in 2019 identified a grievance as one of the most common motives for targeted violence among K-12 perpetrators.[11] One of the most notable first steps leading to an attack can be a perceived grievance that triggers intense disappointment accompanied by frustration and anger. The grievance is a serious injury to the self-esteem of the student such as an episode of bullying, break-up of a romantic relationship, a failing grade, or loss of an opportunity with a sports team or other activity. In one school shooting case, a student was removed from a leadership position on the school debate team.[66] In all cases, the student's perception of the event as severe and life-changing is more important than the objective magnitude of the grievance. The student's mental state may influence them to perceive the event as much more distressing than would others in a similar situation.

2. Rumination

When a student is unable to cope with the disappointment of a grievance, they may begin to ruminate or think excessively about it. They consider different ways to respond, and thoughts of violence can arise. In today's society, students are exposed to many examples on social media in which other persons with a grievance commit acts of violence directed at themselves or others. The student may fantasize about various ways to carry out a violent attack and how it would affect others and restore their sense of pride or self-esteem. At this stage, students may share their feelings and ruminations with others, and in several school shooting cases, their peers encouraged their thoughts of violence. The key development here is the conclusion that violence alone can resolve the grievance.[44]

3. Planning

At some point, the distressed individual may begin to gather information on how to carry out a violent attack. They may use the Internet to study prior shootings, investigate different kinds of weapons, and develop plans for how to carry out an attack at their school. At any of these stages, but especially the planning stage, the student might reach out to peers for advice or assistance, such as how to obtain a weapon. The student also might invite collaboration on an attack.[52]

4. Preparation

The student crosses into the stage of preparation by taking action to obtain a weapon or other materials needed for the attack. The student might practice using the weapon, examine the site for the attack, or write a manifesto explaining the rationale for the attack. There are many ways that an individual planning an attack will exhibit warning behaviors that leak their intentions.[67] Persons who know the student might observe "leakage" that could range from veiled threats and ominous statements about an impending event to explicit posts on social media that reveal their intentions. For this reason, it is especially important that schools foster a community of help-seeking and support so that students are willing to report a classmate's

Research on Pathway Models

For more detailed analysis of pathway models and related practical advice on threat investigation, see work by Calhoun and Weston (2003, 2021).[44,64] Other excellent resources are the case studies of school shootings and averted shootings undertaken by the U.S. Secret Service.[11,43,52,65] These descriptive studies make it clear that there is no uniform sequence that applies to all cases, but that many youth can be diverted from an identifiable behavioral pathway to violence.

concerning behavior.[68] Schools should have multiple means of receiving reports, such as tip lines or anonymous reporting systems, and should educate students on the difference between seeking help and snitching.[69,70]

5. Attack

When the student begins the attack, there is little or no time for prevention. However, threat assessment teams who had been aware of a student's threats have in some cases been able to intercept a student just prior to an attack. In such cases, the student had announced their intentions on social media, flashed a weapon, warned friends, or in some other way signaled that an attack was imminent.[20,71,72] This stage could be further divided into a "breach" when the individual has initiated the attack but still might be stopped, depending on the nature and quality of security measures in place.[44] In these circumstances, there is no time for further assessment and the team must move directly to a crisis response such as notifying law enforcement and securing the school.

Key Term

Leakage

An accidental or intentional communication that reveals intent to commit a violent act, such as making remarks that reveal hostility toward someone or plans of violence. Leakage might occur in direct or indirect ways and might not be a purposeful disclosure. Increasingly, leakage is observed in digital communications such as social media posts, texts, blogs, and emails.

Resource

Check out the National Center for School Safety's Physical Security Measures Overview to learn more about potential physical security measures to use in your school.

Key Terms

Identification

Identification occurs when someone has a concern about a threat of violence and makes a report that is transmitted to the threat assessment team. These reports may be based on behaviors listed in the pathways to violence earlier in this section.

Assessment

The process of gathering information to evaluate the seriousness of a threat.

Intervention

The team's response to the threat can range from quickly resolving a threat that is not serious to safety planning and protective actions for a very serious threat.

Evaluation

The process of collecting data on the threat assessment process and outcomes to ensure fidelity, equity, and protection of student rights.

Research on Pathway Models

In their study of 35 school attacks, the U.S. Secret Service observed that all but two of the students exhibited concerning behaviors at school prior to their attack.[11] About three-quarters (26) displayed them online. These concerning behaviors ranged in severity, but some of the most serious included threats to harm someone, violent acts, bringing weapons to school, and suicidal statements. They described these behaviors as "objectively concerning" or "prohibited" behaviors that would merit immediate attention. Other behaviors, described as "lower-level concerning behaviors", raised concern but would not require an immediate safety response. Some examples are a depressed or angry mood, peer conflicts, and interest in violent topics. The Secret Service stressed that teams should look for a constellation of lower-level behaviors rather than a single behavior.

There are some important caveats about the use of concerning behaviors or warning sign checklists to initiate a threat assessment.[8,53] **Many students with no plans to commit an attack will display one or more concerning behaviors, and teams must be careful not to profile a student as dangerous.** Research has consistently failed to find an individual profile or set of risk factors that can accurately predict someone will commit a violent act.[73] When concerning behaviors such as a depressed mood or peer conflict come to the attention of a threat assessment team, any inquiry or intervention should be based on the student's needs reflected in the behavior itself. In these cases, often a referral to counseling is more appropriate than a full threat assessment unless a broader constellation of behaviors indicates an intent to harm someone.

Three Stages of School Threat Assessment

Knowing the pathways to violence is an important first step for threat assessment teams to recognize concerning behavior. In order for teams to complete a threat assessment following a concern or report, they need to move through three stages: identification, assessment, and intervention. A key fourth piece is evaluation, monitoring, and accountability. Teams should be monitoring throughout the stages to ensure fidelity to the program and equitable outcomes. Section 3 discusses evaluating your threat assessment program.

Identification occurs when someone has a concern about a threat of violence and makes a report that is transmitted to the threat assessment team. Assessment refers to the process of gathering information to evaluate the seriousness of a threat. Intervention involves the team's response to the threat, which can range from quickly resolving a threat that is not serious to safety planning and protective actions for a very serious threat.

Stage 1: Identification

The first stage of the threat assessment process is the identification of a concerning situation. Threats can come in many forms; they can be oral, written, or transmitted electronically. There might be threatening gestures, drawings, or photos. Threats might be communicated directly to an intended target or indirectly to someone else. In short, any behavior or communication that raises concern that a person has an intent to harm someone should be considered a threat.

Challenge

There may be situations where there is no apparent threat, but a student seems withdrawn, distressed, or preoccupied in some way that is concerning. These students might be referred to a school counselor for inquiry but not a threat assessment.

A threat assessment cannot be conducted if threats are not reported. All members of the school community should know how to report a concerning situation or statement. Reporters are not expected to determine whether a threat is credible, but simply to report observations that raise their concern, so that the threat assessment team can investigate. It is essential that schools encourage threat reporting and provide their community with both confidential and anonymous ways to report threats.

Key Terms

Confidential Report

A confidential threat report is one in which authorities know the identity of the person reporting the threat, but agree to keep it secret from the public.

Anonymous Report

An anonymous report is one in which no one knows the identity of the person reporting the threat.

Confidential reporting is preferred over anonymous reporting because the credibility of the reporter can be considered and because the team can more readily communicate with the reporter to ask questions and gather more information than in the case of an anonymous report. Anonymous reports are usually in the form of a single report with limited information, although it is possible to arrange a system that allows back-and-forth communication with an anonymous source. The advantage of anonymous reporting is that some reporters are reluctant to reveal their identity and more willing to report if no one knows who they are.

Resource

For information about anonymous reporting systems, visit these resources:

- Getting Buy-In for Anonymous Reporting Systems On-Demand Webinar
- A Quick Guide to Information Sharing During Threat Reporting and Assessment

Challenge:
Who Should Determine the Credibility of a Threat?

There is some debate about whether teachers should be trained to distinguish between credible threats and other characteristics. Although threat assessment teams should be responsible for the determination of threats as credible, it is helpful for teachers to understand and appreciate that every threat is not considered credible and serious. Individual teachers may take a zero tolerance approach mindset towards threats, which the use of a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team can avert.

Table 2: Reporting Resources by State

State	Program
Colorado	Safe2Tell-Colorado
Florida	Fortify Florida
Georgia	1-877-SAY-STOP
Idaho	See Tell Now!
Illinois	School Violence Tipline
Indiana	See Something, Say Something Indiana
Kansas	1-877-626-8203
Kentucky	S.T.O.P Tipline
Louisiana	Say It Here
Maryland	Safe Schools
Michigan	OK2SAY
Mississippi	Stay Safe Hotline
Missouri	Courage2Report
Nebraska	Safe2HelpNE
Nevada	SafeVoice
North Carolina	Say Something
Ohio	SaferOH
Oklahoma	Oklahoma School Security Tipline
Oregon	Safe Oregon
Pennsylvania	Safe2Say Something
Tennessee	SafeTN
Texas	iWatchTexas
Utah	SafeUT
Vermont	Safe4VT
West Virginia	Safe Schools Helpline
Wisconsin	Speak Up, Speak Out
Wyoming	Safe2Tell- Wyoming
Available for all	Say Something- Sandy Hook Promise

Note: These resources are provided for informational purposes. This toolkit does not endorse or recommend any specific program or product.

For more information about tip lines, see these recent publications, funded by a grant from the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice:

- Tip Lines for School Safety: A National Portrait of Tip Line Use
- School Tip Line Toolkit: A Blueprint for Implementation and Sustainability

Educating Students, Parents, and Staff

A student who plans to harm someone may communicate their intentions to a third party, which is a behavior called leakage.[74] Leakage might occur in direct or indirect ways and might not be a purposeful disclosure. Increasingly, leakage is observed in digital communications such as social media posts, texts, blogs, and emails. The success of a threat assessment approach rests on the willingness of members of the school community to recognize and report leakage.

Schools can encourage threat reporting by educating their students, parents, and staff about the threat assessment process and the importance of threat reporting. One study of school shootings found that in the majority (81%) of cases, another person was aware of what a student was thinking or planning.[9] Reporters should understand that they are not expected to make an assessment of the seriousness of a threat since that is the job of the threat assessment team.

Research has found various reasons why students (and others) are reluctant to report threats.[11,43,68,70,75,76] Studies of school shootings found that students failed to report threats because they did not think the person making the threat was serious or did not believe the person would carry out the threatened act of violence.[6,44,68] Other reasons include that the student feared retaliation or did not want to be labeled a snitch. This is one reason for the use of anonymous reporting systems.

Research has found that students are more willing to report threats of violence when they trust the adults at school and believe the adults care about them and have their best interests in mind.[43,68,77] Explanations of how the threat assessment team responds to threats might be helpful in allaying concerns about reporting a threat. Threat assessment teams should evaluate their school climate and consider ways to encourage threat reporting.

Action Step

Building a positive school climate is a key step to a successful threat assessment program. Threat assessments can only be done if concerns are reported. Students should be taught to be upstanders – persons who stand up for something – rather than bystanders – persons who stand by passively and let something happen. Schools must transform bystanders into upstanders. This can be accomplished by staff efforts to create a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility in which students, staff, families, and others feel that reports are wanted and that something positive will be done about them.

Threat reporting should extend beyond students to include parents and school staff, who also might observe or learn secondhand about a situation that is concerning and merits reporting. Please see Section 1 of this toolkit for resources on online threat assessment education programs for students, parents, and teachers, which encourage threat reporting.

Stage 2: Assessment

Once a threat has been reported, the team begins the assessment phase by gathering information from multiple sources to determine the seriousness of the threat. Threats occur on a continuum of severity. Different models of threat assessment categorize threats differently, but in general, the first decision is to determine whether a threat exists (i.e., Did the person communicate a threat or engage in threatening behavior?). There are multiple situations where a threat might be reported, but upon investigation, it is not a threat. For example, a reported threat might be an unsubstantiated rumor or a false report. Another example is that a student who posts a photo of himself holding a firearm might be proudly displaying a hunting rifle but not threatening to harm anyone. Suppose the threat assessment team has concerns because a situation seems ambiguous. In that case, it is safest to gather further information until the team is more confident that a threat is present.

Schools using threat assessment must distinguish between a threat assessment and a crisis response. If a threat report indicates that a student attack is imminent (e.g., a student threatening violence has brought a gun to school or is on the way to school with a gun), there is no time for a threat assessment. Rather, the school must implement its crisis response plan, which will likely involve contacting law enforcement and engaging in a building security procedure such as a lockdown. Threat assessments are not used in emergency situations; they are intended to prevent an emergency from arising.

Although there is no set time frame for completing a threat assessment, they should be conducted promptly and efficiently after a report, both in order to assure safety and to mitigate disruption to the student and other affected individuals. Students should not be excluded from school for lengthy periods while an assessment is being conducted. If a student with a disability is being assessed, the team should take into consideration the student's disability and confer with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team as appropriate.

If the team determines a threat occurred, then the second decision is whether the threat is legitimate and serious, meaning that the person has serious intent to harm someone. Many threats are not serious expressions of intent to harm someone, such as jokes or figures of speech. Other threats might be expressions of anger or frustration, or efforts to intimidate someone (sometimes called "howling") without a genuine intent to commit a violent act.[64] Threat assessment teams are most concerned with identifying the small percentage of threats that represent leakage by someone who is planning or preparing to carry out a violent attack.

Threat assessment authorities recommend that teams should follow systematic procedures to gather all information to understand the student's thinking, behavior, and circumstances. There is no uniform order for gathering information. Much will depend on the nature of the threat and the availability of persons who could be interviewed. If the threat is conveyed on a website or social media communication, it is best to examine that information first. If the threat is a statement or behavior that someone observed, it might be best to begin with the observer and perhaps any collaborating witnesses. This will allow the team to interview the student of concern with more information that will make it easier to assess the student's candor.

Potential sources of information include:

- Interviews with the student who made the threat
- Interviews with involved parties (e.g., persons who have been threatened or witnessed threatening behavior)
- Interviews with parents
- Interviews with teachers and other school staff who know the students
- If the student has a disability, the student's IEP/504 Plan and consultation with the associated team
- Relevant academic, disciplinary, law enforcement, and other records
- Materials in the student's locker and/or desk
- Interviews or records from professionals outside the school such as a therapist or counselor
- Interviews with others with whom the student has a relationship, such as peers
- The student's social media communications and internet activity

Challenge: Determining the Need for a Threat Assessment

Here are some examples of situations where the need for a threat assessment is harder to determine, but other interventions might be appropriate:

- A student tells a group of classmates that he is going to be a serial killer for Halloween. A rumor spreads that the student is planning to kill people on Halloween. Upon interview with the student and witnesses to the original statement, it is clear that the student was only talking about a Halloween costume and expressed no threat to kill anyone. The threat assessment team may need to deal with the spread of rumors that could arouse anxiety in the school community.
- A student writes an essay with a gruesome, violent scene from a war. There is no explicit or implied threat to others. The student explains that he was describing a video game he likes to play. A counselor might talk with him about his interest in violence and whether he has thoughts of harming others, but his essay and interest in video games is not by itself sufficient to merit a threat assessment. Situations like this must be carefully considered since there are circumstances where additional information suggests a threat assessment is needed. For example, if the student has been bullied, has recently acquired a weapon, or has spoken with classmates about his interest in school shootings.
- A student becomes angry at a teacher for telling him to stop talking and pay attention in class. He uses profanity and storms out of the room. Upon interview, the student describes frustration with the teacher and embarrassment at being called out in class but expresses no intention of harming the teacher. There is no other incident or report of the student threatening to harm the teacher. The student might be disciplined and referred for counseling, but this incident alone, in the absence of other concerning behavior, does not merit a threat assessment.

Keep in mind that with any scenario, there could be additional facts or context that would change the assessment and lead to a threat assessment. These stories are all intended to illustrate a point, but they are not complete accounts that represent all the information that a team would consider in making a decision.

The potential sources of information are vast, and teams must decide how much time and effort to devote to gathering information based on the nature and seriousness of the threat. It is not realistic to expect teams to gather every available piece of information for all reports of threats. Different threat assessment models offer different guidance on how much information to collect and how to make decisions.

Interviews with parents (or other primary caregivers) are especially important. Parents should be regarded as partners in the threat assessment process because their knowledge and cooperation can be critical to its success.[50] It is important to emphasize from the outset the common interests of parents and the team to keep everyone safe and to help their child to be successful. Although a threat assessment should be initiated as soon as possible to prevent potential violence, parents should be notified promptly when a threat assessment is being conducted with their child. Parents have essential background information and perspective on their child's development and current levels of stress and concern that can help the team assess the seriousness of a threat and formulate an appropriate response to manage the threat and reduce the risk of violence. Parents are often critical to the success of any action or intervention in response to a threat. The team might devise a safety plan that extends beyond the immediate situation and could involve services and supports as well as protective security measures. A safety plan will often require parental collaboration and supervision to be maximally effective.

Resource

All assessment tools must be used carefully, with attention to their reliability and validity for the purpose for which they are being used. Because threat assessment is a relatively new field, all tools must be used with caution and it is important to evaluate their use with students across racial, ethnic, cultural, and disability groups. Use this list of assessment tools to get started.

Resource

For information on documenting threats, review these sample threat assessment and management forms.

Stage 3: Intervention

There are three goals for this phase of the threat assessment process:

1. Contain the situation and supervise the student to prevent a possible violent act
2. Protect and support potential targets
3. Provide support and guidance to help the student deal with underlying problems that precipitated the threat[9,10]

A threat assessment is the beginning of a management process.[10,43,67] Once an assessment has been completed, the team uses the information to determine whether the student is at risk of harming someone and develops a plan to mitigate that threat. The plan should be individualized to the student and include recommendations regarding supportive resources, a time frame for check-ins, and specific indicators for discontinuing monitoring. Law enforcement should be immediately notified if it is determined that a student is planning a violent act. If the student is found to have the motive

and capability of carrying out the threat, the team will want to take a number of protective actions to prevent violence. The specific actions are based on the nature and circumstances of the threat, but some typical actions include:

1. Increase monitoring or supervision of the student to keep the student and others safe.
2. Support and counsel the student, to de-escalate the situation and reduce risk.
3. Notify law enforcement, if not already involved.
4. Search the student, backpack, locker, vehicle, home, etc. for weapons, if appropriate.
5. Warn and counsel any intended target, including notification of parents, if applicable.
6. Notify relevant school staff.

Temporary removal from school may be an appropriate protective action. This is not a zero tolerance practice; decisions about school removal should be based on the seriousness of the situation and the need to maintain safety. Ideally, a safety plan would allow the student to return to school soon or continue in an alternative setting. However, it should be noted that removal from school may not be an adequate safety measure if there is not appropriate supervision and removal of lethal means. Thus, it may be best for the student to remain in a closely supervised setting (at school or elsewhere) or in the custody of parents who are willing and able to provide supervision appropriate to the situation.

In addition to protective actions, there may be need to address general concern among students, parents, or staff about a threat incident. Threat assessment teams must consider the impact of the case on the school community.

There are many different kinds of interventions that a team might use depending on the student's needs and the nature and circumstances of the threat. Figure 7, on the following page, provides a list of interventions suggested by various authorities.[3] Teams might use some variation of these responses or devise their own.

Resource

To learn how to plan a communications strategy and handle incorrect information sharing, see our School Safety Communications Planning Guide.

Figure 7: Intervention Type List

Supportive Interventions	Prospective Actions	Law Enforcement Actions
• Academic supports • Counseling • Apology or restorative action • Anger management • Social-emotional learning program • Anti-bullying interventions • Mental health services (in school or community) • Revision to IEP/504 plan • Behavior plan • Conflict mediation • Social skills support • Mentoring/Advising program • Support for threatened individuals • Alternatives to suspension	• Warning targeted individuals • Notifying parents of targeted individuals • Increased monitoring or supervision • No-contact agreement • Transportation change • Suspension in or outside of school • Alerting school staff • Alerting law enforcement • Searching for weapons • Schedule change • Evaluation for psychiatric hospitalization • Expulsion or school transfer	• Review of law enforcement records • Court-ordered searches • Court-ordered protective order • Court-ordered restraining order • Arrest and/or detention • Law enforcement investigation • Law enforcement monitoring • Diversion program • Court-ordered removal of firearms • Charges filed • Consultation with school staff on safety measures

Common Features of Existing Threat Assessment Programs

Threat assessment models typically include procedures for investigating a threat, determining the seriousness or risk level of a threat, and then acting in response to the threat.[45,78-80] Some threat assessment publications more narrowly describe a particular instrument that can be used to classify the risk level of a threat.[81] Finally, an increasing number of states are publishing guidelines or protocols specifically for their schools, often drawing upon other models.[46,82-84]

Resource

To see how threat assessment operates with other programs and interventions as part of a comprehensive school safety program, visit the Integrating Threat Assessment with Selected Programs and Interventions tool.

The United States Secret Service and the FBI reports on threat assessment serve as a framework for many models that have similar principles and recommendations. Our review of the threat assessment literature reveals some common features of threat assessment programs. Threat assessment functions best when it operates in a positive school climate that addresses common problems such as bullying and harassment and when students perceive that the adults in their school are trustworthy, fair, and supportive. Threat assessment publications consistently note the need for a school climate that encourages and facilitates threat reporting.

Threat assessment models also consistently emphasize the importance of gathering information from multiple sources to make well-informed, fact-based decisions. There should be fair and impartial investigations of threat reports with minimal speculation and inference. Threat assessment models often encourage reliance on observable behaviors that indicate planning or preparation to commit an attack rather than efforts to infer dangerousness from indirect indicators such as personality traits and personal interests. Finally, threat assessment is generally regarded as a multi-disciplinary team effort that will draw upon the multiple perspectives and capabilities of individuals in different occupational fields. Decisions should come from the group's review and analysis of all the available information rather than rest on the shoulders of a single individual.

Features

Comprehensiveness

There is wide variation in the comprehensiveness and specificity of threat assessment models. For example, one study by Pennsylvania State University researchers examined the content of 12 school threat assessment publications.[85] They identified components of each model, such as whether there was a definition of threat assessment, a description of the roles of team members, procedures for conducting a threat assessment, and interventions or responses to the threat. The number of components in a model ranged from 8 to 86, with a mean of 39 components. School authorities may need to determine procedures and practices that are not specified in a particular model.

Research Support

A basic question for educators to ask is "What happens after the model is implemented in our schools?" Most threat assessment models are based at least in part on the case study research by the U.S. Secret Service.[8,10,43] Case studies of school shootings shed light on the characteristics of students who committed school attacks and suggest what might have stopped them. Case studies of averted school shootings tell us what stopped a shooting from occurring.[20] These are valuable studies that contribute to the development of threat assessment procedures and strategies.

However, case studies are a form of research that does not replace the need for direct study of a threat assessment model or process. Despite the widespread use of threat assessment and the proliferation of threat assessment models, few empirical studies test the effectiveness or outcomes of a particular threat assessment model. One exception is the body of research conducted with the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG), which was developed at the University of Virginia. The CSTAG literature includes two field tests and six controlled studies.[25,27-31,86,87] In addition, there are studies of the training process and the reliability and validity of team decisions.[34,86,88] Another exception is the German NETWASS model, which has studies of training and implementation.[79,89] There is a clear need for more empirical studies of different school threat assessment models and practices. For more information, see the summary of studies in Appendix 2 in the full toolkit PDF.

Challenge

Although complete objectivity in the social sciences is not possible, threat assessment should be as objective as possible. The focus on observable behaviors and a multi-disciplinary team help provide a balanced approach. Evaluation of threat assessment outcomes can also help teams understand and correct any bias in implementation.

Selected Threat Assessment Programs*

This toolkit identifies example resources and programs for schools to consider. It does not endorse any particular model of threat assessment. Other resources not found on this list may also be useful.

Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG): This model was developed in 2001 by a research team at the University of Virginia with the goal of integrating recommendations from FBI and Secret Service studies of school shootings with practical advice obtained from educators working in Virginia public schools.[45] The original manual, including a five-step decision tree and standard forms, was published in 2006, with updated guidelines released in 2018.[45] This model is designed to help school-based multi-disciplinary teams gather information to determine whether a student's threat can be readily resolved as a transient threat that is not serious or will require more extensive assessment and intervention as a serious, substantive threat. Teams take a problem-solving approach to help students resolve the problem or conflict underlying the threat rather than a punitive, zero-tolerance approach. There is a body of peer-reviewed research supporting training, implementation, and outcomes for this model.

* Dr. Cornell discloses that he is the primary developer of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines.

FBI: In 2000, the FBI published a seminal report on school shootings, *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective,* which recommended a threat assessment approach rather than a profiling approach.[8] In this publication, the FBI proposed a four-pronged approach to assessment, which involves gathering information about the individual student as well as family, school, and social influences. In 2017, the FBI published a practical guide for threat assessment and management, *Making prevention a reality: Identifying, assessing and managing the threat of targeted attacks*.[43]

National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC): The United States Secret Service has a National Threat Assessment Center that has published a series of reports on school shootings and threat assessment. This guide to creating a model, sometimes referred to as the federal model or Secret Service model, was described in *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence*, released in 2018. The NTAC identified eight key steps in establishing school-based threat assessment, summarized in Section 1 of this toolkit. They further recommended organizing information gathering around 13 key themes. The National Threat Assessment Center has also released an updated study of school shootings and a report on averted shootings.[36,37]

NETWorks Against School Shootings (NETWASS): Developed between 2009 and 2013 by a research team at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), this model emphasizes early intervention with students experiencing a psychosocial crisis. Threats and leaking behavior are seen as indicators the student might be on a pathway to violence. The foundation of the program is the creation of a school-based organizational structure for crisis intervention by educating staff to (1) recognize a student in crisis, (2) assess accompanying warning behaviors, and (3) implement appropriate supportive measures. Although not well-known in the U.S., this model has research support and offers a different perspective on threat assessment with its emphasis on training all school staff in identifying and helping students in a psychosocial crisis.[11,12]

Salem-Keizer Cascade Model (SK Cascade Model): In 2000, John Van Dreal, working in the Salem-Keizer (WA) School District, led the development of a threat assessment protocol in coordination with local law enforcement and mental health agencies. The Salem-Keizer Cascade model consists of standardized assessment protocols and safety planning procedures to provide an immediate and systematic response to a student posing a threat to others. The process is overseen and administered by a collaborative team of schools, law enforcement, mental health providers, the judiciary, and juvenile corrections. The goals of the program include (1) identifying and assessing threats to determine the level of concern and action needed, (2) coordinating resources to produce an effective response to the threat, and (3) maintaining a sense of psychological safety among all school

members, thus creating a supportive learning environment.[80] Two threat assessment teams are used; one is in the individual school (Level 1) and the other is based in the community (Level 2). If a Level 2 assessment is requested, it is conducted primarily at the school site by an investigative team with members from the school staff and the larger community as appropriate.

Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA): J. Kevin Cameron established the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) in Canada in 1999 and began the development of the Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA). This model focuses on the interdependence of micro and macro environments. At stage one of this model, the team conducts a micro-assessment to determine whether the threatening individual poses a risk to carry out the threat, followed by a macro-assessment concerned with historical and foundational risk enhancers such as the level of anxiety or tension in the social environment. Assessment proceeds through three stages:

1. Data collection and immediate risk-reducing interventions by a site-specific VTRA team and the local police.
2. Specialized risk evaluation completed by VTRA team members or partners to assess overall functioning of the threatener and to identify interventions to stabilize and maintain the student's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral well-being.
3. Comprehensive intervention, review, and follow-up during which a long-term multi-disciplinary intervention plan is developed, monitored, and revised as needed.

Table 3: Quick Guide to Primary Resources for Selected Threat Assessment Models

Model	Related Publications
CSTAG	Cornell, D.G. (2018). *Comprehensive school threat assessment guidelines: Intervention and support to prevent violence.* Charlottesville, VA: School Threat Assessment Consultants LLC
FBI	O'Toole, M.E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective.* Quantico, VA: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation
NTAC	National Threat Assessment Center (2018). *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted violence.* U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security
NETWASS	Leuschner, V., Bondu, R., Schroer-Hippel, M., Panno, J., Neumetzler, K., Fisch, S., School, J., & Scheithauer, H. (2011). Prevention of homicidal violence in schools in Germany: The Berlin leaking Project and the Networks Against School Shootings Project (NETWASS). *New Directions for Youth Development, 2011 (129)*
STAS	Van Dreal, J. (Ed.) (2016). *Assessing student threats: Implementing the Salem-Keizer-System,* (2nd ed.). Rowman and Littlefield Publishers
VTRA	Cameron, K. (2018). *Violent threat risk assessment (VTRA) protocol: A community based approach* (10th ed.). North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response

State Guidance on Threat Assessment

Several states have legislation related to threat assessment, and many have published threat assessment guidelines or protocols specifically for their schools, often drawing upon NTAC guidance. Others require that their school staff members be trained in a particular model. Table 4 features a list of states with information about their threat assessment resources and/or guidelines.

Disclaimer: The list in Table 4 is intended as a starting point for readers to learn about threat assessment in different states and is not intended as an endorsement of a particular model. Additionally, this list may not be up to date since state practices and policies may change.

Resource

Remember that your state may have specific guidance on threat assessment. See Appendix 4 in the full toolkit PDF for recent state guidance.

Table 4: List of Threat Assessment Resources by State

State	Threat Assessment Efforts	Contact Agency or Organization
Alabama	Use of a threat assessment approach is recommended	Office of the Governor
Alaska	No threat assessment information found	Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
Arizona	Links to threat assessment trainings, forms, and online education program	Arizona Department of Education
Arkansas	Links to threat assessment trainings	Arkansas Center for School Safety
California	Threat assessment mentioned as part of comprehensive planning	California Department of Education
Colorado	Colorado Threat Assessment and Management Protocol	Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CTAMP)
Connecticut	Links to threat assessment resources	Connecticut Department of School Safety and Security
Delaware	Links to threat assessment resources	Delaware Department of Education
Florida	Links to standardized, statewide threat assessment protocol	Florida Department of Education- Office of Safe Schools
Georgia	Link to resource about targeted school violence	Georgia Department of Education
Hawaii	No threat assessment information found	Hawaii State Department of Education
Idaho	Provides 8-hour training based on current research in the field as well as links to resources	Idaho Office of School Safety and Field Security
Illinois	Links to threat assessment resources	Illinois School and Campus Safety Resource Center
Iowa	Provides threat assessment training for staff	Iowa Department of Education
Kansas	General school safety site with links to external threat assessment resources	Kansas Safe and Secure Schools Unit
Kentucky	Each school must have a threat assessment team	Kentucky Center for Safe Schools

State	Threat Assessment Efforts	Contact Agency or Organization
Louisiana	Links to threat assessment resources	Louisiana Center for Safe Schools
Maine	Link to threat assessment resources and videos	Maine School Safety Center
Maryland	Mandated model policy for the establishment of threat assessment teams in each school district	Maryland Center for School Safety
Massachusetts	Section on threat assessment; report on school safety	Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Michigan	No threat assessment information found	Michigan Department of Education
Minnesota	Trainings are available through the Minnesota School Safety Center.	Minnesota School Safety Center
Mississippi	Link to threat assessment resources on school safety page	Mississippi Department of Education- Division of School Safety
Missouri	Provides behavioral risk assessment training and links to threat assessment resources	Missouri School Boards' Association Center for Education Safety
Montana	School safety and emergency preparedness plans including references to threat assessment	Montana Office of Public Instruction
Nebraska	Provides threat assessment training for schools	Nebraska School Safety- Nebraska DOE
Nevada	Threat assessment resources	Nevada Department of Education- School Safety
New Hampshire	School Safety Preparedness Task Force Report, which recommends use of a threat assessment task force	New Hampshire Department of Education
New Jersey	Threat assessment training available	New Jersey Department of Education- Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning
New Mexico	Safe school plan guidance with link to threat assessment resource	New Mexico Public Education Department- Safe Schools
New York	Links to threat assessment resources	The New York State Center for School Safety
North Carolina	Schools are mandated to establish threat assessment teams; addressed in school safety resource guide	North Carolina Center for Safer Schools

State	Threat Assessment Efforts	Contact Agency or Organization
North Dakota	General school safety guidance, no specific mention of threat assessment	North Dakota Department of Public Instruction- School Safety and Security
Ohio	Ohio School Threat Assessment Training provides free threat assessment training for all public schools	Ohio Office of the Attorney General
Oklahoma	Oklahoma Behavioral Threat Assessment with link to online training modules	Oklahoma State Department of Education-School Safety and Security
Oregon	Schools are required to have multi-disciplinary student safety assessment systems to assess students who threaten violence	Oregon School Safety and Prevention System
Pennsylvania	Threat assessment is mandated	Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency
Rhode Island	Threat assessment guidance trainings mentioned on Department of Education website	Rhode Island Department of Education
South Carolina	School-based Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management: Best Practices Guide for South Carolina K-12 schools	South Carolina Department of Education
South Dakota	Threat assessment training available	South Dakota Department of Education
Tennessee	Guidance on the SAVE Act, including links to threat assessment resources	Tennessee Department of Education
Texas	School threat assessment teams are mandated; Model Policies and Procedures to Establish and Train on Threat Assessment	Texas School Safety Center
Utah	School Safety Center promotes the use of threat assessment	Utah State Board of Education School
Vermont	Threat assessment training available as well as link to threat assessment resources, including publications and videos	Vermont School Safety Center
Virginia	School threat assessment teams are mandated; Threat Assessment and Management in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines	Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
Washington	School threat assessment programs are mandated; web page gives links to district policies, procedures, and area threat assessment coordinators	Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
West Virginia	Sample protocols for threat assessments	West Virginia Department of Education

Wisconsin	School threat assessment teams are recommended with guidance in the Wisconsin School Threat Assessment Protocol	Wisconsin Department of Justice
Wyoming	General health and safety web page	Wyoming Department of Education
Washington, DC	School Emergency Response Plan and Management Guide with section on threat assessment	District of Columbia Public Schools- Student Safety

Student Rights

This section describes how threat assessments can be conducted in a manner that protects student rights. Although a legal analysis of all relevant rights is beyond the scope of this toolkit, some key topics are reviewed, including the right to due process, compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the First Amendment right to free speech, and the rights of students with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The interpretations of federal and state law presented here are consistent with the documents cited in this section; however, laws and regulations are complex, subject to change, and might be applied differently across jurisdictions. School authorities are advised to rely on their legal counsel when implementing threat assessment.

Due Process

The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states in section 1: "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." The due process clause in this amendment is the basis for many court rulings that limit government authority. Most relevant to schools is that they must follow due process in educational practices such as disciplining students. The U.S. Constitution does not guarantee public education for all students, but individual states typically provide some right to public education for their youth, and since education is considered a valuable property, the due process requirement is applicable.[90] School law around due process is complex, but some general points can be noted.[91]

In the area of school discipline, a suspension or removal from school of 10 days or more is generally considered so substantial as to require due process.[91] This requirement is widely recognized for special education, where there are specific due process requirements, but due process might also be applied to students not receiving special education services. One implication is that a student is entitled to a fair hearing in which they can present their side of the case, either to deny or lessen what they have been accused of doing. The extent and formality of the hearing depends on the circumstances and the seriousness of the disciplinary consequences. However, schools are allowed to suspend a student immediately when necessary to protect others and preserve order in the school.[91] In these cases, it is sufficient that the principal has reviewed the

Action Step

Threat assessment teams should ensure they are giving students due process. Teams should make every effort to interview students who have been reported as making a threat to allow them to explain themselves. Teams should also use standardized procedures to ensure fairness and impartiality.

infraction with the student and given the student an opportunity to present their version of the facts.

Although the court cases on due process have not specifically addressed threat assessment, and threat assessment is not a disciplinary process, it seems wise and reasonable for threat assessment teams to interview a student reported to have made a threat and to give that student an opportunity to explain themselves. However, there may be cases when it is not possible to interview the student (e.g., the student is not available or cannot be located), and this should not stop the team from gathering information from other sources and taking any actions that seem appropriate to maintain immediate safety.

Due process requires that school discipline be fair and impartial, so it seems reasonable to expect that threat assessment procedures would also be fair and impartial.[91] Schools can demonstrate fairness and impartiality by using standardized procedures consistently for each student and by doing a diligent job of gathering information and making decisions based on facts. Schools can also conduct reviews of their threat assessment programs to make sure that student outcomes are equitable across demographic groups defined by race, ethnicity, disability status, and other characteristics. Suggestions for evaluating threat assessment programs are found in Section 3.

Student Records

Schools using threat assessment should maintain high-quality records in order to document and ensure the protection of student privacy and due process rights. An FBI report on the general practice of threat assessment emphasizes the need for teams to establish consistent documentation practices and procedures. Standardized practices are helpful for two basic reasons.[43] One is that standardized practices can help improve the quality of threat assessments so that the team looks carefully at the facts of each case and does not overlook any steps in their process of assessment and intervention. Second, standardized practices can help assure fairness and equity in conducting threat assessments so that all students receive the same review and treatment.

Any use of forms or templates should be standardized across cases. Case files should be kept confidential and stored securely, with access limited to those with a legitimate need for the information. It is good practice to include who is entitled to view and share assessment records. A formal report might acknowledge that decisions were made based on information known to the team at the time of the assessment and that any change in circumstances or additional information could change team recommendations.

Challenge

Good records are necessary to protect student privacy rights. There are important concerns about the protection of student records and adherence to FERPA. Threat assessment policies should include information on who is able to view and share threat assessment records.

Action Step

Documentation of each threat assessment case should include:

- What, when, where, how, and from whom information was gathered
- A complete report of the threat, including date, time, target, and witnesses
- Preservation of evidence (e.g., copies of emails, screenshots of texts)
- Decisions made by team, including reference to the supporting data
- Interventions taken (such as safety measures, support services, and recommendations to parents)
- Time frame and specific plans for re-evaluation

Documentation of threat assessment team activities serves multiple purposes, including:

- Aiding in the identification of trends and patterns
- Maintaining the quality and consistency of threat assessment practices
- Providing evidence of the scope of the assessment
- Providing evidence that established procedures and privacy protections were followed for each case
- Guiding future training and practice needs
- Guiding long-term management of cases
- Improving continuity of interventions with students who may present more than once
- Protecting against liability

Temporary removal from school may be an appropriate protective action. This is not a zero-tolerance practice; decisions about school removal should be based on the seriousness of the situation and the need to maintain safety. Ideally, a safety plan would allow the student to return to school soon or continue in an alternative setting. However, it should be noted that removal from school may not be an adequate safety measure if there is no appropriate supervision and removal of lethal means. Thus, it may be best for the student to remain in a closely supervised setting (at school or elsewhere) or in the custody of parents who are willing and able to provide supervision appropriate to the situation.

In addition to protective actions, there may be a need to address general concerns among students, parents, or staff about a threat incident. Threat assessment teams must consider the impact of the case on the school community.

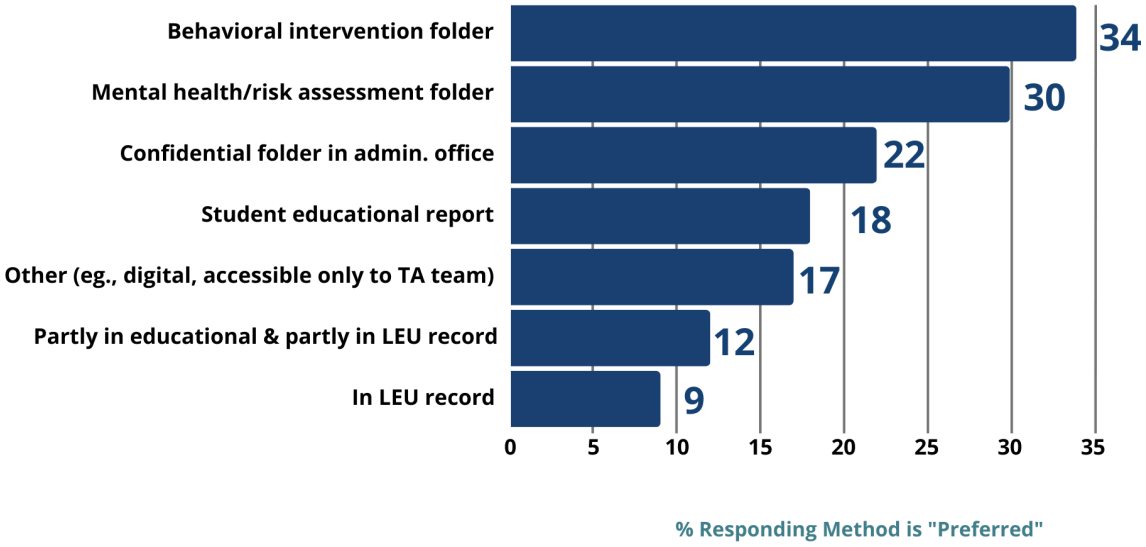
Challenge

Liability is an important consideration that can have a huge impact on practitioner decisions. The concept of liability is a legal means of encouraging best practices, which is the best way to protect student rights. Liability is minimized when a team follows recognized practice standards and makes reasonable decisions consistent with those standards. It is essential that teams keep records that are sufficient to document the assessment they conducted, what they concluded, and what actions they took in response.

There is no single established practice for maintaining threat assessment records. Schools have multiple options but must always comply with federal and state restrictions. If threat assessment records are placed in the student's educational record, they are subject to FERPA restrictions. However, FERPA allows schools to store threat assessment records outside of the educational record as law enforcement unit records, which are not subject to FERPA restrictions. When the national cadre of experts was polled about record-keeping (see Appendix 3 for full survey results), the most preferred practice was a behavioral intervention folder separate from the student's educational record (34%) or a confidential mental health/risk assessment folder (30%). Not recommended by most experts was to keep the threat assessment record in a school professional's individual records (85% not recommended), exclusively in a law enforcement unit record (82% not recommended), or exclusively in a student educational record (70% not recommended). There is an ongoing need to establish best practices for record-keeping and information sharing.

Ideally, the record system can be used to generate a database of threat assessment cases and outcomes. Such a system can be used to evaluate threat assessment trends, program fidelity, and equity of outcomes across student groups for each school and district.

Figure 8: How Should TA Records Be Maintained?



Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

FERPA is a federal law designed to protect the privacy rights of students and their parents by regulating access to the student's education records. FERPA applies to all educational institutions (primarily public schools) that receive federal funding from the Department of Education. The statute is found under 20 USC § 1232(g) and the supporting regulations are found under 34 C.F.R. Part 99. FERPA gives parents the right to review their child's education records, request changes to those records, and control what information in the records can be disclosed to others outside of school authorities. FERPA also transfers parent control of the records to the student when the student turns 18 or enters college.

The student's education record is broadly defined to include written records of the student's academic performance, disciplinary actions, health conditions, and parent information. Personally Identifiable Information (PII) refers to any information that reasonably identifies the student, such as name,

address, date of birth, and social security number. In most circumstances, school authorities must have parental consent to disclose any information about a student that includes PII. However, with parental consent, school authorities can disclose any information in the student's record.

Threat assessment teams must operate within FERPA's legal framework (as well as any state privacy laws). There are three ways that FERPA is relevant to the threat assessment process:

1. Access to Education Records

Members of the threat assessment team generally have access to a student's education records as part of their assessment process. They will want to review a student's academic history, discipline record, and information about mental health conditions and disability-related needs. If threat assessment team members are also part of the school's staff, then they are already authorized to have access to student education records. However, some threat assessment teams include law enforcement officers or community-based mental health service providers who are not school employees.

In these situations, there should be a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that places clear limits on their access to education records. Information from student records should be relevant to the threat assessment process, and it must be used only for threat assessment purposes (including interventions or services that are indicated by the threat assessment). For example, a school resource officer serving on a threat assessment team cannot use information from student education records for purposes beyond the scope of the threat assessment.

2. Creation of Education Records

A school may choose to place information gained from a threat assessment in the student's education record. This information might include threat assessment forms, reports, interviews, or other documents created or obtained in the course of a threat assessment. Once the information is in the student's education record, it becomes subject to FERPA protections. School staff members can maintain personal notes of their observations or their work that are not part of the education record if the notes are used solely by the staff member and not shared with others. For example, a school counselor might have session notes from a counseling session or interview with a student that are maintained in the counselor's files; if these notes are used only by the counselor and not shared with others, they are not considered part of the student's education record. These notes are still subject to the counselor's professional standards or any school district policy or regulations apart from FERPA.

FERPA allows schools to maintain threat assessment information outside of the student's education record in a separate record maintained by a "law enforcement unit". The term "law enforcement unit" could refer to records held by a school resource officer but could also include any individual in the school designated to maintain records related to physical safety or security. These records are maintained by the school and should not be confused with records maintained by a law enforcement agency outside of a school. There are advantages and disadvantages of using a law enforcement unit to maintain threat assessment records. The advantage of a law enforcement unit record is that this information can be freely shared and is not restricted by FERPA, but the corresponding disadvantage is that student privacy of this information is not protected by FERPA.

3. Sharing Information from Education Records

Sharing educational records should always be done to protect the health and safety of others. Threat assessment teams often want to share information with persons who have an interest in the threatening situation, such as the identified target(s) of the threat. If the target is a juvenile, the team would want to share information with the parents as well. FERPA regulations provide some guidance on information sharing:

School authorities can disclose any information in the student's record if they have parental consent (or consent of the student if the student is 18 or older). Threat assessment teams should strive to develop a collaborative relationship with parents and seek their agreement to share information for specific purposes (e.g., facilitating community-based mental health services for their child or reassuring the parents of a targeted student that an incident has been resolved). However, FERPA allows school authorities to reveal personally identifying information, such as a student's name, without parental consent if there is a health or safety emergency.

It is important to recognize that a student's education record does not include all information about a student known to the school. There are sources of information that are not considered part of the student's education record. Notably, the personal observations of school staff (e.g., information a teacher or counselor gains in talking to a student or observing a student) is not part of the education record. However, if personal observations are included in the student's education record, they are protected by FERPA. A common example might be a teacher who observes an argument between two students. The teacher might contact the parents of the two students to share information about the argument and discuss appropriate responses. These conversations could take place without revealing information from either student's education records.

Some school threat assessment teams might include members who are not employees of their school district, such as law enforcement officers and community-based mental health professionals. Information from educational records that is relevant to the threat assessment team can be shared with these team members when it is clear that it serves a legitimate educational interest, such as maintaining safety and order in the school.[50] When outside members serve on teams, it is advisable for threat assessment team members to sign an agreement that such information can only be used for threat assessment purposes and cannot be redisclosed outside of the team.[50,92]

Resource

For additional FERPA resources, refer to the U.S. Department of Education's Balancing Student Privacy and School Safety: A Guide to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act for Elementary and Secondary Schools.

Also see: School Resource Officers, School Law Enforcement Units, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and A Quick Guide to Information Sharing During Threat Reporting & Assessment.

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)

HIPAA is a federal law designed to protect sensitive patient health information from being disclosed without patient consent or knowledge. HIPAA restricts protected health information (i.e., demographic information created by a healthcare provider relating to the past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition of an individual) from being shared without individual authorization except in the case of a permitted disclosure. Healthcare providers include those "who electronically transmit health information in connection with certain transactions. These transactions include claims, benefit eligibility inquiries, referral authorization requests, and other transactions for which HHS has established standards under the HIPAA Transactions Rule."

Threat assessment teams must operate within HIPAA's legal framework when they are seeking healthcare records; however, HIPAA permits disclosures by healthcare providers who submit electronic records under HIPAA's privacy rule in the case of a serious threat to health or safety. Covered entities may disclose protected health information that they believe is necessary to prevent or lessen a serious and imminent threat to a person or the public when such disclosure is made to someone they believe can prevent or lessen the threat (including the target of the threat) would most likely include a serious threat to health and safety.[93]

School authorities are advised to consult their legal counsel and review the federal government's "Joint Guidance on the Application of FERPA and HIPAA to Student Health Records." In general, HIPAA does not apply to schools because schools are not HIPAA covered entities.[94] If schools collect student health information that is contained in student education records, that information is covered by FERPA and is exempt from HIPAA. Even if the school employs a third-party healthcare provider to work with students, the resulting records qualify as education records subject to FERPA rather than HIPAA. One exception might be if a school has an on-site health clinic that maintains separate records that are not placed in the student's education record.

Resource

To learn more about HIPPA, visit the CDC's HIPPA resource page.

Resource

For a comparison of state laws, see the "Mental Health Professionals' Duty to Warn" brief by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Duty to Warn

In many states, mental health service providers have a legal duty to protect third parties from violence if the provider has knowledge that they have been threatened. The extent of this duty and the circumstances under which it applies vary according to state laws. School districts must examine their state laws and regulations for guidance.

The duty to warn statutes generally do not apply to teachers or administrators but might apply to school counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers depending on the state. Even if there is no state law determining whether school authorities must warn a potential victim, there is always the possibility of a civil lawsuit by an injured party. In these circumstances, the judge or jury would decide what the school threat assessment team should have done and whether they are liable for any injury to the victim.

The concept of a duty to warn is based on the widely cited Tarasoff case, which involved a college student who was threatened and later murdered by a disappointed suitor. This case established the idea that mental health professionals have a duty to warn potential victims who have been threatened by their client, or in some circumstances, a broader duty to take reasonable steps to protect the potential victim from harm. Examples of actions taken to protect someone could include notifying law enforcement, seeking civil commitment or involuntary hospitalization, or providing mental health services or other interventions intended to defuse the threat and reduce the risk of violence.

Research Findings

An important case addressing mental health and the law, Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California, 1974 and 1976, reflects the general principle that confidentiality is secondary to safety.

A University of California student who was infatuated with Tatiana Tarasoff told his therapist that he wanted to kill her for spurning his advances. The therapist told the campus police but did not warn Tarasoff. After the student killed Tarasoff, her family sued the University, the police department, and the therapist. The therapist was found liable for failing to warn Tarasoff. The California Supreme Court first asserted that the therapist had a "duty to warn" potential threat victims and later articulated a "duty to protect" that included other actions that a mental health professional might take beyond a warning to protect a potential victim of client violence. Over the years, cases in other states have addressed different circumstances in which a Tarasoff duty would or would not apply.[95] Threat assessment team members should be aware of the Tarasoff duties to warn and protect in their state.

For more information on Tarasoff duties, refer to The Tarasoff Rule: The Implications of Interstate Variation and Gaps in Professional Training.[96]

Reservations about Warning a Threatened Party

Sometimes school authorities are concerned about revealing the identity of a student who has made a threat. These concerns might be based on the belief that the student's identity is protected by FERPA or the fear that such a disclosure would lead to a negative reaction by the threatened individual or the individual's parents. Each of these concerns must be weighed against the greater need to protect a potential victim.

If there is an immediate risk to the health or safety of any student, defined as a reasonable belief that an "articulable and significant threat" to a student(s) health or safety exists, FERPA allows the threat assessment team to disclose the student's identity without parent consent. The law restricts this disclosure only to individuals who need the information to protect involved students.[97] Schools should document the need for this disclosure and to whom the information was given. Such information can be shared with law enforcement and emergency professionals when there are genuine health or safety concerns for the student or others. Once the threat is resolved and there is no longer an immediate safety risk, the team must follow regular FERPA guidance regarding release of any further information.

Sometimes, school authorities are concerned that revealing the name of a student could disturb the warned individual or parents and perhaps instigate a retaliative act of aggression. In these cases, the team should consider the negative consequences of not warning the individual or parents. The most obvious negative consequence is that the unwarned individual will be at increased risk of harm, but another is that the individual or parents could become aware of the threat from other sources and carry out the anticipated act of aggression anyway.

By not warning the threatened party, the team loses the opportunity to communicate with them and attempt to prevent the retaliative act. The failure to warn could also arouse anger toward school authorities and jeopardize their ability to work collaboratively to resolve the threat.

In the case of threats that are judged not to be serious, threat assessment teams may want to notify the threatened individual and parents even though a warning is not needed for safety reasons, and is not legally required. A threat notification can be distinguished from a threat warning. A notification involves informing the individual about a threat incident to clarify what has occurred. The purpose of a notification is to defuse potential rumors or exaggerated reports that could inflame the situation and maintain credibility and alliance with the threatened individual and parents.

Action Step

School district personnel and educators should refer to their school attorneys for additional legal guidance.

Action Step

Part of the function of the threat assessment team is to manage the impact of the threat on individuals who have been threatened, as well as the general school community, to mitigate the impact of a threat on the well-being and security of others. Threat assessment teams should routinely assess the impact of a warning on threatened individuals and their parents, and provide support and reassurance to lessen fear, anger, or other negative responses.

Free Speech

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." The Supreme Court affirmed in Tinker v Des Moines (1969) that students have free speech rights with the ruling that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." However, the right to free speech is not completely uncontrolled, as students sometimes think. Schools can regulate the speech of their students under certain conditions which are spelled out in various court rulings.[91] School districts will want to consult their legal counsel for specific court rulings as well as state laws that apply to them. The most important principle, however, is that schools must determine whether a statement or expression (such as clothing, artwork, or music) is disruptive to learning or the learning environment. In a recent decision, the Supreme Court ruled that schools cannot discipline students for off-campus speech unless it "materially disrupts classwork or involved substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others."[98]

An important distinction is that public schools represent the government and must regulate speech within the limits of the First Amendment, while private schools do not have the same Constitutional limits on their ability to restrict student speech.

Threats represent a complicated form of speech that is not protected by the First Amendment if they are considered "true threats." A true threat is "a statement which, in the entire context and under all the circumstances, a reasonable person would foresee would be interpreted by those to whom the statement is communicated as a serious expression of intent to inflict bodily harm upon that person." (290 F.3d at 1077). Furthermore, "It is not necessary that the defendant intend to, or be able to carry out his threat; the only intent requirement for a true threat is that the defendant intentionally or

knowingly communicate the threat." (290 F.3d at 1075). A threat which is merely exaggeration used to attract attention is not considered a true threat. From a threat assessment perspective, a threat that is obviously a joke would not be a true threat, although it might be subject to disciplinary action if it was disruptive to the school environment or was hurtful to the recipient (e.g., verbal bullying or harassment).

Challenge

There are some categories of speech that are not protected by the First Amendment. School authorities should be aware that these categories exist and could be a basis for action. Speech that is not protected, or is less strongly protected, by the First Amendment include obscenity, child pornography, fraud, speech that violates intellectual property laws, and speech that is integral to illegal conduct, or incites imminent unlawful action.

Resource

For more information on threat assessment and FERPA, see the FAQs about Threat Assessment and FERPA tool.

Resources: Free Speech

- What Does Free Speech Mean?
- The First Amendment in Schools
- Speech on Campus
- Threats of Violence Against Individuals

Students with Disabilities

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Students with disabilities are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) comparable to the education of students without disabilities. There are complex legal and procedural protections of these students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Some key elements of these laws and regulations will be reviewed here. Districts are encouraged to rely on their legal counsel for interpretation of relevant federal and state laws and regulations that apply to their students. In every case, school authorities will have to consider the unique facts specific to the student and the circumstances of the threat.

Under IDEA, schools must provide FAPE to all students between ages 3 and 21 who need special education services due to a disability. The existence of a disability and the determination of services are documented in an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP must be carefully considered when evaluating a student who has been referred for a threat assessment. The first priority for the school is to assess risk and take any immediate safety precautions, but it is also important to consider the possible role of the student's disability. The student's special education status and related history of services can be relevant to understanding the threat situation and planning a response to reduce risk. NASP (2020) recommends that an expert in special education, such as a school psychologist, serve on the threat assessment team. Although threat assessment teams cannot modify a student's IEP, it is appropriate for the threat assessment team to provide information to the special education staff who are working with the student. In some cases, a revision of the student's IEP might be warranted.

Titles II and III of the ADA

Titles II and III of the ADA present a legal definition of a threat assessment that is applied when a district wants to remove a student with a disability from school because of safety concerns. "In determining whether an individual poses a direct threat to the health or safety of others, a public entity must make an individualized assessment, based on objective evidence, to ascertain: the nature, duration, and severity of the risk; the probability that the potential injury will actually occur; and whether reasonable modifications of policies, practices, or procedures or the provision of auxiliary aids or services will mitigate the risk" (CFR § 35.139b).

In conducting a threat assessment of a student with a disability, threat assessment teams will want to document that their assessment was consistent with this regulation, showing that it was based on objective evidence (such as observations of student behaviors and statements) and that it ascertained with reasonable accuracy the nature, duration, and severity of the risk. The team will want to consider whether any interventions or services might reduce the risk as an alternative to removing the student from school. The documentation of the threat assessment should include relevant information about the student's disability and the basis for determining that the student posed a serious risk of harming someone, justifying any proposed interventions such as a change in school placement.

Challenge: Context Matters

Threat assessment teams should be mindful to conduct threat assessments appropriately to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are protected. Conducting a proper threat assessment is the best way to protect both student rights and potential victims.

Manifestation Determinations

If the response to a threat by students receiving special education services involves a change in school placement, the school will need to conduct a manifestation determination review (MDR; 34 CFR § 300.530 (e)). The threshold for a change in school placement is reached when a student has been suspended for more than ten days. If a student has been suspended for fewer than ten days, but the total for the school year is going to exceed ten days, then an MDR is needed. An MDR is a process of reviewing all relevant information regarding the relationship between a student's disability and the behavior prompting disciplinary action. The MDR is conducted by the student's IEP team, including the parent. There are two questions considered by the MDR:

1. Was the behavior caused by, or directly and substantially related to, the student's disability?
2. Was the behavior a direct result of the school's failure to implement the IEP?

If the answer to either question is "yes", the behavior is regarded as a manifestation of the student's disability, and the school is not permitted to make the change in placement without parental permission. Moreover, the school must take immediate steps to amend the IEP and provide appropriate services for the student. If the answer to both questions is "no", the school is permitted to make the change in placement without parental permission. In cases where there is no change in placement, the school is not obligated to conduct an MDR, but it is good practice to review the student's IEP, and when appropriate, the threat assessment team might make recommendations for the IEP team to consider. It is noteworthy that threat assessments typically do not lead to suspension out of school.[36,38,49]

Interim Alternative Placements

Safety is the top priority when it comes to student threats of violence. Under special circumstances, federal law allows schools to place a student with a disability in an interim alternative educational setting (IAES) for up to 45 school days even if the student's behavior was judged to be a manifestation of the student's disability (34 CFR § 300.530 (g)). According to IDEA, a student can be placed in an IAES if one of the following special circumstances applies:

1. The student carried a dangerous weapon to school or possessed a weapon at school (including school premises or at a school function). A dangerous weapon is defined in the U.S. criminal code as one that is readily capable of causing death or serious bodily injury, excluding a pocketknife with a blade of less than 2.5 inches.
2. The student knowingly possessed or used illegal drugs, or sold or solicited sale of a controlled substance, while at school, on school premises, or at a school function.
3. The student inflicted serious bodily injury on another person while at school, on school premises, or at a school function. Serious bodily injury is defined in the U.S. criminal code as involving in a substantial risk of death, extreme physical pain, extended or obvious disfigurement, or extended loss or impairment of the function of a bodily member, organ, or mental faculty.

In practice, there are few occasions to pursue an IAES. A student who qualifies for an IAES might be removed from school by the judicial system due to being arrested and placed in juvenile detention.

Honig Injunctions

If school authorities are sufficiently concerned that allowing a student to remain in school is going to result in injury to others, the school can seek a court order to change the student's placement. This court order is called a Honig injunction after a noted case, Honig v Doe, 559 IDELR 231 (U.S. 1988). A Honig injunction might be used in an extremely serious situation where there is not enough time to pursue other remedies such as an IAES.

Although there is much attention to the legal complexities of removing a student from school, it should be emphasized that threat assessment is not focused on school removal. School removal is a last resort when other efforts have been tried or ruled out. Furthermore, school removal can be counterproductive since the threat assessment team may lose the opportunity to monitor and support the student. Some notable school shootings (e.g., in Red Lake, Minnesota; Parkland, Florida; and Springfield, Oregon) were committed by students who had been suspended or expelled from school. The goal of a threat assessment is to prevent violence, and prevention is best accomplished by helping the distressed student and resolving the problem or conflict that underlies the threat. A randomized controlled study found that students who received a threat assessment were substantially more likely to receive counseling and less likely to be given a long-term suspension or transferred to a different school than students who made threats in schools not using a threat assessment approach.[86]

Challenge: School Removal

School removal should only be used as a last resort when other interventions have been tried or ruled out. It may result in the lost opportunity to monitor and support the student.

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School Threat Assessment TOOLKIT

Section 3

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Your Threat Assessment Program

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Implementation Tools

Fidelity Evaluation Tool

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SECTION 3 OBJECTIVE

This section describes steps for evaluating the effectiveness of a threat assessment program, including topics such as implementation fidelity and the impact of threat assessment on students.

SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

This toolkit is authored by University of Virginia professors Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with input from school safety leaders, experts, government agencies, and the National Center for School Safety.

To access all three sections of the toolkit, as well as the introduction and appendices, visit our website at nc2s.org or visit the toolkit's web page directly.

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What is an Effective Program?

Fundamentally, a threat assessment program is effective if it keeps everyone safe. However, safety is more than the absence of school shootings, which are statistically rare and will never occur in most schools.[99] School safety includes both physical and psychological safety.[100] Physical safety is concerned with physical acts of violence like fighting and assault, while psychological or social-emotional safety is concerned with problems such as verbal bullying and harassment. School threat assessment teams should consider multiple indicators of physical and psychological safety and focus on prevention and mitigation efforts such as lowering rates of fighting and bullying and making use of multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions.

School threat assessment aims to help students resolve problems and to support social-emotional and academic learning needs that might be identified in the threat assessment process. Therefore, an additional measure of effectiveness is to examine the services and supports provided to these students and the relevant outcomes. A part of case management is to monitor and promote the student's behavioral and academic status.

As noted in the U.S. Secret Service guide, "a crucial component of preventing targeted violence at school relies on developing positive school climates built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and social and emotional support."[11] Threat assessment teams should encourage school-wide efforts to help students feel connected to the school. Students should have supportive peer groups and trusting relationships with their teachers. School climate surveys and other measures can be used to assess the healthy and protective qualities of the school. School discipline should be fair and equitable and concerned with facilitating student growth and responsibility.

Resource

The National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments has a collection of validated school climate surveys that can be used to assess school climate.

Implementation Fidelity

Developing a school threat assessment program is a dynamic process, requiring regular review and adjustment as necessary. One way to evaluate the effectiveness of your threat assessment program is to examine whether it has been implemented with fidelity. This section describes the importance of implementation fidelity and presents some general procedures and a scoring protocol that can be applied across threat assessment models. Fidelity includes making sure that the program is conducted in a fair and equitable manner that protects student rights.

The Importance of Implementation Fidelity

Knowing whether a program has been implemented with fidelity allows practitioners to understand how and why an intervention works. When a program is unsuccessful, it is difficult to judge whether the program was ineffective or was not properly implemented. Therefore, evaluating the fidelity of implementation is essential to evaluating a program and achieving maximum effectiveness.

Key Term

Implementation Fidelity

The degree to which an intervention is delivered as intended.[101]

School threat assessment programs should demonstrate implementation fidelity. Failure to carry out threat assessments effectively can have tragic consequences. Investigations of school shootings in Colorado and Florida revealed that the school's threat assessment team had identified the student who subsequently carried out the shooting, but did not follow its threat assessment procedures with fidelity and did not take appropriate actions to prevent violence.[102-104] These cases highlight the need for ongoing program evaluation to measure fidelity of implementation.

Factors Affecting Implementation Fidelity

Action Step: Factors Affecting Program Implementation

In choosing a threat assessment program, schools should consider how they will evaluate its implementation. The program evaluation literature has identified some program characteristics that influence how readily a program can be implemented and evaluated.[101]

- **Organizational capacity:** A positive school climate, good staff morale, low staff turnover, and well-defined staff roles and responsibilities make it easier to implement a new program with high fidelity.
- **Organizational support:** The program should have dedicated resources, including staff time, funding, training, and supervision.
- **Program features:** Programs can be implemented more effectively if there are manuals, standardized forms, handouts, videos, or other guidance.
- **Program complexity:** More complex programs are harder to implement consistently and are more prone to revision or simplification when adopted.
- **Integration into school operations, local initiation, and local planning:** Programs are more successful when they are integrated into regular school routines and operations.

Implementation fidelity is a concern for all kinds of programs and can be especially challenging in school settings.[105] Staff need a solid understanding of the rationale and need for a program, and there must be strong support by the school leadership and staff who champion the particular program.[106,107] Otherwise, the quality of program implementation will suffer because of the many competing demands and responsibilities in schools. Factors that negatively influence program implementation are insufficient staff, inadequate supervision, high staff turnover, heavy student caseloads, and lack of training.[108,109]

One of the first hurdles to achieving implementation fidelity for schools implementing threat assessment is training all team members in each school. The team members need high-quality training that includes active learning, role-playing, and feedback. Training must be scheduled at a time when all team members can attend, which often means pulling staff from their regular school duties for a full-day workshop. In districts with many schools, the training must be coordinated across schools. After the initial training, there will be a need to train new team members each year due to staff turnover. Beyond training team members, the school should provide an orientation to threat assessment for its staff so that they understand and support the program. All staff members must understand the need to report threats promptly so that they can be investigated. Parents and students also need an orientation to threat assessment for the same reasons.

Another challenge to implementation fidelity occurs when staff have heavy caseloads and do not feel they can devote enough time to conducting a thorough threat assessment or following up with students after a threat assessment has been conducted. The team leader or another administrator with responsibilities for school safety must provide oversight and support so that teams follow their protocol.

The school administration and threat assessment team must be in alignment for implementation fidelity. For example, one school trained its threat assessment team and implemented its program, but the next year a new principal joined the school who did not understand the threat assessment

approach. The team, who had received threat assessment training teaching them to effectively critique the current risk, evaluated a middle school student who drew a picture of a figure holding a very large knife in a threatening manner. The team found no evidence that the student had such a knife, a current peer conflict, or an intention to stab anyone. The information gathered in the assessment suggested that the boy was trying to impress his peers with a dramatic drawing. During the assessment the student recognized that his drawing could have been misinterpreted and was apologetic. The team decided that the threat was not serious and resolved it as a minor incident. However, the school principal applied a zero-tolerance approach and decided that the student should be given a long-term suspension in order to set an example and deter other students from aggressive behavior.

Challenge

Including school resource officers is a frequent concern in schools adopting threat assessments. School threat assessment authorities consistently recommend a law enforcement officer be a member of a threat assessment team, although the officer need not be engaged in every case except where state law requires it (e.g., FL) and might not be an SRO. However, bringing in an officer outside the school who does not understand threat assessment may increase the risk of criminalization if the officer does not understand the school context. Evaluating implementation fidelity can help make sure all members of the threat assessment team, including law enforcement, receive the necessary threat assessment training.

A further complication is that outside evaluators cannot always be available to monitor implementation, given that threat assessments typically occur infrequently and unexpectedly.[49,86] However, local supervisors could be called upon to monitor or supervise cases. In one district, the head of the threat assessment program routinely reviews the digital records of ongoing cases and consults with the team on the most serious or complex cases.

Measuring Implementation Fidelity

Schools need to regularly review the quality of their threat assessments. This evaluation should examine whether school teams are conducting threat assessments consistent with their guidelines and whether they are using evidence-based practices. Schools should review protocols to ensure that there are clearly defined roles and expectations for all team members.[26]

Resource

The fidelity evaluation tool is intended to address the core components of threat assessment. It provides a scoring sheet for schools to assess the implementation of their chosen threat assessment model.

The evaluation of threat assessment is particularly challenging because threat assessment requires some degree of flexibility and professional judgment. Threat assessment models offer guidelines to assist a team's decision-making rather than a prescriptive process. Threat assessments are intended to produce an individualized safety plan or intervention that depends on the student and the nature of the threat.

Program implementation literature recommends that program developers specify core components of an intervention that are directly related to a program's theory of change. This approach allows collaborators some flexibility to adapt a program to individual circumstances and helps ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved.[107,110]

There are several core components of threat assessment practice identified by threat assessment experts.[10,43,45,80,103] These include:

- Establishment of a multidisciplinary team, including training for all team members.
- Education for students, parents, and staff about threat reporting and the school's use of threat assessment.
- Consistent use of standard threat assessment procedures (e.g., information gathering, threat classification, management strategies).
- Regular team meetings to monitor cases and assess the effectiveness of risk reduction efforts.
- Fair and equitable outcomes for students, including disciplinary consequences, law enforcement actions, and supports and interventions.

Case Outcomes

Another important measure of the effectiveness of your threat assessment program is to consider its influence on students. School teams should be monitoring the effectiveness of their safety plans as part of their case management efforts. For those students who remain on their caseload, the team should reviews the student's well-being and safety on a regular basis, with more frequent review where there is greater concern.

This section describes three important measures of student outcomes following a threat assessment: safety, support (services to the student), and equity and fairness. General considerations for each outcome measure are discussed, and a scoring tool is included.

Key Terms

Physical Safety

The physical dimension of safety involves preventing physical injury through the use of threat assessment, along with other disciplinary and security measures that maintain order in the school.

Psychological Safety

The psychological dimension of safety involves the mental health and well-being of students by preventing bullying and harassment by students and adults, as well creating a school climate that is supportive and conducive to learning.[100,104]

Outcome One: Safety

Physical Safety

Threats to physically injure someone should be prevented or averted without anyone being harmed. Schools cannot realistically prevent all threats of violence from being carried out but should have a very low rate of violent incidents following a threat assessment. Violent incidents can range from simple assaults and fights to more serious injuries and, of course, school shootings. School shootings are so rare that it is not scientifically feasible to claim that an absence of a shooting can be attributed to threat assessment, but controlled studies have shown threat assessment results in a decline in bullying and other forms of victimization.[111,112] Nevertheless, it is important for schools to document the number of threat cases they have investigated, what kinds of violent acts were threatened, and the number that resulted in some type of violent act (most often, a fight).

Research Findings

A study of 1,865 cases in Virginia found that students who received a threat assessment made no attempt to carry out their threat in 97% of cases and only attempted a violent act in 3% (62) of the cases.[88] Of the 62 attempted cases, school authorities averted the attempt in 49 cases so that there was no physical injury to anyone. In the remaining 13 cases, a student who received a threat assessment subsequently carried out the threat, which in all cases involved an assault or fight.

Action Step: Classifying Case Outcomes

Threats can be classified as not attempted, attempted-but-averted, and carried out. Schools should tabulate the number of threats evaluated by their team and report the distribution of these three outcomes. An attempted-but-averted threat is one in which the student engaged in some kind of attack, such as going after a classmate or bringing a weapon to school with the intent to use it. A threat would be classified as carried out if there was any kind of physical assault or injury to someone following a threat assessment, even if the assault did not achieve the stated goal of the threat (e.g., a student threatened to kill someone and stabbed the person but did not kill them). The few threats that are carried out can be classified based on whether anyone was injured, with categories of no injury, minor injury (such as a bruise or abrasion), or major injury (such as a broken bone, stab wound, or some other injury requiring hospital treatment).

Psychological Safety

Researchers found that victims of aggression, especially bullying, suffer from impaired concentration, motivation, and engagement in learning that compromises academic achievement.[113-115] Research also shows that school violence is negatively associated with teachers' self-efficacy and professional engagement and that teachers who feel unsafe are more likely to leave the profession.[116-119]

A welcoming, supportive school environment that fosters respect, communication, and trust is foundational to school safety. A large body of research associates a positive school climate with several positive student outcomes, including better social-emotional adjustment and less peer aggression, misconduct, and weapons carrying.[108,120-124] A positive school climate, characterized by high structure and high support, "is the foundation for a safe school."[125] The NTAC and the threat assessment models highlighted throughout this toolkit emphasize the importance of a positive school climate to threat assessment implementation and school safety.

Outcome Two: Student Support

Students should receive interventions and services to address the problems or concerns that are identified in the threat assessment. Teams will want to examine student outcomes to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts and identify ways to improve. Researchers found that schools have implemented a wide range of non-disciplinary supports for most students following a threat assessment.[42] These included mental health supports, a behavior plan, and a modified schedule, among others. Strategies such as academic supports and mental health services for students are effective in addressing student needs and in improving student behavior following a threat assessment.[31]

Resource

There are many different evidence-based ways to achieve a positive school climate. The Office of Elementary & Secondary Education provides information on resources to improve school climate.

Effective supports and services can mitigate the need for exclusionary discipline, which has well-established negative consequences for students.[125] For example, the Texas study *Breaking Schools' Rules* found that the widespread practice of removing students from school for minor misconduct did not improve school safety, had no apparent benefits to the students, and increased their risk of school dropout and juvenile court involvement.[23]

Challenge

Modified schedules are sometimes used as a threat assessment outcome. These can take different forms but sometimes involve sending individual students home early. There are concerns that using a modified schedule may result in students having less of an opportunity to receive assistance. However, using a modified schedule can be preferable to complete removal from school because students would still be able to receive monitoring and supports. Threat assessment teams should carefully consider all possible interventions and supports.

A Virginia study found that high school suspension rates were associated with higher dropout rates beyond the effects of school demographics and student attitudes toward school rules.[126] The discipline gap is closely associated with the achievement gap and the "school-to-prison pipeline."[127] Schools serving high numbers of disadvantaged students are more likely to use exclusionary discipline and to have lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates, ultimately leading to higher juvenile crime rates.[23,127] It is critical to track the relationship between threat assessment and school discipline over time at each school by evaluating threat assessment outcomes.

It is also important to document whether students continue to make threats, engage in further aggressive behavior, or have disciplinary problems in the months and years after a threat assessment. Although students rarely carry out their threats, students who make more serious, substantive threats are much more likely to attempt to carry out the threat than students whose threats are classified as not serious.[128] We also know from case studies of school shootings and averted shootings that the students most at risk for extreme violence had multiple incidents of conflict or misbehavior before a serious act of violence occurred.[10,20] Although a threat assessment might avert an immediate crisis, some students remain at risk for continued problems and require further support.

An important goal of threat assessment is that the student can continue in school with continued behavior and academic progress. Threat assessment is able to generate support for students in need of services. Schools can document the extent to which students receive counseling, mental health services, academic support, or other interventions using the Student Outcome Tool. If students are receiving special education services, the threat assessment should be coordinated with the student's IEP and comply with all special education requirements. Finally, there should be a follow-up assessment to determine whether the student was able to continue successfully in school.

Action Step:
Students with Disabilities

Threat assessment teams should be mindful of interventions or supports already in place for students. A thorough review of the student's IEP or 504 plan should always be part of the threat assessment process.

Outcome Three: Fairness and Equity

Schools implementing threat assessment should use it as part of a comprehensive approach to building safe and positive school climates that reduce their use of exclusionary discipline, except in the most serious cases where school removal is indicated for safety reasons.

Although threat assessment teams generally do not make disciplinary decisions, their assessments should inform the disciplinary process. Schools using threat assessment should be able to avoid major disciplinary actions (such as long-term suspension or expulsion) for minor student misbehavior that does not pose a serious threat. Schools should consider law enforcement outcomes as well as disciplinary outcomes. Although threat assessment teams do not make law enforcement decisions about students, the threat assessment process should inform law enforcement decision-makers (for a detailed discussion of information sharing during the threat assessment process, see Student Rights in Section 2 of this toolkit).

Resource

The U.S. Department of Education has guidance on:

- School climate and discipline
- Racial and ethnic disparities in discipline

There should be a relatively low rate of students who are arrested, charged, or placed in a detention facility as a result of a threat. In a study of 1,865 cases in Virginia schools, only 1% of students were arrested and fewer than 1% were placed in juvenile detention. Court charges were registered in approximately 5% of cases.[100] However, court charges do not necessarily result in convictions and sometimes are resolved with a referral for services.[134] A study of 22,694 Florida threat assessment cases found an arrest rate of 0.7%, incarceration of 0.1%, and court charges of 1.8%.[38]

As noted above, the threat assessment team does not make disciplinary decisions or undertake law enforcement actions; however, schools should examine the disciplinary decisions and law enforcement outcomes for their cases.[51] One of the major concerns in American education is that students from some minority groups and students with disabilities are subject to disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline. Outcomes should be equitable across student demographic groups as defined by race, ethnicity, or disability status.

Action Step: Examining Disciplinary Outcomes

We recommend that schools compare disciplinary and law enforcement outcomes across demographic groups.

Disciplinary outcomes to review include, but are not limited to:

- Out-of-school suspensions.
- In-school suspensions.
- Expulsions.
- Changes in school placement.

Law enforcement outcomes to consider are:

- Arrests.
- Court charges.
- Placement in juvenile detention or jail facilities.

Schools should also consider the transportation of students to a psychiatric assessment for involuntary hospitalization.

Several studies have found little or no disparity across Black, Hispanic, and White students in the use of school suspension or law enforcement actions among students who received a threat assessment.[36,42] However, in light of the prevalence of disparities in exclusionary discipline observed in the general student population (not limited to students receiving a threat assessment) as reported by the U.S. Department of Education, it is important for schools to monitor and review disciplinary and law enforcement outcomes for students receiving a threat assessment.[51,96]

One concern is that students of color and students receiving special education services might be referred for threat assessment at a higher rate than other students. The threat assessment process uses multiple sources of information and multiple perspectives of team members to help protect against bias in the decision-making process. Research indicates that these students do not receive disproportionate disciplinary or law enforcement outcomes when referred for a threat assessment.[27,32] Studies have shown that students are much more likely to be excluded from school for a threat if the school does not use threat assessment.

Challenge

Although disproportionate referrals may be a cause for concern, the goal of threat assessment is to prevent disproportionate disciplinary outcomes. Research shows that when schools do not use threat assessment, the outcome for students who make a threat is that they are much more likely to be suspended or transferred from school. Threat assessment teams take a problem-solving rather than a punitive approach and follow standard procedures for performing the threat assessment. These steps protect students from inappropriate discipline by objectively analyzing the context of the situation.

When appropriate, a referral for threat assessment is preferable to exclusionary discipline such as suspension or expulsion, especially when the threat assessment program is being evaluated with fairness and equity of outcomes in mind.

As the National Association of School Psychologists concluded, "When BTAM best practices are followed, the process helps prevent or reduce the overuse of restrictive placements and punitive measures for students with disabilities and students of color."[51]

Procedures for Determining Equitable Outcomes

An important aspect of determining equitable outcomes for threat assessment is accurate record keeping, described in Section 2 of this toolkit. If a school keeps accurate threat assessment records and discipline records, it can determine whether there are disparities in referral rates by race, ethnicity, disability status, or other demographic characteristics of interest. A school can compare overall discipline rates (e.g., suspension rate) to the discipline rates for students receiving a threat assessment.

Table 5, below, provides an example of how differences in suspension by race within the group of students referred for threat assessment can be determined. A hypothetical school with 1,000 students reported 25 threat cases with the following student demographics and suspension outcomes.

Table 5: Hypothetical Differences in Suspension by Race

Threat Case Data	Total (N)	White (N)	Black (N)	Hispanic (N)
Number of cases	25	10	11	4
Number of cases resulting in suspension	7	3	3	1
Percent suspended in group	28%	30%	27%	25%
Risk ratio*	—	—	.90	.83

*The risk ratio tells us how the risk for one racial/ethnic group compares to the risk for a comparison group. In this example, we used White as the comparison group (the risk ratio for Black students compared to White students is 27/30, the number of Black students suspended/number of Black students referred for TA *100 / the number of White students suspended/number of White students referred for TA *100).

Note that this is a hypothetical example. Most schools have relatively few (<10) threat assessment cases per year, but many more disciplinary referrals. Statistical analyses will be more reliable in larger samples, so that it is desirable to aggregate data across schools, perhaps at the district level.

Suspension Rates Following Threat Assessment

Within the 25 threat cases, 7 resulted in suspension. Of the 10 White students referred for threat assessment, 3 (30%) were suspended. Of the 11 Black students referred for threat assessment, 3 (27%) were suspended, and 1 of the Hispanic students referred for threat assessment was suspended (25%). This suggests that there is parity in the rate of suspension following threat assessment for Black and White students; approximately equal proportions of White and Black students were suspended following a threat assessment.

Resource

Schools can use the Outcome 3 section of the Student Outcome Tool and input their own data to identify potential disparities in referral for threat assessment outcomes.

Action Step

Schools can conduct a statistical test of association (e.g., crosstabs in SPSS) in which each racial group is compared to the White reference group.

A risk ratio tells us how the risk for one racial/ethnic group (e.g., Black) compares to the risk for a comparison group (e.g., White). Risk ratios of greater than 1.0 indicate overrepresentation by a racial/ethnic group, and risk ratios of less than 1.0 indicate underrepresentation by a racial/ethnic group. For more details on this calculation, see pages 5-6 of the U.S. Department of Education's Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Special Education guide.

Research Findings

For a review of these studies, see Appendix 2 in the full toolkit PDF.

Cornell, D. G., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in kindergarten through grade 12. *School Psychology Review*, 41(1), 100–115.

Cornell, D. G., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *NASSP Bulletin, 95(3)*, 175–194.

Cornell, D. & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Research for policymakers* (pp. 180-191). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review,* 47, 183-195.

Crepeau-Hobson, F. & Leech, N. (2021). Disciplinary and nondisciplinary outcomes of School-Based Threat Assessment in Colorado Schools. *School Psychology Review*, 51(5), 609-618.

JustChildren & Cornell, D. (2013). Prevention v. punishment: Threat assessment, school suspensions, and racial disparities. Charlottesville, VA: Legal Aid Justice Center and University of Virginia Curry School of Education.

Kaplan, S., & Cornell, D. (2005). Threats of violence by students in special education. *Behavioral Disorders,* 31, 107–119.

Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis city schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders*, 34(1), 42–54.

National Center for School Safety

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SCHOOL of EDUCATION and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

School Threat Assessment Toolkit
APPENDICES

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SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

This toolkit is authored by University of Virginia professors Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with input from school safety leaders, experts, government agencies, and the National Center for School Safety.

To access all three sections of the toolkit, as well as the introduction and appendices, visit our website at nc2s.org or visit the toolkit's web page directly.

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APPENDIX 1

Description of Toolkit Development

This toolkit is intended to provide a broad overview of best practices in threat assessment that are not specific to any single model or approach. It uses a survey of approximately 200 external experts to represent a consensus in the field. The authors also drew upon their own research and experience and conducted an extensive review of research literature on school threat assessment. Multiple drafts of the toolkit were critically reviewed by members of the National Center for School Safety, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of Education. All of the external experts were invited to review the toolkit, and 24 provided extensive feedback.

Literature Review

The review of research included 139 publications concerned with school-based threat assessment and/or school shootings published between 1995 and 2020. These publications addressed general principles as well as specific procedures for conducting threat assessments in schools. It included guidelines or protocols published by several states.[46,82] Other publications include both case studies and controlled studies of school threat assessment. In the course of writing this toolkit, the authors updated the list of studies and included additional publications on other topics, such as school climate and discipline.

Cadre of Experts

The authors recruited and surveyed a national cadre of K-12 threat assessment experts (see list in Appendix 6). To enlist a broad, multidisciplinary group, the authors did not impose any restrictions or prior qualifications on membership and invited volunteers from a variety of agencies and professional groups. However, the authors subsequently examined the backgrounds of those who volunteered and found that this process generated a highly qualified group, including many of the recognized leaders in school threat assessment research, education, and practice.

Detailed reports are available describing the expert selection process and their responses to survey questions about threat assessment training and practice standards. The experts represented a range of fields and had varying levels of experience with threat assessment.

Figure 9: Range of Fields in the Cadre of Experts

45%
worked in education

54%
worked in a health or mental health services field

29%
worked in a law or law enforcement field

4%
worked in other fields (some experts worked in two fields)

Figure 10: Threat Assessment Experience in the Cadre of Experts

82%
had experience as threat assessment trainers

68%
served as a leader or supervisor of threat assessment

51%
developed a threat assessment module or procedure

30%
published on the topic of threat assessment

49%
had at least 10 years of experience in the threat assessment field

39%
had more than 15 years of experience in the threat assessment field

APPENDIX 2

Research Support for School Threat Assessment

A review of publications on school threat assessment identified 139 journal articles, books, book chapters, or reports published between 1995 and 2020. The search process and a summary of each publication can be found in the "School Threat Assessment and Shootings Bibliography". Much of the literature is concerned with studies of school shootings, the background and characteristics of persons who committed shootings, and potential strategies for preventing shootings through early identification and threat assessment. Notably, these studies include the Secret Service reports on school shootings.[11,14,52,59,69,129] These studies provide an important rationale for the use of a threat assessment approach and can aid teams in identifying students of concern. This appendix is more narrowly concerned with research testing the implementation of threat assessment in school settings and specifically questions concerning its impact on student outcomes.

The studies summarized in Table 6 below were used in support of the following conclusions reflected in the toolkit recommendations:

1. Multiple studies found that the proportion of students removed from school through suspension, expulsion, or transfer due to a threat of violence is much lower in schools using threat assessment than in schools not using threat assessment.
2. Multiple studies found that the proportion of students subject to law enforcement actions such as arrest, court charges, or incarceration is low, typically < 5%.
3. Multiple studies found no statistically significant differences among Black, Hispanic, and White students in disciplinary outcomes of law enforcement actions.
4. Multiple studies found that most students referred for a threat assessment received counseling and other support services in response.

Table 6: Studies of School Threat Assessment Implementation

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D., Sheras, P. Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., McKnight, L., Branson, C., & Cole, J. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review, 33,* 527-546	188 student threats in 35 schools from 2 Virginia school divisions.	This study introduced a decision-tree model to evaluate the seriousness of a threat and take appropriate action to reduce the threat of violence in schools and then evaluated the resulting disciplinary outcomes. Of the 188 threats that were reported and evaluated: • 70% were deemed to be transient threats and handled quickly while 30% were classified as substantive and required more extensive intervention. • 1.6% of threats resulted in student expulsions. • 50% of threats resulted in short short-term suspension. • 0% of threats resulted long-term (> 10 days) suspension. • 6% of threats resulted in alternative school placement.

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Kaplan, S., & Cornell, D. (2005). Threats of violence by students in special education. *Behavioral Disorders, 31,* 107–119	256 student threats in 49 schools from 4 Virginia school divisions (188 students overlap with 2004 study).	This study compared the number and severity of threats made by students in the Special Education program and students in the general population as well as the resulting disciplinary outcomes. • Within the sample schools, 53% of students were in the general population while 47% of students were in the special education (SPED) program, with further breakdown of Emotional Disturbance (50% of SPED group), Learning Disability (23%), Other Health Impairment (17%), and other categories (11%). • Found an estimated threat rate 7 per 1,000 students for general education and 33 per 1,000 for special education. • Both groups resulted in 1.2% of students experiencing expulsions. • 36% of SPED students versus 31% general ed students were suspended which is not statistically significant.

Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders, 34,* 42-54	209 students from 194 Memphis City, Tennessee schools referred for expulsion following a threat of violence.	The Memphis City Schools adapted a threat assessment program modeled after the existing guidelines in Virginia. This study evaluated the assessment of 209 threats using this system and resulting disciplinary outcomes.
		
		• While only 12% of students were in the SPED program, 38% of threats were made by that population, with further breakdown of Learning Disability (36%) Intellectual disability (25%), Emotional Disturbance (14%), Other Health Impairment (12%), Functionally Delayed (9%), and Speech and Language Impairment (4%).
		• 39% of students who made threats did not return to their previous school and the majority received an alternative school placement. (note that this sample consisted of cases in which the principal recommended removal from the school)
		  • 2% received expulsion
		  • 1.4% of students were incarcerated

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24,* 119-129. doi: 10.1037/a0016182	280 Virginia public high schools using Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines (95) versus comparison groups of schools using other threat assessment procedures (131) or no threat assessment (54).	This quasi-experimental study evaluated the impact of utilizing the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines by comparing behavioral outcomes and school climate feedback in schools using the Virginia model, those using an alternative model and those with no threat assessment model. • Found lower rate of long-term suspensions (for all students, not limited to students threatening violence) in schools using Virginia model than in either comparison group. • Statewide school climate survey of students found lower rates of bullying, and higher ratings of positive learning environment and help-seeking, in schools using the Virginia model than either comparison group; lower rates of general victimization and bullying victimization in schools using Virginia model than schools not using threat assessment.
Cornell, D. G., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *NASSP Bulletin, 95,* 175-194	23 Virginia high schools using Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus 26 schools not using threat assessment.	Quasi-experimental study that followed the disciplinary outcomes in 23 schools following the adoption of the Virginia Threat Assessment guidelines as compared to a control group of 26 schools. • 52% reduction in long-term suspensions (for all students, not limited to students threatening violence) in schools using Virginia versus no change in comparison group. • 79% reduction in bullying infractions versus slight increase in comparison group.

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review, 41,* 100-115	40 Virginia K-12 schools in a single district randomly assigned to use the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines versus 20 schools in a wait-list control group not using threat assessment.	Randomized control study in which disciplinary outcomes were evaluated in 40 Virginia K-12 schools that were randomly assigned to either continue using their existing discipline system or implement the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. • After accounting for race, gender, grade, etc., students making threats in schools using threat assessment were less likely to receive long term suspension (Odds Ratio (OR)= 0.35) or alternative school placement (OR = 0.13), but more likely to receive counseling services (OR = 3.98) and a parent conference (OR = 2.57) than students making threats in control group schools.
JustChildren and Cornell, D. (2013). Prevention v. punishment: Threat assessment, school suspensions, and racial disparities. Retrieved from http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/UVA_and_JustChildren_Report_-_Prevention_v._Punishment.pdf	398 Virginia secondary schools using Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines versus 265 schools using another model or no threat assessment.	This study questioned if the implementation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in schools impacted the racial disparities that exist in rates of suspensions. • Schools using VSTAG had 15% lower rates of short-term suspensions and 25% lower rates of long-term suspensions for all students (not limited to threat assessment cases). • For schools using VSTAG, lower rates of short-term suspensions were found for White males, White females, and Black females, but were not statistically significant (p = .075) for Black males. • Lower rates of long-term suspensions for schools using VSTAG found for Black males. • The racial disparity in long-term suspensions between Black and White students was lower (approximately 46%) among schools using VSTAG than comparison schools.

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D. & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Research for policymakers* (pp. 180-191). Teachers College Press	Study 1: supplemental analysis of data from 2012 study of 40 schools reported above. Study 2: 971 schools using VSTAG compared to 824 schools not using VSTAG.	This paper reviewed two studies on the implementation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines to better understand the implications of implementation, especially in terms of suspension rates. • Study 1 consisted of secondary analyses from a randomized controlled trial and found no differences between Black and White students in any of the threat assessment outcomes (lower suspension, lower transfer, more counseling services, more parent conferences). Study 2 was a retrospective, quasi-experimental study evaluating the scaled-up implementation of the VSTAG and found 8% lower rates of short-term suspensions and 19% lower rates of long-term suspensions for all students (not limited to threat assessment cases) in schools using VSTAG compared to control group schools. • Rates of suspension were lowest in VSTAG schools with formal training; lower rates were consistent across schools with differing racial composition.
Nekvasil, E., & Cornell, D. (2015). Student threat assessment associated with positive school climate in middle schools. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 2,* 98-113. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000038	332 Virginia middle schools using VSTAG (166), an alternative model of threat assessment (47), or no threat assessment (119).	This quasi-experimental study focused on implementation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in middle schools and evaluated the effectiveness in violence prevention. • Lower rate of short-term suspensions (for all students, not limited to students threatening violence) in schools using Virginia model than in either comparison group. • Statewide school climate survey of students found lower rates of bullying victimization, general victimization, and prevalence of teasing and bullying, in schools using Virginia model than either comparison group. • Statewide school climate survey of teachers found higher perceptions of safety in schools using Virginia model than either comparison group.

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review, 47,* 183-195. doi: 10.17105/SPR-2017-0030.V47-2	1,836 students who received a threat assessment in 779 Virginia K-12 public schools.	This study evaluated the disciplinary outcomes of students in elementary, middle and high schools in Virginia, a state with mandated use of threat assessment. The data were analyzed by multiple regression to examine results by race and ethnicity. • Few students receiving a threat assessment were arrested (<1%), incarcerated (<1%), or charged in court (4.6%) • Students (Black, Hispanic, and White students combined) receiving a threat assessment were sometimes suspended (47%) for one or more days, but infrequently expelled (< 1%) or received an alternative placement (16%) or law enforcement action (arrest, court charges, or incarceration combined 5%) • No statistically significant differences between Black and White students, or between Hispanic and White students, in whether a student receiving a threat assessment was suspended from school, received an alternative placement, expelled, or subject to law enforcement action; notably, these findings of racial/ethnic parity occurred in schools where the proportion of Black students suspended for all disciplinary infractions was 3.52 times higher than the proportion of White students (the proportion of Hispanic students suspended was 1.03 times higher than White students). • Variables most strongly associated with school suspension, alternative placement, and law enforcement action were possession of a weapon and making a threat that was judged to be more serious (likely to be carried out). • Special education status was associated with a higher likelihood of being suspended from school (OR = 1.27) in one analysis, but not another (using a sample of 563 schools without missing cases).

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Burnette, A. G., Datta, P. & Cornell, D. G. (2018). The distinction between transient and substantive student threats. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 5,* 4-20. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-56103-001	844 students who received a threat assessment using VSTAG in 339 Virginia K-12 public schools. (This study used a sample overlapping with Cornell et al., 2018 and Maeng et al., 2020).	This retrospective study evaluated the reliability and validity of the differentiation between transient and substantive threats in schools. • Threat classification reliability for the transient/substantive distinction was 70% (K = .53). • Variables distinguishing substantive threats were presence of warning behaviors, student mentioning use of a weapon, student older, student also threatening to harm self. • Although only 2.5% of threats were attempted, substantive threats were 36 more times likely to be attempted than transient threats. • Substantive threats were more likely to result in suspension, change in school placement, and/or legal action.
Maeng, J., Cornell, D., & Huang, F. (2020). Student threat assessment as an alternative to exclusionary discipline. *Journal of School Violence, 19,* 377-388. doi: 10.1080/15388220.2019.1707682	657 students who received a threat assessment in 260 Virginia K-12 public schools using CSTAG versus 661 students from 267 schools using a more general threat assessment approach (state guidelines).	This quasi-experimental study evaluated differences in disciplinary consequences between schools using the Comprehensive Student Threat Assessment Guidelines and schools using a more general threat assessment approach. • 42% of students receiving a threat assessment (combining both groups) were suspended, 15% were transferred to a different school placement, < 1% were expelled, 4.6% received a law enforcement action (arrest, incarceration or court charges) (these percentages also reported in Cornell et al., 2018). • Students receiving a threat assessment with CSTAG were less likely to be suspended (OR = 0.59), expelled (0% versus 1.7%) or receive a law enforcement action (OR = 0.47).

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Maeng, J., Malone, M., & Cornell, D. (2020). Student threats of violence against teachers: Prevalence and outcomes using a threat assessment approach. *Teacher and Teacher Education, 87,* 1-11. doi. org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102934	1,454 Virginia K-12 students who received a threat assessment for threatening a teacher (226) versus a peer (1,228) (This study used a sample overlapping with Maeng et al., 2020).	This study evaluated the effectiveness of the threat assessment model in addressing threats specifically against teachers, compared to threats against other students. • Variables significantly associated with threatening a teacher rather than a peer included SPED status (OR = 1.74), prior disciplinary referrals (OR = 1.85), Hispanic (OR = 3.11), threat of battery (not homicide; OR= 1.52), weapon possession (OR = 0.29), directly communicated threat (OR = 0.574). • Threatening a teacher was not associated with the threat being determined to be serious or threat being attempted compared to threatening a peer. • Students who threatened a teacher were more likely to be suspended (OR = 1.56) and have a change in placement (OR = 2.20) but not have law enforcement action or a mental health referral than students who threatened a peer.
Cornell, D., & Maeng, J., (2020). *Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy: Final Technical Report.* Charlottesville, VA: School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia. https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/255102.pdf	Cases involving threats against others (14,131), threats to harm self (16,430) and threats to harm both self and others (1,691) reported by approximately 1,900 Virginia public K-12 schools from 2014-15 through 2017-2018 (with different variables measured each year).	This project summarized a wide variety of research studies in an attempt to examine the impact of statewide implementation of threat assessment guidelines, determine how implementation is associated with individual student and schoolwide outcomes, and assess potential areas for improvement. • Many of the results in this technical report are found in separate journal articles summarized in this table. • Based on 1,865 cases for the 2014-15 school year, services for students receiving a threat assessment included school-based counseling (32%), mental health assessment (19%), mental health services inside (7%) or outside (14%) the school system, review of an existing Individualized Education Program (21%) or 504 Plan (2%), special education evaluation (5%), or hospitalization (5%).

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Stohlman, S., Huang, F., & Cornell, D. (2021). High school graduation outcomes of student threat assessment. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 66*:2, 109-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2021.1980851 A more complete report of this study is found in: Stohlman, S. (2020). Facilitating threat assessment implementation in schools: From training to outcomes. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Virginia. Charlottesville, VA.	Graduation rates for 146 students who received a threat assessment in 2 Virginia school districts.	This study evaluated graduation rates in schools that implemented the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines to better understand the academic impact of implementation. • 83% of students in a select sample with records available over four years graduated from high school. • Among 73 students with more complete records, students receiving SPED services were 18 percent more likely to graduate compared to students not receiving SPED services. • No statistically significant association between graduation/dropout and student grade level, gender, or race/ethnicity.
Crepeau-Hobson, F., & Leech, N. (2021). Disciplinary and nondisciplinary outcomes of school-based threat assessment in Colorado schools, *School Psychology Review, 51.* DOI:10.1080/2372966X.2020.1842716 10.1080/2372966X.2020.1842716 10.1080/2372966X.2020.1842716 10.1080/2372966X.2020.1842716	253 students receiving a threat assessment in three Colorado school districts.	This study evaluated the outcomes of implementing threat assessment systems in three Colorado school districts, with a specific focus on evaluating disparities. • 37.5% of students receiving a threat assessment had SPED status. • Students receiving a threat assessment were White (46.6%), Hispanic (16.7%), Black (15.0%) or other (21.7%). • Services for students receiving a threat assessment included mental health support (75.9%), behavior plan (30.0%), modified schedule (23.3%), referral for SPED evaluation (11.1%) or some other action (76.3%). • Disciplinary actions for students receiving a threat assessment included suspension (41.1%), expulsion (5.5%), and/or other disciplinary action (50.2%). • No statistically significant differences in disciplinary or service outcomes for students associated with race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, White) or SPED status. These findings of racial/ethnic parity occurred in schools where Black and Hispanic students were suspended, expelled, and/or received law enforcement outcomes disproportionately more than White students for all disciplinary infractions.

Citation	Sample	Description and Selected Findings
Cornell, D., & Maeng, J. (2022). School threat assessment in Florida: Technical report for 2020-2021 case data. Charlottesville, VA: School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia.	1,102 students referred for a threat assessment in 21 Florida school districts.	• 43.6% of students receiving a threat assessment had SPED status. • Students receiving a threat assessment were White (59%), Black (25%), Hispanic (10%), or other (6%). • Services for students receiving a threat assessment included counseling (44%), conflict resolution (30.1%), mental health services (26.3%), and other services (80% of students received at least one service). • Disciplinary actions for students referred for a threat assessment included out-of-school suspension (26%), in-school suspension (11%), detention after school (2%), and/or expulsion (2%). • Law enforcement actions for students referred for a threat assessment included arrest (0.5%), placement in juvenile detention (0.5%), and/or court charges (2%). • No statistically significant differences between Black and White students, or between Hispanic and White students, in whether a student receiving a threat assessment was suspended from school, received an alternative placement, expelled, or subject to law enforcement action (except that Hispanic students were less likely to be transferred than White students).

The studies in Table 7 are concerned with training school staff to conduct threat assessments. These studies support Toolkit recommendations that school staff can be trained in school threat assessment using a one-day workshop. Staff were receptive to the training and demonstrated statistically large gains in knowledge of threat assessment principles and practices. They demonstrated the ability to classify threat assessment cases with high reliability. Notably, they showed a large decline in support for zero tolerance discipline and support for using a supportive, threat assessment approach that discourages use of school exclusion. Positive training effects were observed across disciplines including school administration, counseling, law enforcement, psychology, and teaching. Additional studies have found that students, teachers and other staff can be educated about school threat assessment with briefer educational programs and demonstrate greater understanding of school safety and increased willingness to report threats of violence. A limitation of this work is that nearly all of the studies were conducted with the CSTAG model and studies of other training programs are needed.

Table 7: Studies of School Threat Assessment Training

Citation	Sample	Selected Findings
Allen, K., Cornell, D., Lorek, E., & Sheras, P. (2008). Response of school personnel to student threat assessment training. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 19(3).*	351 staff from 2 Virginia school divisions completed pre and post surveys as part of a 1-day professional development workshop using the *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence.*	• High satisfaction with training and motivation to use school threat assessment • Increased knowledge about school safety and risk of school shootings. • Decreased support for zero tolerance discipline • Similar results for staff from high and low income schools and across counselors, law enforcement officers, principals, psychologists, and social workers
Cornell, D. G., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *NASSP Bulletin, 95(3)*, 175–194.	142 staff from 23 Virginia high schools completed pre and post surveys as part of a 1-day professional development workshop using the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.	• High satisfaction with training and motivation to use school threat assessment • Increased knowledge about school safety and risk of school shootings • Decreased support for zero tolerance discipline
Cornell, D. G., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in kindergarten through grade 12. *School Psychology Review, 41*(1), 100–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2012.12087378	59 staff from 20 Virginia K-12 schools completed pre and post surveys as part of a 1-day professional development workshop using the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.	• Increased knowledge about school safety and risk of school shootings • Decreased support for zero tolerance discipline.

Citation	Sample	Selected Findings
Leuschner, V., Fiedler, N., Schultze, M., Ahlig, N., Göbel, K., Sommer, F., Scholl, J., Cornell, D., & Scheithauer, H. (2017). Prevention of targeted school violence by responding to students' psychosocial crises: The NETWASS program. *Child Development, 88*(1), 68–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12690	3,473 school staff (primarily teachers) from 98 German schools completed surveys pre and post training, and then 7 months after training, in the NETWASS (Networks Against School Shootings) program to prevent targeted school violence.	• Increased knowledge of risk factors for school shootings • Increased ability to evaluate case scenarios and ability to identify and assist students experiencing a crisis that could lead to targeted violence • Increased confidence in the school's organizational structure
Maeng, J.L., & Cornell, D. (2020, August). *Effects of online teacher professional development in school safety and threat assessment.* A paper for the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., virtual conference.	4,908 school staff (primarily Virginia, but seven other states) who completed pre and post surveys for a brief online educational program about threat assessment.	• Increased knowledge about school safety and threat assessment • Decreased support for school suspension for student threats • Increased staff motivation to speak with students about threats (83%), teach students about the difference between snitching and seeking help (93%), and encourage students to report threats (95%)
Stohlman, S. L., & Cornell, D. G. (2019). An online educational program to increase student understanding of threat assessment. *Journal of School Health, 89*(11), 899–906. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12827	2,338 Virginia secondary school students completed pre and post surveys for a brief online educational program about threat assessment.	• Students demonstrated increased knowledge about threat assessment and greater willingness to report threats
Stohlman, S., Konold, T., & Cornell, D. (2020). Evaluation of threat assessment training for school personnel. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management. 7*(1-2), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000142	4,666 school staff from multiple states completed pre and post surveys for a full-day in-person CSTAG workshop, involving 9 different trainers and 100 workshops.	• Increased staff knowledge of school safety and threat assessment • High (95%+) support for threat assessment and motivation to implement • Consistent results across trainers and across multidisciplinary groups including administration, law enforcement, mental health, teaching, and others
Cornell, D., & Maeng, J., (2020). *Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy: Final Technical Report.* Charlottesville, VA: Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/255102.pdf	School staff from 9 states completed pre and post surveys for 3 brief online educational programs: (1) threat assessment basics (n = 1,763); (2) School discipline and research findings (n = 1,485); (3) Case management (n = 1,84). Note that this technical report also includes results reported in publications above by Maeng & Cornell (2020) and Stohlman & Cornell (2019).	• Increased staff knowledge of school safety and threat assessment • Decreased support for zero tolerance and school exclusion discipline practices • Increased staff motivation to speak with students about threats (93%), teach students about the difference between snitching and seeking help (95%), and encourage students to report threats (95%)

APPENDIX 3

National Center for School Safety Initial Survey of School Threat Assessment Experts

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December 9, 2020

Executive Summary

We report survey results for 175 experts in K-12 school threat assessment asked to identify the top priorities for the field. From a curated list of topics, the experts identified the quality and quantity of school team training as the top priority in the field. The second priority was delineation of the threat assessment process, including how referrals are obtained and how comprehensive the assessment should be. The third priority was determination of team composition and meetings, followed by records and information sharing; protection of student rights, fairness, and equity; and how teams should handle threats of self-harm. The next priorities were the role of law enforcement; work on cases involving special education; sustainability of the threat assessment program; and how threat assessment affects school disciplinary decisions.

Recruitment of Experts

Threat assessment is a relatively young and multidisciplinary field with no established standards for expert status. Rather than attempt to establish a priori criteria for expertise in a nascent field, we decided to make membership inclusive and open to all individuals who identified themselves as experts in school threat assessment. We measured the qualifications of these experts with background questions in our initial survey.

Experts were recruited primarily by emails sent to persons identified as school threat assessment trainers, authors of publications on school threat assessment, heads of professional and government organizations concerned with threat assessment (such as the National Threat Assessment Center), as well as persons with administrative responsibility for school threat assessment in all 50 state governments and the 25 largest school districts in the United States. Recruitment requests were posted on the websites of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals and the National Center for School Safety.

Altogether, we invited more than 680 experts in school (K-12) threat assessment via email, personal referral, and website recruitment postings to participate in our cadre of experts. Of those invited, 219 experts indicated their willingness to serve in our cadre of experts. The first survey was completed between May 11 and July 1, 2020 by 175 experts for a participation rate of 80%. This survey had two purposes: (1) assess the background and qualifications of the experts; and (2) identify priorities for K-12 threat assessment.

The experts reported backgrounds in education (52%), psychology (29%), or criminal justice/law enforcement (20%). Approximately two-thirds (62%) reported a master's degree and one-third (32%) a doctoral degree. Approximately half (49%) currently work in a K-12 school setting, with others working in government, higher education, independent consulting, and law enforcement settings.

Most (65%) experts had personally conducted more than 10 threat assessments. Although some experts reported being relatively new to the field of threat assessment (42% < 5 years), they hold positions of responsibility and engagement in threat assessment, making their input desirable. Experts were 50% female and predominantly White (78%), Hispanic (11%), and Black (6%).

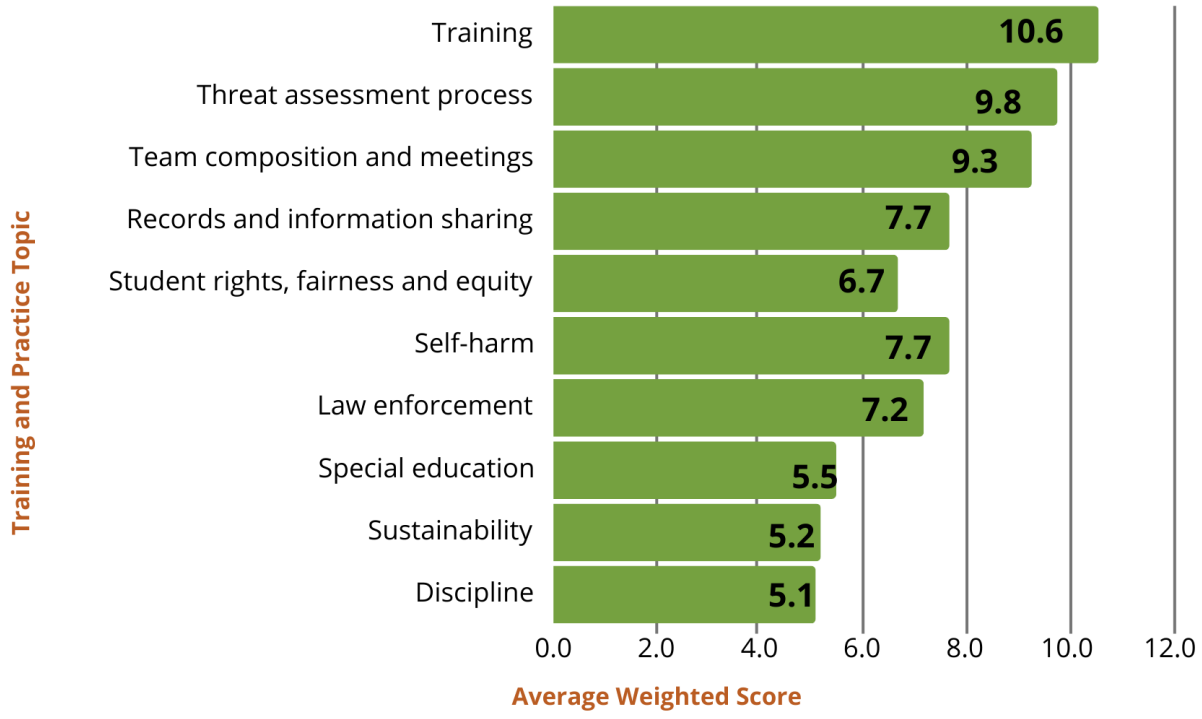
Priorities for School Threat Assessment

The survey presented ten priority topics for ratings. As noted above, experts identified training and threat assessment process as their two top priorities for the field (Figure 11), followed by team composition and meetings; records and information sharing; student rights and fairness; self-harm; role of law enforcement; special education; sustainability; and school discipline.

The ten priority topics were also included on a separate survey of 113 Bureau of Justice Assistance STOP grant recipients conducted by the National Center for School Safety. The results for grant recipients were strikingly similar to those for the experts, with training and threat assessment process again identified as the highest priorities.

Overall, these results provide us with a basis for focusing our work on the development of training standards and best practices for the threat assessment process. Future surveys will concentrate on those areas.

Figure 11: Average Weighted Score for Each Priority Topic



School Threat Assessment Expert Survey 1 Results

The first School Threat Assessment Expert Survey was designed to characterize the background of the experts and to collect their views on priorities in the field.[3] This brief report summarizes survey results for these 175 participants who completed the survey between May 11, 2020 and July 1, 2020. The results are reported in summary form so as not to identify individual respondents.

Recruitment of Experts

Experts were recruited primarily by emails to persons identified as school threat assessment trainers (n = 272), authors of publications on school threat assessment (n = 150), heads of professional and government organizations concerned with threat assessment (n = 30, e.g., National Threat Assessment Center), as well as persons with administrative responsibility for school threat assessment in all 50 state governments and the 25 largest school districts in the United States (n = 185). Recruitment requests were posted on the websites of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals and the National Center for School Safety. Respondents were also encouraged to recommend additional participants.

Altogether, we invited more than 680 experts in school (K-12) threat assessment via email, personal referral, and website recruitment postings to participate in our cadre of experts. Of those invited, 219 experts indicated their willingness to serve in our cadre of experts. The first survey was completed between May 11 and July 1, 2020 by 175 experts for a participation rate of 80%. This survey had two purposes: (1) assess the background and qualifications of the experts; and (2) identify priorities for K-12 threat assessment.

Table 8: Characteristics of Experts

1. How were you invited to join the expert group?	**N**	**%**
Email solicitation (total)	**134**	**76.6**
Persons identified as school threat assessment trainers	61	45.5
Requests sent to 50 state Departments of Education	29	21.6
Authors of publications on school threat assessment	26	19.4
Requests sent to professional and government organizations concerned with TA[a]	8	60
Requests sent to the 25 largest school districts in the U.S.	7	5.2
Other	3	2.2
Website posting (total)	**15**	**8.6**
Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP) website	13	86.6
National Center for School Safety (NCSS) website	2	13.3
Referred by colleague	**26**	**14.9**
2. What degrees do you hold?[b]	**N**	**%**
M.A./M.S./M.Ed.	86	49.1
Ph.D.	40	22.9
Other- B.A./B.S.[c]	14	8.0
M.S.W.	13	7.4
Other-Other Masters[c]	9	5.1

Other- Ed.S.[c]	8	4.6
Ed.D.	7	4.0
Other-Psy.D./Psy.S.[c]	6	3.4
J.D.	5	2.9
M.D.	3	1.7
Other: Left blank (4), Licensed Professional Counselor (1), Criminal Justice Administration (1), Certified Threat Manager (1), Superintendent Eligibility Certification (1), N/A (1)	9	5.1
3. Occupational Field[d]	**N**	**%**
Education	91	52.0
Psychology	51	29.1
Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement	35	20.0
Counseling	32	18.3
Social Work	19	10.9
Other- Safety/Security/Emergency Management[e]	10	5.7
Other-Government[c]	5	2.9
Law	4	2.3
Medicine	3	1.7
Human Resources	2	1.1
Sociology	2	1.1
Other: Left blank (3), Threat Assessment Manager (1), Family Nurse Practitioner (1)	5	2.9
4. In the course of your career, approximately how many threat assessment cases have you conducted (individually or as part of a team)? For estimation purposes, enter a single number.	**N**	**%**
None (0)	27	15.4
Few (1-10)	35	20
Some (11-100)	74	42.3
Many (>100)	39	22.3
5. How many years have you worked or been engaged in the threat assessment field?	**N**	**%**
Limited experience (0-5 years)	73	41.7
Experienced (6-15 years)	51	29.1
Highly experienced (16+ years)	51	29.120
6. Which of the following applies to you? (Choose all that apply)	**N**	**%**
Conducted workshops or training on threat assessment	134	76.6
Served as threat assessment team leader or supervisor (or member of TA team)	113	64.6
Developed a TA model or procedure	83	47.4
Conducted research on TA	59	33.7
Published article(s) or chapter(s) on TA or related topic	36	20.6
Testified on TA at legislative proceeding	20	11.4
Testified on TA at court proceeding	20	11.4
Other TA role: Left blank (3), Develop the Latin America Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (1), Participated in TA training (4)	8	4.6

7. In what setting do you work currently?	N	%
K-12 school	86	49.1
Government agency	43	24.6
College or university	30	17.1
Independent consulting	25	14.1
Law enforcement agency	16	9.1
Other- Safety/Security support center or organization[c]	5	2.9
Other: Left blank (3), Corporate setting (1), Private psychotherapy practice (1), Educational agency (1), Non-profit (1), State hospital, county jail, Superior Court (1)	8	4.6
8. How many years have you worked in a K-12 school setting over the course of your career?	**N**	**%**
No K-12 experience	40	22.9
Limited K-12 experience (1-5 years)	32	18.3
Experienced (6-15 years)	47	26.9
Highly experienced (16+ years)	56	32
9. What is your reported gender?	**N**	**%**
Male	87	49.7
Female	88	50.3
Prefer not to answer	0	0
Prefer to self-describe	0	0
10. Which best describes your race/ethnicity? (We recognize that these are flawed albeit conventional categories. Choose all that apply)	**N**	**%**
White	136	77.7
Black or African-American	10	5.7
Asian	3	1.7
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	0.6
Mixed race	5	2.9
Hispanic	20	11.4

Notes

[a] SIGMA Threat Management Associates, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center, Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP), National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC).
[b] Participants could report more than one degree. Participants were not asked to report only their highest degree, but many may have interpreted the question this way since everyone with a Ph.D. likely has a Bachelor's degree as well.
[c] These categories were derived from classification of "other" responses.
[d] Some participants selected more than one occupational field.

Priority Topics for School Threat Assessment Training and Practice

Survey participants were asked to rate the priority of 10 topics important to training and practice in school threat assessment. The topics were described in the table below.

Table 9: Priority Topics by Rating

Indicate whether you regard each topic as high, medium, or low priority for the field of school threat assessment. If you have no "Other Topic," mark this as a low priority[a]	Frequency	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority
Training. How much training do school-based teams need to begin conducting threat assessments & what topics should be covered in training? How should we evaluate training quality? Should participants demonstrate some kind of proficiency after training? What ongoing training is needed after initial training to sustain the team & promote continued professional development & high quality work?	**N**	155	17	1
	%	89.6%	9.8%	0.6%
Team Composition and Meetings. Who should be on a school threat assessment team? Should teams be based within a school or outside the school, & should one team cover more than one school? Who should lead the team? How frequently should teams meet? Who should attend meetings?	**N**	101	62	10
	%	58.4%	35.8%	5.8%
Threat Assessment Process. How should teams obtain referrals? How should they determine whether a referral needs an assessment & how comprehensive the assessment should be? How should teams deal with threats by non-students?	**N**	137	32	4
	%	79.2%	18.5%	2.3%
Records and Information Sharing. What should be recorded in a threat assessment, where should records be stored, & who should have access? When & how should information be shared with persons outside the threat assessment team? How should information be obtained & shared with agencies outside the school?	**N**	120	48	5
	%	69.4%	27.7%	2.9%
Self-harm. How should threat assessment teams handle threats of suicide & self-harm? Since secondary schools tend to have more students identified as threatening to harm self than others, & often have separate procedures for responding to students who are suicidal or have engaged in self-injurious behaviors such as cutting, what role should the threat assessment team play?	**N**	104	50	19
	%	60.1%	28.9%	11.0%

Law Enforcement. What are the roles of law enforcement on threat assessment teams? When should law enforcement be involved? What access should they have to threat assessment information? What information should they provide to threat assessment teams?	**N**	91	73	9
	%	52.6%	42.2%	5.2%
Student Rights, Fairness, and Equity. How should student rights be protected in the threat assessment process? Do students (and/or parents) have a right to decline participation in a threat assessment, to have access to threat assessment records & findings, & to challenge threat assessment findings or decisions? How do schools assure fairness & equity of the threat assessment process & consequences for students? What safeguards are in place to deal with potential for disproportionate adverse outcomes for students across groups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, or special education status?	**N**	108	56	9
	%	62.4%	32.4%	5.2%
Special Education. How should the threat assessment process differ when a student is receiving special education services? How should teams proceed when a student appears to need special education services? In other words, how do threat assessment teams coordinate their actions with the special education process and the procedures guiding a student's Individualized Education Program?	**N**	103	61	9
	%	59.5%	35.3%	5.2%
Discipline. How does the threat assessment process affect disciplinary decisions? Who makes disciplinary decisions in threat assessment cases?	**N**	75	79	19
	%	43.4%	45.7%	11.0%
Sustainability. What systems arrangements are needed so that schools can implement & sustain high-quality threat assessment programs? How can they be designed to thrive in the education community? How can they be funded?	**N**	123	43	7
	%	71.1%	24.9%	4.0%
Note. [a]N=173; some participants did not respond to this question.				

After rating each topic as high, medium, or low in priority, participants were asked to arrange the topics in order of priority. This provided an alternative way to measure their priority. Each topic was given a priority score based on the rankings it received, with a ranking of 1 weighted as score of 12 points, a ranking of 2 weighted as 11 points, etc. The total score for each topic was sum of the weighted ranks. The virtue of this process (in comparison to the percent endorsing the topic as a high priority) is to identify middle range topics more accurately. The Pearson correlation between the two measures was r = .77 (p = .009).

Table 10: Priority Topics by Score

		Training	Team composition and meets	Threat assessment process	Records and information sharing	Self-harm	Law enforcement	Student rights, fairness, and equity	Special education	Discipline	Sustainability
Rank[a]	**Score**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**
1	**12**	112 (64.7)	9 (5.2)	31 (17.9)	2 (1.2)	5 (2.9)	0 (0)	10 (5.8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1.2)
2	**11**	30 (17.3)	44 (25.4)	62 (35.8)	7 (4)	6 (3.5)	4 (2.3)	12 (6.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (4)
3	**10**	11 (6.4)	42 (24.3)	48 (27.7)	13 (7.5)	13 (7.5)	11 (6.4)	12 (6.9)	5 (2.9)	5 (2.9)	9 (5.2)
4	**9**	6 (3.5)	20 (11.6)	14 (8.1)	37 (21.4)	23 (13.3)	11 (6.4)	19 (11)	19 (11)	4 (2.3)	13 (7.5)
5	**8**	2 (1.2)	18 (10.4)	10 (5.8)	29 (16.8)	24 (13.9)	21 (12.1)	20 (11.6)	18 (10.4)	7 (4)	17 (9.8)
6	**7**	5 (2.9)	9 (5.2)	4 (2.3)	28 (16.2)	28 (16.2)	31 (17.9)	15 (8.7)	14 (8.1)	16 (9.2)	18 (10.4)
7	**6**	2 (1.2)	9 (5.2)	2 (1.2)	18 (10.4)	25 (14.5)	33 (19.1)	32 (18.5)	21 (12.1)	17 (9.8)	7 (4)
8	**5**	1 (0.6)	10 (5.8)	0 (0)	20 (11.6)	20 (11.6)	23 (13.3)	22 (12.7)	43 (24.9)	15 (8.7)	15 (8.7)
9	**4**	2 (1.2)	4 (2.3)	1 (0.6)	10 (5.8)	7 (4)	28 (16.2)	22 (12.7)	34 (19.7)	46 (26.6)	15 (8.7)
Rank[a]	**Score**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**	**N(%)**
10	**3**	2 (1.2)	8 (4.6)	0 (0)	8 (4.6)	17 (9.8)	8 (4.6)	8 (4.6)	15 (8.7)	51 (29.5)	53 (30.6)
11	**2**	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	2 (1.2)	1 (0.6)	3 (1.7)	10 (5.8)	13 (7.5)
12	**1**	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (2.3)	1 (0.6)	0 (0)	1 (0.6)	2 (1.2)	4 (2.3)
	Total Score	1920	1543	1786	1266	1186	1092	1224	992	790	936
	M (SD)	11.09 (1.79)	8.91 (2.38)	10.32 (1.50)	7.31 (2.12)	6.85 (2.48)	6.31 (2.07)	7.07 (2.54)	5.73 (2.03)	4.56 (1.97)	5.41 (2.84)

Note: [a] N=173; 2 participants did not respond to this question. Ranks were assigned by survey participants. Ranks were converted to scores and then the total scores for each priority were calculated as shown in the table. A ranking of 1 earns 12 points and a ranking of 2 earns 11 points. For example, the topic of Training was ranked 1 by 112 of the participants and there given 12 x 112 = 1,344 points. Training was ranked 2 by 30 of the participants and given 11 x 30 = 330 points, etc. The total points for Training was 1,920, an average of 11.09 per participant.

Priorities as a Function of Expert Characteristics

Regressions were run for each of the threat assessment priorities using the following predictors: white/non-white, degree type, gender, occupation is law enforcement, occupation is education, occupation is mental health, years working in a K-12 setting, years experience in threat assessment, and number of threat assessments completed to assess whether priority scores differed as a function of expert characteristics. There were no statistically significant relationships between any of these predictors and any of the threat assessment priorities.

Other Priorities

Participants were able to propose additional priority topics. Of the 86 proposed additional topics, most (52) could be recoded into one of the existing topics.* For example, "perceived need for yearly training" and "refresher training" as well as "methods to evaluate trainers" were all recoded into the Training topic. Responses including "types of data collected" and "transfer of information between schools" were recoded into the Records topic.

The other proposed additional topics were coded into three groups:

- 17 participants (9.8%) suggested topics that were classified as follow-up interventions as a high priority, including "development of effective monitoring and intervention strategies", "social-emotional supports for students", and "reintegration strategies."
- 10 (5.8%) nominated school climate interventions as a high priority. Responses included, "prevention efforts", "multi-tiered systems of support", and "campaigns such as 'See Something, Say Something'."
- 4 (2.3%) identified administrative/district support and oversight as a high priority, including "district monitoring" and "oversight."

*When a write-in topic was rated as a high priority and recoded into an existing topics, the existing topic was rated a high priority.

NCSS Grantee Needs Assessment Survey Threat Assessment Topic Priorities

NCSS Grantee Survey participants were asked to rearrange the list of topics so that the highest priority was ranked 1. Each topic was given a priority score based on the rankings it received, with a ranking of 1 weighted as 12 points, a ranking of 2 weighted as 11 points, etc. The total score for each topic was sum of the weighted scores. This process identifies middle range topics more accurately.

Table 11: NCSS Grantee Ratings of Priority Topics

		Training	Team composition and meetings	Threat assessment process	Records and information sharing	Self-harm	Law enforcement	Student rights, fairness, equity	Special education	Discipline	Sustainability
Rank[a]	Score	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)	N(%)
1	12	57 (50.4)	17 (15)	15 (13.3)	3 (2.7)	3 (2.7)	4 (3.5)	4 (3.5)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	7 (6.2)
2	11	21 (18.6)	28 (24.8)	27 (23.9)	8 (7.1)	10 (8.8)	7 (6.2)	4 (3.5)	1 (0.9)	3 (2.7)	4 (3.5)
3	10	15 (13.3)	18 (15.9)	36 (31.9)	12 (10.6)	12 (10.6)	5 (4.4)	6 (5.3)	2 (1.8)	1 (0.9)	6 (5.3)
4	9	2 (1.8)	17 (15)	16 (14.2)	20 (17.7)	14 (12.4)	16 (14.2)	7 (6.2)	6 (3.5)	9 (8)	6 (5.3)
5	8	6 (5.3)	11 (9.7)	9 (8)	22 (19.5)	19 (16.8)	20 (17.7)	14 (12.4)	4 (3.5)	4 (3.5)	4 (3.5)
6	7	5 (4.4)	5 (4.4)	3 (2.7)	17 (15)	23 (20.4)	15 (13.3)	18 (15.9)	16 (14.2)	6 (5.3)	3 (2.7)
7	6	3 (2.7)	4 (3.5)	1 (0.9)	12 (10.6)	14 (12.4)	18 (15.9)	27 (23.9)	10 (8.8)	15 (13.3)	9 (8)
8	5	2 (1.8)	6 (5.3)	2 (1.8)	6 (5.3)	9 (8)	14 (12.4)	20 (17.7)	38 (33.6)	7 (6.2)	8 (7.1)
9	4	0 (0)	5 (4.4)	2 (1.8)	7 (6.2)	4 (3.5)	10 (8.8)	6 (5.3)	24 (21.2)	45 (39.8)	8 (7.1)
10	3	2 (1.8)	2 (1.8)	2 (1.8)	6 (5.3)	5 (4.4)	3 (2.7)	7 (6.2)	10 (8.8)	19 (16.8)	56 (49.6)
11	2	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.9)	0 (0)	1 (0.9)	2 (1.8)	2 (1.8)
12	1	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.9)	0 (0)
	Total Score	1200	1048	1104	867	865	813	760	619	577	593
	M (SD)	10.61 (2.05)	9.27 (2.38)	9.67 (1.88)	7.67 (2.22)	7.65 (2.18)	7.19 (2.26)	6.72 (2.16)	5.47 (1.86)	5.10 (2.22)	5.24 (3.03)

Note. [a]N = 113. Ranks were assigned by survey participants. Ranks were converted to scores and then the total scores for each priority were calculated as shown in the table. A ranking of 1 earns 12 points and a ranking of 2 earns 11 points. For example, the topic of Training was ranked 1 by 57 participants and there given 12 x 57 = 684 points. Training was ranked 2 by 21 participants and given 11 x 21 = 231 points, etc. The total points for Training was 1200, an average of 10.61 per participant.

Other Priorities

Participants were able to propose additional priority topics. Of the four highly ranked proposed topics, three were recoded into an existing topic.* "Continuum for identifying and referring students at risk" was recoded into the Threat Assessment Process topic, "developing and implementing a threat assessment team" was recoded into the Team Composition and Threat Assessment Process topics, and "safety communication" was recoded into the Records and Information Sharing topic. One additional priority topic, "target hardening," was not recoded.

Comparison of Expert and Grantee Priority Topics

There was a significant positive correlation between grantees using TA and grantees not using TA ($r = .975$, $p < .01$) and between the expert panel and grantee rankings ($r = .970$, $p < .001$) on the most important topics in threat assessment. Although there was overall consistency between experts and grantees, there were some differences in the relative importance of some topics. The t-test results indicate that TA experts emphasized training and TA process as priorities more consistently than did grantees, whereas grantees prioritized self-harm, law enforcement, and discipline higher than TA experts. The grantee findings suggest that some attention to these topics is merited, even if the TA experts did not rank them as among the highest priorities.

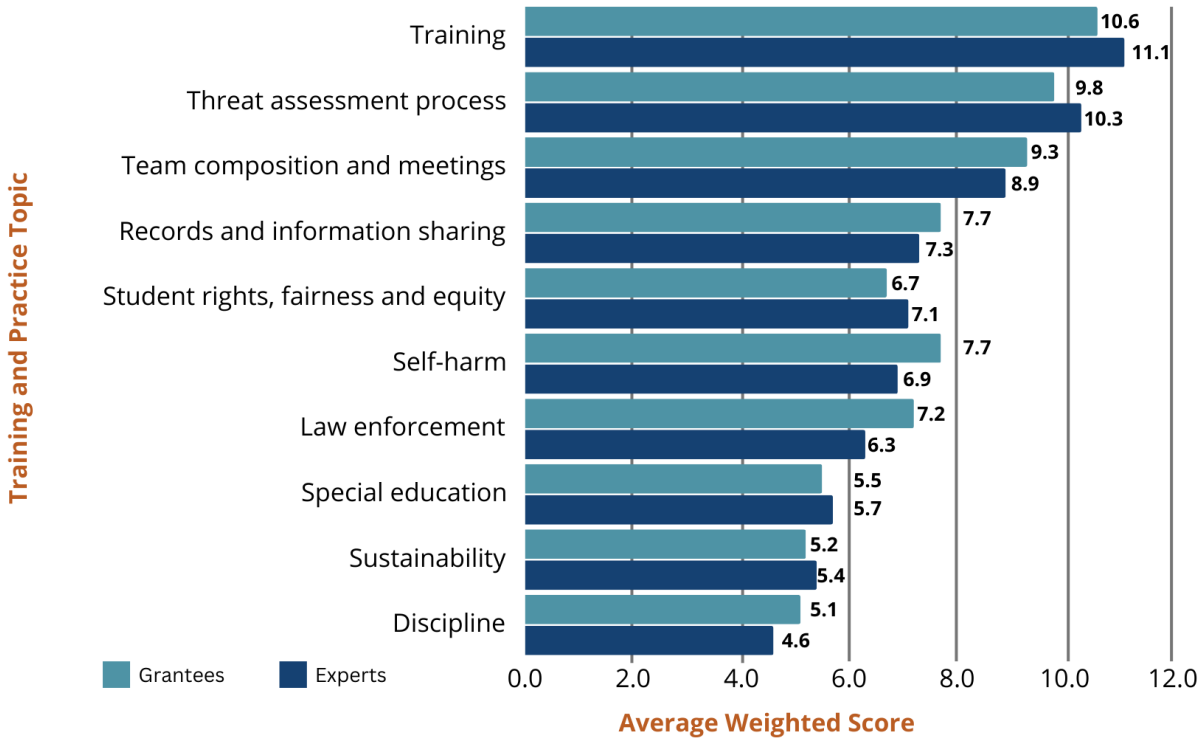
Table 12: Priority Topics for Experts and Grantees

Priority Topic	Experts N=173 Mean (SD)	All Grantees N=113 Mean (SD)	Welch's t[a]	Grantees using TA N=63 Mean (SD)	Grantees not using TA N=50 Mean (SD)	Welch's t[b]
Training	11.09 (1.79)	10.61 (2.05)	4.09*	10.88 (1.82)	10.28 (2.28)	2.36
Team composition and meetings	8.91 (2.38)	9.27 (2.38)	1.52	9.66 (2.12)	8.78 (2.6)	3.79
Threat assessment process	10.32 (1.5)	9.76 (1.88)	6.91**	9.74 (1.76)	9.8 (2.03)	0.02
Records and information sharing	7.31 (2.12)	7.67 (2.22)	1.79	7.71 (2.09)	7.62 (2.4)	0.05
Self-harm	6.85 (2.48)	7.65 (2.18)	8.20**	7.41 (2.2)	7.96 (2.14)	1.77
Law enforcement	6.31 (2.07)	7.19 (2.26)	11.11***	6.92 (2.14)	7.54 (2.38)	2.06
Student rights, fairness, and equity	7.07 (2.54)	6.72 (2.16)	1.55	6.69 (2.09)	6.76 (2.26)	0.02
Special education	5.73 (2.03)	5.47 (1.86)	1.20	5.52 (1.94)	5.42 (1.76)	0.09
Discipline	4.56 (1.97)	5.10 (2.22)	4.38*	5.06 (2.22)	5.16 (2.24)	0.05
Sustainability	5.41 (2.84)	5.24 (3.93)	0.21	4.9 (2.97)	5.68 (3.09)	1.81

Note. [a]Based on Welch's t-test (to account for different sample sizes). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.
b Based on Welch's t-test (to account for different sample sizes), there was no significant difference in mean scores between grantees using TA and grantees not using TA, all p's > .05.

* When a write-in topic was rated as a high priority and recoded into an existing topic, the existing topic ratings were adjusted to reflect this.

Figure 12: Average Weighted Score for Each Priority Topic for Experts and Grantees



APPENDIX 4

State Level Threat Assessment Guidance

States have increasingly enacted legislation of varying scope related to K-12 school threat assessment. In 2018, Woitaszewki et al. conducted a search of all 50 states to determine which had requirements for school threat assessment, as well as which states provided threat assessment resources to schools. At the time of their study, only one state (Virginia) mandated K-12 school based threat assessment procedures and teams (Woitaszewki et al, 2018). However, as of 2022, 39 states had policies supporting threat assessment, including 18 states with a legal requirement for schools to have threat assessment teams (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.).

Below is a summary of threat assessment legislation for several states, with links to the relevant statutes.

Florida: Senate Bill 1001.212
Florida Chapter 1001.212 establishes the role of the Office of Safe Schools in the development of a state threat assessment among other things. It charges the office to develop by December of 2023 a Florida specific statewide behavioral threat assessment operational process to guide school districts, schools, charter school governing boards and charter schools through the threat assessment process. This includes but is not limited to the establishment and duties of threat management teams, defining risk and threat behavior, appropriate law enforcement intervention, procedures for risk management and disciplinary actions, continued monitoring, and creation of threat assessment reports. It also charges the office with developing and maintaining by August of 2025 a threat management portal.

Illinois: HB 1561
Under Illinois HB 1561, each school district must implement threat assessment procedures, including the creation of a threat assessment team to include a district administrator, a teacher, a counselor, a school psychologist, a social worker, and at least one law enforcement official. The law establishes timeframes for compliance and allows a district to use a regional behavioral threat assessment and intervention team that includes mental health professionals and representatives from the State, county, and local law enforcement if existing staff and resources prevent them from establishing a district team.

Kentucky: Senate Bill 1
This law requires each district superintendent to appoint a school safety coordinator beginning with the 2019-2020 school year. The safety coordinator ensures that each school has a threat assessment team, consisting of two or more staff members, who may include school administrators, school counselors, school resource officers, school-based mental health services providers, teachers, and other school personnel.

Louisiana: Louisiana Law RS 17:409.4
This law states that public school governing authorities shall develop a policy for the investigation of potential threats of violence. The law does not specify whether this investigation should be completed by a threat assessment team. If there is concern of a credible and imminent threat, law enforcement should be immediately notified, who must then begin their own investigation.

Maryland: Maryland Code § 7-1507
Maryland Code§ 7-1507 mandates the development of a model policy for the establishment of threat assessments teams in each school district, to include how to identify threatening behavior, how to assess threats from both students and non-students, and best practices for trainings members of the school community to identify, respond to and report threatening behavior, including staff, students, and parents. The model policy also must address the appropriate number of teams within each school system, as well as policies for training members. Teams should include experts in education, instruction, counseling, school administration, and law enforcement. Schools also are required to set standards for timely response to threats and for coordination with and referral to community partners such as law enforcement and mental health assessment as appropriate.

New Jersey: Chapter 83
Chapter 83 supplements Chapter 17 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes requiring school districts and board of trustees of charter schools to develop and adopt policy to establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team at each school. They are required to have an administrator, a teacher, school staff member with expertise in student counseling, and a safe schools resource officer or staff member who acts as the liaison between school and law enforcement. The law establishes the framework for developing threat assessment policy and training for threat assessment teams through the Department of Education, state law enforcement, and the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.

Ohio: 3313.669
Section 3313.669 requires school districts to establish threat assessment teams at every school within two years of March 2021. It suggests that the structure of the team be multidisciplinary and requires team members to to go through an approved threat assessment training every three years, this list of approved threat assessment trainings is maintained by the department of public safety. The law also provides that team members are not liable in damages unless their act or omission constitutes willful or wanton misconduct.

Pennsylvania: 24 P.S. § 1301-1303-E
24 P.S. § 1301-1303-E mandates Pennsylvania schools establish threat assessment teams and facilitate team member training on best practices in threat assessment. Each school must have a team, with members and a team leader appointed by the principal or their designee. Members must include individuals with expertise in school health, mental health, special education, and school administration as well as the school safety/security coordinator. All members of the school community must be informed of the team's purpose and receive training regarding threat recognition and reporting. Teams must make an annual presentation to their school board outlining their threat assessment activities. The School Safety and Security Committee, created under Section 1302-B, must provide model threat assessment procedures, guidelines and training for team members and must review these annually and revise as appropriate.

Tennessee: Tennessee Code § 49-6-2701
This legislation authorizes local education agencies (LEAs) to establish threat assessment teams which must include LEA personnel and law enforcement personnel and can include mental health professionals, representatives from the district attorney, and children's services offices and/or juvenile services personnel. The teams are trained by local law enforcement or mental health providers. They conduct threat assessments, provide guidance to school communities on recognition of threats and reporting of same, refer to appropriate support services, and complete post-incident fidelity assessments. The team must keep quantitative data on all threats, team decisions, and post-incident assessments and provide this documentation to the LEA, the local board of education and the director of schools while following all relevant privacy laws, including FERPA.

Texas: Texas Statutes Section 37.115
This law mandates the development of district-level threat assessment teams trained by the Texas School Safety Center using evidence-based threat assessment protocols. Each school in the district must have an assigned team, but teams can serve more than one school. Team members should have expertise in counseling, special education, behavior management, school safety and security, mental health and substance use, classroom instruction, school administration, emergency management, and law enforcement. A district oversight committee may be created, which must include members with expertise in regular and special education, human resources, counseling, behavior management, school administration, mental health and substance use, school safety and security, emergency management, and law enforcement. Each team is charged with receiving and assessing threats by gathering necessary data, referring students for mental health assessment as needed and following district policy for serious threats, which includes reporting these cases to the superintendent. The team must conduct a threat assessment for suicidal students who also threaten to harm others, and refer that student to the district's suicide prevention program. The statute specifies records teams must keep, including quantitative data about threats and assessment outcomes, and how to report this information.

Utah: Utah Code 53G-8-802
Utah Code 53G-8-802 creates the Student Safety and Support Team program and mandates the state board develop model policies and protocols for conducting a school threat assessment. The board must also provide training in evidence-based approaches for identifying individuals who pose a risk to the school community as well as collect school climate data via a survey.

Virginia: Code of Virginia§ 9.1–184.A.10 and Code of Virginia§ 22.1-79.4
In 2013, Virginia became the first state to mandate threat assessment teams in its K-12 public schools. The Code of Virginia §9.1-184.A.10 creates the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety, charged with developing a model policy for the establishment of threat assessment teams, providing resources and technical assistance and collaborating with government agencies such as the state police and the departments of Education, Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, and Criminal Justice Services.

Subsequently, the Code of Virginia§ 22.1-79.4 directs each division superintendent to establish a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team for each school to include persons with expertise in counseling (school psychologists, counselors and/or social workers), instruction (teachers, special education teachers or administrators with teaching experience), school administration (principals or assistant principals), and law enforcement (SROs or local or state law enforcement), although members do not need to be currently serving in those roles. Other team members may be included as appropriate on either a permanent or ad hoc basis. Ideally, each core team member has at least one back-up, typically from the same area of expertise. Each team has a designated leader, typically a school administrator, but school administration has discretion to appoint another staff member to this role.

The division superintendent ensures that all schools are served by a team; teams can serve more than one school with allocation based on resources and staffing needs. Each division may establish an oversight division-level committee to include individuals with expertise in human resources, education, school administration, mental health, and law enforcement. Responsibility for district oversight of school level threat assessment teams may also be assigned to an existing committee, at the superintendent's discretion.

Washington: RCW 28A.320.123
The Washington State School Director's Association, along with the office of the superintendent of public instruction, must develop a model policy and procedures for the establishment of school threat assessment programs to be posted on the web site of the state school safety center by January 1, 2020. School districts are required to adopt a threat assessment program consistent with the state's model policy no later than the start of the 2020-2021 school year. Minimum requirements for program implementation include policies for timely response to threats and response protocols based on behavior rather than demographic characteristics. Teams must be multidisciplinary and multi-agency and include special education teachers and practicing educational staff associates. To monitor implementation, the superintendent of public instruction must develop data collection and reporting mechanisms and review specific district programs at least once every five years.

Wisconsin: Act 143
2017 Wisconsin Act 143 creates the Office of School Safety (OSS) within the Wisconsin Department of Justice. The Act requires that the Office of School Safety provide best practice guidance to Wisconsin schools as well as school safety training. It requires every school to conduct a safety assessment and develop a safety plan, and sets forth guidance for schools to submit specified safety-related information to the OSS. The Act designates specific individuals as mandatory threat reporters and states that employees must receive training around threat reporting. The Act creates school safety grants and appropriates $100 million in funding for this purpose. The Act requires DOJ to award the grants for expenditures related to improving school safety.

APPENDIX 5

Glossary

Anonymous v confidential – an anonymous reporter means that the reporter is unknown to the recipient, whereas a confidential reporter is known to the recipient, but the reporter's identity is not disclosed to others

Duty to warn/protect - see Tarasoff duty in Section 2

Fixation – an intense preoccupation with something, such as a person, idea, or activity

Grievance - an event perceived to be so harmful and unjust that, in threat assessment cases, can motivate a desire for revenge or retaliation through violence

Howling v hunting – in the threat assessment field, an individual who engages in threats that seem intended to express animosity or intimidate someone, but without serious intent to carry them out is described as a howling, whereas someone who is engaging in behaviors along the path to intended violence is described as hunting

Leakage – an accidental or intentional communication that reveals intent to commit a violent act, such as making remarks that reveal hostility toward someone or plans of violence. Leakage might occur in direct or indirect ways and might not be a purposeful disclosure. Increasingly, leakage is observed in digital communications such as social media posts, texts, blogs, and emails

Pathway to violence – the idea that individuals progress toward committing a violent act in a series of steps that start with a grievance, followed by actions such as thinking, planning, preparing, breaching, and then attacking

Predatory violence – violence that involves planning or premeditation, often described as instrumental or proactive violence, distinguished from reactive violence that is more impulsive and emotional without planning

Profiling – the practice of using a predetermined list of characteristics or signs to identify someone as likely to commit a crime (prospective profiling) or likely to have committed a specific crime (retrospective profiling); prospective profiling is widely condemned in threat assessment

Protective action – efforts to prevent violence such as increasing security, warning a victim, and monitoring or supervising an individual who has threatened violence

Psychopathy – a personality characterized by lack of conscience and empathy, usually masked by superficial charm and dishonesty, and accompanied by antisocial and risky behavior

Psychopathology – general term referring to any kind of maladaptive symptoms or behaviors that indivates the presence of a mental disorder; also refers to the study of the nature and types of mental disorders

Risk factor – a variable that is correlated with an increase in the likelihood of an outcome; a risk factor is not necessarily a cause of the outcome, but might be merely associated with it

Safety plan – a plan developed to reduce the risk that an identified threat will be carried out, often including services for a threatening individual as well as protective actions such as warning targets or increasing security measures

School resource officer (SRO) – a law enforcement officer who is assigned to work in school settings, often with specialized training; distinguished from a school security officer

School security officer (SSO) – an individual who is not a law enforcement officer but is assigned to provide security in school settings

APPENDIX 6

Threat Assessment Cadre of Experts

We thank the following experts for their contribution to the National Center for School Safety. These individuals volunteered their time and expertise to provide input and feedback on the National Center for School Safety Threat Assessment surveys and toolkit. We appreciate and value their input, but recognize that the final document does not necessarily represent their positions or policies.

- Greg Akin, Operations Service Division, Volusia County Schools, Florida
- Sally Alayon, Educational Services/ School Operations, Dade County Schools, Florida
- Tyler Allen, American Leadership Academy, Ironwood, Arizona
- Molly Amman, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Retired
- Barb Anderson, Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports, Iowa Department of Education
- Stacy Anderson, Paradise Valley Unified School District, Arizona
- Craig Apperson, Public Safety & Behavioral Health Consultants, PLLC
- Beth Arnold, Washington County School District, Florida
- Wes Baker, Mental Health Intervention Team, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Texas
- Stephen Balko, School Building Security, Indiana Department of Education
- Karen Barnes, Maine Department of Education
- Shannon Bass, Glades County Schools, Florida
- Tamara Beard, Pinellas County Schools, Florida
- Diana Joyce Beaulieu, School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies, University of Florida
- Nicolas Beliz, Department of Mental Health Emergency Outreach and Triage Division, Los Angeles County, California
- Tony Beliz, Sol Price School of Public Policy, Safe Communities Initiative, University of Southern California
- John Berglund, Metis Group
- Peter Berkson, Assessment and Care Team, University of Iowa
- Heilit Biehl, Adams 12 Five Star Schools, Colorado
- Celina Bley, Texas School Safety Center, Texas State University
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