



COLORADO

School Safety Resource Center

Department of Public Safety

ESSENTIALS OF SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT:

PREVENTING TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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This document is intended as guidance to Colorado schools and was created with collaboration from the Threat Assessment Work Group of the Colorado School Safety Resource Center. Consultation with district legal counsel and local law enforcement is recommended. Additional consultation and template formats may also be obtained from the Colorado School Safety Resource Center, Department of Public Safety.

With Thanks to Participating Threat Assessment Work Group Agencies

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Jefferson County School District

Jefferson County Juvenile Assessment Center

Mapleton School District

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Safe2Tell

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I: Threat Assessment Policy Elements

Policy should outline the schools plan to identify and manage concerning behaviors among the student body. Information about the behavior and communications of the student of concern should be gathered and analyzed by the authorities involved in a threat assessment inquiry. This information will permit reasonable judgments about whether the student of concern is moving along a path toward attack on an identifiable target.

The following four elements are essential to an effective threat assessment policy:

1. **ESTABLISH AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP TO CONDUCT AN INQUIRY.**
 2. **DEVELOP A MULTIDISCIPLINARY THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM THAT IS BASED IN THE SCHOOL OR DISTRICT AND PROVIDE ONGOING TRAINING.**
 3. **ESTABLISH INTEGRATED AND INTERAGENCY SYSTEMS RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO RESPOND TO PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS.**
 4. **PROVIDE AWARENESS TRAINING FOR STAFF, STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN WARNING SIGNS OF VIOLENCE AND REPORTING PROCEDURES.**
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Explanation of Policy Elements

1. ESTABLISH AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP TO CONDUCT AN INQUIRY

- a. Formal policy and procedures are recommended to authorize school officials to conduct a threat assessment inquiry when any behavior of a student deviates from the norm and may pose a threat.
 - (1) The question often arises as to whether or not schools can conduct a threat assessment without parental permission. SB12-036 clearly states, “Nothing in this subsection limits the ability of a school district to administer a suicide assessment or threat assessment.”
C.R.S. 22-1-123.
 - (2) However, at the appropriate point in the process, as decided by the threat assessment team, parents will be consulted.
- b. Building and district leadership should support, create, and designate the threat assessment team(s). The building/district team also acts as an information “vortex” for student concerns and record-keeping.
- c. Information sharing must support the school threat assessment process.
 - (1) Information must be gathered from various sources during the inquiry.
 - (2) Consider options for storing the information in an accessible format and keep information in a central location.
- d. Legal issues regarding information sharing require advance consideration. Consult with legal counsel and create appropriate memorandums of understanding. Training must be provided to involved school staff and agency personnel.
 - (1) FERPA allows for various exceptions to privacy protection that have relevance to threat assessment inquiries: Section 99.36 (December, 2008) makes clear that an educational agency or institution may disclose personally identifiable information from an educational record to appropriate parties, including



parents, whose knowledge of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of a student or other individual if there is a significant and articulable threat to the health or safety of a student or other individual, considering the totality of the circumstances.

In January of 2018, the Colorado Attorney General provided a Formal Opinion on FERPA. “The Opinion addresses misconceptions about FERPA’s scope to assure teachers, administrators, and other school staff that they may proactively respond to safety concerns, including threats of school violence, without violating students’ and families’ privacy rights. The Opinion also explains what information Colorado schools may obtain from juvenile courts and law enforcement agencies to assist in evaluating school safety risks.” The Opinion can be found at: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/dataprivacyandsecurity/ag-ferpaandschoolsafety>

- (2) Colorado statutes (SB 00-133) provide schools, and other agencies working with juveniles, encouragement for open communication among appropriate agencies, including criminal justice agencies, assessment centers for children, school districts, and schools in order to assist disruptive children and to maintain safe schools. C.R.S. 22-32-109.1(3)
- (3) Colorado law (HB 16-1063) provides an exception to mental health professionals disclosing confidential communications when school safety is at risk. Disclosure may be made “when a client, regardless of age, makes an articulable and significant threat against a school or the occupants of a school; or exhibits behaviors that, in the reasonable judgment of the licensee, registrant, or certificate holder, create an articulable and significant threat to the health or safety of students, teachers, administrators, or other school personnel. A licensee, registrant, or certificate holder who discloses information under this statute shall limit the disclosure to appropriate school or school district personnel and law enforcement agencies.” C.R.S 12-43-218
- (4) Colorado law (HB 00-1119) mandates that each board of education cooperate and, to the extent possible, develop written agreements with law enforcement officials, the juvenile justice system, and social services to identify the public safety concerns for information sharing. The Colorado Office of the Attorney General has developed guidance, in the form of a Model Interagency Agreement, for the effective implementation of HB 00-1119 and SB 00-133. Model Interagency Agreement can be found at: https://coag.gov/sites/default/files/contentuploads/oce/School_Safety_SS/Safe2Tell_S2T/coloradojuvenile-information-exchange-laws-model-for-implementation.pdf
- (5) In 2009, the Colorado Children and Youth Information Sharing (CCYIS) Initiative was created as a result of many state and local agency representatives hearing concerns about the lack of guidelines regarding sharing of confidential information across systems. Over the course of several years, the CCYIS secured the commitment of multiple state agencies, including the Department of Human Services, State Court Administrator’s Office, Department of Public Safety, Department of Public Health & Environment, and Department of Education, to make information sharing across systems a priority. The result was an Authorization/Consent to Release Information Form. This form may be used by schools, with parental consent, to gather additional information from other agencies. The form can be found at: https://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/oajja/ccyis/Colorado_Consent_2016_V1_1.pdf

2. DEVELOP A MULTIDISCIPLINARY THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM THAT IS BASED IN THE SCHOOL OR DISTRICT AND PROVIDE ONGOING TRAINING

- a. Multidisciplinary and interagency teams may already exist and respond or intervene in a wide variety of situations.
- b. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined for threat assessment, including the leadership of the team.
 - (1) An information “vortex” should be identified as a central clearinghouse for student concerns and record-keeping.
- c. Teams should be trained together in the use of best practices and lessons learned.
 - (1) Tabletops or experiential exercises are recommended.



- d. The primary role of the team is to guide the assessment and management of the situation of concern and to provide ongoing support and monitoring to the student.
- e. Suggested membership of a trained multi-disciplinary team includes no less than three members with whom to counsel, with at least two being onsite, including:
 - (1) A senior, respected, and trained member of the administration who chairs the team, or designee who is trained and chairs the team
 - (2) School disciplinary or safety personnel assigned to school (or faculty member with training)
 - (3) A mental health professional, such as a school psychologist, social worker, or counselor, with training in threat assessment (may also facilitate the team)
 - (4) Local law enforcement contact
 - (5) Others who may be able to contribute to the process, such as:
 - a) *guidance counselors*
 - b) *teachers, coaches who know the student well*
 - c) *nurses*
 - d) *transportation bus drivers*
 - e) *custodial and cafeteria staff*
 - f) *representative from IEP team, if applicable*
 - g) *community members with information, such as:*
 - 1. probation officers
 - 2. social service workers
 - 3. experts and consultants or
 - 4. others providing service or knowledge of the student (e.g. therapists)

****Note:** Suicide assessments must be conducted by a trained mental health professional.

3. ESTABLISH INTEGRATED AND INTERAGENCY SYSTEMS RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO RESPOND TO PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS

- a. Community system relationships and relationships between individuals are required.
- b. Individuals who can serve as “boundary spanners” are critical to interagency relationships, developing written protocols, facilitating meetings, and resolution of any conflicts.
- c. Interagency Information Sharing Agreements are suggested by Colorado law to identify public safety concerns for each community (HB 00-1119).
- d. Identify Interagency Team support and clarify roles.
 - (1) Interagency Social Support Teams (ISST), or other integrated services teams (Collaborative Management Program, HB 04-1451), may help to develop Response, Management, & Support Plans or to provide needed community services.
https://coag.gov/sites/default/files/contentuploads/oce/School_Safety_SS/Safe2Tell_S2T/safetyassessment_klst.pdf
 - (2) The Collaborative Management Program promotes the voluntary development of multi-agency services provided to children and families by county departments of human/social services and other mandatory agencies, including local judicial districts and probation, health departments, school district(s), each community mental health center, and each Mental Health Assessment and Service Agency.
<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdhs/child-welfare-collaborations>



4. PROVIDE AWARENESS TRAINING FOR STAFF, STUDENTS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN WARNING SIGNS OF VIOLENCE AND REPORTING PROCEDURES

- a. Behaviors of concern and threats to the safety and welfare of a student, the school, or community must be reported to school officials in a timely manner.
- b. Reporting procedure must be clear and use a common language.
- c. Multiple means of reporting should be encouraged (i.e. tiplines, calling, texting, telling a trusted adult).
- d. Use of Safe2Tell anonymous reporting, through phone, online, and mobile app platforms is strongly encouraged.
- e. Breaking the “code of silence” must be reinforced: Telling keeps people safe. Training should be updated and repeated yearly.

Adapted from:

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2004). *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. A complete copy of the guide is available online at <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>.

These are general guidelines offered by CSSRC. Please consult with school district legal counsel as needed.



II. Creating a Comprehensive Targeted Violence Prevention Plan

These recommendations serve as the starting point on a path to implementation that will need to be customized to the specific needs of your school, your student body, and your community. When creating these plans, schools should consult with legal representatives to ensure that they comply with any applicable state and federal laws or regulations.

1. **ESTABLISH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM**
 2. **DEFINE CONCERNING AND PROHIBITED BEHAVIORS**
 3. **CREATE A CENTRAL REPORTING MECHANISM**
 4. **DETERMINE THE THRESHOLD FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTION**
 5. **ESTABLISH ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES**
 6. **DEVELOP RISK MANAGEMENT OPTIONS**
 7. **CREATE AND PROMOTE SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES**
 8. **CONDUCT TRAINING FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS**
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Explanation of Steps to Create a Comprehensive Targeted Violence Prevention Plan

1. ESTABLISH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

The first step in developing a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan is to establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team (hereafter referred to as the “Team”) of individuals who will direct, manage, and document the threat assessment process. The Team will receive reports about concerning students and situations, gather additional information, assess the risk posed to the school community, and develop intervention and management strategies to mitigate any risk of harm. Some considerations for establishing a Team include:

- a. Some schools may pool their resources and have a single Team that serves an entire district or county, while other districts may choose to have a separate Team for each school.
- b. Teams should include personnel from a variety of disciplines within the school community, including teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, school resource officers, mental health professionals, and school administrators. The multidisciplinary nature of the Team ensures that varying points of view will be represented and that access to information and resources will be broad.
- c. The Team needs to have a specifically designated leader. This position is usually occupied by a senior administrator within the school.
- d. Teams should establish protocols and procedures that are followed for each assessment, including who will interview the student of concern; who will talk to classmates, teachers, or parents; and who will be responsible for documenting the Team’s efforts. Established protocols allow for a smoother assessment process as Team members will be aware of their own roles and responsibilities, as well as those of their colleagues.
- e. Team members should meet whenever a concerning student or situation has been brought to their attention, but they should also meet on a regular basis to engage in discussions, role-playing scenarios, and other teambuilding and learning activities. This will provide members of the Team with opportunities to work together and learn their individual responsibilities so that when a crisis does arise, the Team will be able to operate more easily as a cohesive unit.

2. DEFINE CONCERNING AND PROHIBITED BEHAVIORS

Schools need to establish policies defining prohibited behaviors that are unacceptable and therefore warrant immediate intervention. These include threatening or engaging in violence, bringing a weapon to school,

bullying or harassing others, and other concerning or criminal behaviors. Keep in mind that concerning behaviors occur along a continuum. School policies should also identify behaviors that may not necessarily be indicative of violence, but also warrant some type of intervention. These include a marked decline in performance; increased absenteeism; withdrawal or isolation; sudden or dramatic changes in behavior or appearance; drug or alcohol use; and erratic, depressive, and other emotional or mental health symptoms.

a. If these behaviors are observed or reported to the Team, schools can offer resources and supports in the form of mentoring and counseling, mental health care, tutoring, or social and family services.

b. The threshold for intervention should be relatively low so that Teams can identify students in distress before their behavior escalates to the point that classmates, teachers, or parents are concerned about their safety or the safety of others. It is much easier to intervene when the concern is related to a student's struggle to overcome personal setbacks, such as a romantic breakup, than when there are concerns about threats posed to others.

c. During the assessment process, Teams may identify other concerning statements and actions made by the student that may not already be addressed in their policies. Gathering information about these behaviors will help the Team assess whether the student is at risk for attacking the school or its students and identify strategies to mitigate that risk.

3. CREATE A CENTRAL REPORTING MECHANISM

Students may elicit concern from those around them in a variety of ways. They may make threatening or concerning statements in person, online, or in text messages; they may engage in observable risky behavior; or they may turn in assignments with statements or content that is unusual or bizarre. When this occurs, those around the student need a method of reporting their concerns to the Team.

a. Schools can establish one or more reporting mechanisms, such as an online form posted on the school website, a dedicated email address or phone number, smart phone application platforms, or another mechanism that is accessible for a particular school community.

b. Students, teachers, staff, school resource officers, and parents should be provided training and guidance on recognizing behaviors of concern, their roles and responsibilities in reporting the behavior, and how to report the information.

c. Teams need to be sure that a team member proactively monitors all incoming reports and can respond immediately when someone's safety is concerned.

d. Regardless of what method schools choose to receive these reports, there should be an option for passing information anonymously, as students are more likely to report concerning or threatening information when they can do so without fear of retribution for coming forward.

e. The school community should feel confident that team members will be responsive to their concerns, and that reports will be acted upon, kept confidential, and handled appropriately.

4. DETERMINE THE THRESHOLD FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTION

The vast majority of incidents or concerns that are likely to be reported can be handled by school personnel using school or community resources. For example, the most common types of reports submitted to Safe2Tell Colorado during the 2016- 2017 school year were related to suicide, bullying, drugs, cutting (self-harm), and depression. Some of these common reports may not require the involvement of law enforcement. Those that do warrant law enforcement intervention include threats of violence and planned school attacks, which constituted Safe2Tell's sixth and seventh most common types of reports, respectively.

a. Reports regarding student behaviors involving weapons, threats of violence, physical violence, or concerns about an individual's safety should immediately be reported to local law enforcement. This is one reason why including a school resource officer or local law enforcement officer on the Team is beneficial.

b. If a school resource officer is not available to serve on the Team, schools should set a clear threshold for times and situations when law enforcement will be asked to support or take over an assessment. For example, it might be necessary to have law enforcement speak with a student's parent or guardian, search a student's person or possessions, or collect additional information about the student or situation outside the school community during the assessment.

5. ESTABLISH ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Teams need to establish clearly defined processes and procedures to guide their assessments. Note that any safety concerns should be immediately addressed before the procedures described below take place. When followed, the procedures should allow the Team to form an accurate picture of the student's thinking, behavior, and circumstances to inform the Team's assessment and identify appropriate interventions.

a. Maintain documentation to keep track of when reports come in; the information that is gathered; when, where, and how it was obtained; who was interviewed; the behaviors and circumstances of the student of concern; and the intervention strategies taken. Documentation requirements, such as forms and templates, should be included in the plan to ensure standardization across cases.

b. Use a community systems approach. An effective approach for gathering information to assess a student of concern is to identify the sources that may have information on the student's actions and circumstances. This involves identifying the persons with whom the student has a relationship or frequently interacts and the organizations or platforms that may be familiar with the student's behaviors. Students exist in more than one system and they come in contact with people beyond their classmates and teachers at school. Gathering information from multiple sources ensures that Teams are identifying concerning behaviors, accurately assessing the student's risks and needs, and providing the appropriate interventions, supports, and resources.

c. Examine online social media pages, conduct interviews, review class assignments, and consider searching the student's locker or desk. Team members should also review academic, disciplinary, law enforcement, and other formal records that may be related to the student. When reviewing school records, be sure to determine whether the student has been the subject of previous reports to school officials, especially if the student has a history of engaging in other concerning or threatening behaviors. Also determine if the student received any intervention or supports and whether those were beneficial or successful. The Team may be able to draw on information from previous incidents and interventions to address the current situation for the student. This factor further emphasizes the importance of the Team's documentation to ensure the accuracy and availability of information regarding prior contacts the student of concern may have had with the Team.

d. Build rapport that can facilitate information-gathering efforts. By demonstrating that their goal is to support individuals who may be struggling, while ensuring that the student and the school are safe, Teams may be better able to build a positive relationship with a student of concern and the student's parents or guardians. When Teams have established this rapport, parents or guardians may be more likely to share their own concerns, and the student may be more forthcoming about frustrations, needs, goals, or plans.

e. Evaluate the student's concerning behaviors and communications in the context of his/her age and social and emotional development. Some students' behaviors might seem unusual or maladaptive, but may be normal for adolescent behavior or in the context of a mental or developmental disorder. To ensure that these students are being accurately assessed, collect information from diverse sources, including the reporting party, the student of concern, classmates, teammates, teachers, and friends. Consider whether those outside of their immediate circle, such as neighbors or community groups, may be in a position to share information regarding observed behaviors.

6. DEVELOP RISK MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

Once the Team has completed a thorough assessment of the student, it can evaluate whether the student is at risk for self-harm or harming someone else at school. Concern may be heightened if the student is struggling emotionally, having trouble overcoming setbacks or losses, feeling hopeless, preoccupied with others who

engaged in violence to solve problems, or has access to weapons. Remember, the Team is not attempting to predict with certainty if violence will happen. Instead, evaluate the presence of factors that indicate violence might be a possibility. Teams can then develop risk management strategies that reduce the student's risk for engaging in violence and make positive outcomes for the student more likely.

- a. Each student who comes to the Team's attention will require an individualized management plan. The resources and supports the student needs will differ depending on the information gathered during the assessment.
- b. Often, the Team will determine that the student is not currently at risk for engaging in violence, but requires monitoring or is in need of guidance to cope with losses, develop resiliency to overcome setbacks, or learn more appropriate strategies to manage emotions.
- c. Resources to assist the student could take the form of peer support programs or therapeutic counseling to enhance social learning or emotional competency, life skills classes, tutoring in specific academic subjects, or mental health care. Most programs and supports will be available within the school, but the Team may need to also access community resources to assist with managing the student.
- d. Sometimes management involves suspension or expulsion from school. When this is necessary, Teams and school administrators should consider how it might affect their ability to monitor the student. Removing a student from school does not eliminate the risk to the school community. Several school attacks have been carried out by former students who had been removed from the school or aged out of their former school. A suspended or expelled student might become isolated from positive peer interactions or supportive adult relationships at school. Teams should develop strategies to stay connected to the suspended or expelled student to determine whether the student's situation is deteriorating or the behaviors of concern are escalating so that they can respond appropriately.
- e. Management plans should remain in place until the Team is no longer concerned about the student or the risk for violence. This is accomplished by addressing the following basic elements that can reduce the likelihood a student will engage in violence and provide support and resources for those in need.
- f. Notify law enforcement immediately if a student is thinking about or planning to engage in violence, so that they may assist in managing the situation.
- g. Make efforts to address the safety of any potential targets by altering or improving security procedures for schools or individuals and providing guidance on how to avoid the student of concern.
- h. Create a situation that is less prone to violence by asking the family or law enforcement to block the student's access to weapons, while also connecting the student to positive, prosocial models of behavior. Another option may involve removing the student from campus for a period of time, while maintaining a relationship with the student and the student's family.
- i. Remove or redirect the student's motive. Every student's motive will be different, and motives can be redirected in a variety of ways. These strategies may include bullying prevention efforts or offering counseling for a student experiencing a personal setback.
- j. Reduce the effect of stressors by providing resources and supports that help the student manage and overcome negative events, setbacks, and challenges.

7. CREATE AND PROMOTE SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES

A crucial component of preventing targeted violence at schools relies on developing positive school climates built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and social and emotional support. Teachers and staff in safe school environments support diversity, encourage communication between faculty and students, intervene in conflicts, and work to prevent teasing and bullying. Students in safe school climates feel empowered to share concerns with adults, without feeling ashamed or facing the stigma of being labeled a "snitch." Administrators can take action to develop and sustain safe school climates.

- a. Help students feel connected to the school, their classmates, and teachers. This is an important first step to creating school climates that are supportive, respectful, and safe. Encourage teachers and staff to build positive, trusting relationships with students by actively listening to students and taking an interest in what they say.
- b. Break down “codes of silence” and help students feel empowered to come forward and share concerns and problems with a trusted adult. At one school, administrators used a faculty meeting to identify students who lacked a solid connection with an adult at school. They provided faculty with a roster of enrolled students and asked them to place a mark next to students with whom they had a warm relationship. For students without a mark next to their name, popular, well-liked teachers and staff were asked to reach out and develop positive connections with them.
- c. Help students feel more connected to their classmates and the school. One teacher asked her elementary students to write down names of classmates they wanted to sit next to. If a student’s name did not appear on anyone’s list, the teacher placed that student’s desk next to a friendly or outgoing classmate in an effort to help the student develop friendships. This effort could be easily adapted with middle or high school-aged students by asking students to identify one or two classmates they would like to be partnered with for a project and assigning any student not named on a list to be partnered with a friendly or outgoing classmate.
- d. Adults can also help students identify clubs or teams at school they can join or encourage them to start their own special interest group.
- e. Schools can also support positive school climates by implementing school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs. These programs actively teach students what appropriate behavior looks like in a variety of settings, including in the classroom, with their friends, or among adults. Teachers frequently praise prosocial behavior they observe and encourage students’ good behavior. PBIS can improve academic outcomes for schools and has been shown to reduce the rates of school bullying.
- f. While teachers and staff can foster relationships and connectedness among the student body, students themselves have a role to play in sustaining safe school climates. They should be actively engaged in their schools, encouraged to reach out to classmates who might be lonely or isolated, and empowered to intervene safely when they witness gossiping, teasing, and bullying.

8. CONDUCT TRAINING FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

The final component of a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan is to identify training needs for all stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and administrators; students; parents; and school resource officers or local law enforcement. School safety is everyone’s responsibility. Anyone who could come forward with concerning information or who might be involved in the assessment process should be provided with training. Effective training addresses the goals and steps of an assessment, the type of information that should be brought forward, and how individuals can report their concerns. It might be beneficial for staff and students to hear presentations, see videos, and role-play scenarios so they have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities and the steps they can take to keep their school safe. Each audience will require a slightly different message, but some stakeholders may also benefit from attending training together, such as parents and students, or school faculty/staff and law enforcement personnel. When developing a training program, consider how frequently each stakeholder will receive training, and whether to vary the delivery method of trainings. Also, each audience may have unique needs.

Faculty, staff, and administrators

Every adult at school needs training related to threat assessment and violence prevention, including administrative, maintenance, custodial, and food service staff. Training can include who should be notified when concerning or threatening information is discovered, what information should be brought forward, how school staff might learn about information, and the steps school staff can take to safely intervene with concerning or threatening situations. Providing training on other topics, such as suicide awareness and prevention, conflict

resolution, mental health, and developmental disabilities, might also allow school faculty, staff, and administrators to foster positive school climates.

Students

Students need training on the threat assessment process, where to report concerns, and what information they should bring forward. Students also need assurances that they can make a report to the Team or another trusted adult anonymously, that their information will be followed up on, and will be kept confidential.

Training can also educate students about other actionable steps they can take to cultivate a safe school climate, including ways they can safely intervene with bullying, gossip, or name-calling. Messaging should demonstrate to students that there is a big difference between “snitching,” “ratting,” or “tattling,” and seeking help. While snitching is informing on someone for personal gain, here, students are encouraged to come forward when they are worried about a friend who is struggling, or when they are trying to keep someone from getting hurt.

Remind students that if they are concerned about a classmate or friend, they need to keep speaking out until that person gets the help they need. Finally, maintaining a safe school climate includes providing students with training or lessons to acquire skills and abilities to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, cope with stress, seek help, and engage in positive social interactions.

Parents

Parents should also be trained on the threat assessment process at their child’s school and their role in that process. They should be clear on who to call, when, and what information they should be ready to provide. Parents can also benefit from training that helps them recognize when children and teenagers may be in emotional trouble or feeling socially isolated. Training can also reduce the stigma around mental, emotional, or developmental issues and provide information on available resources and when they should seek professional assistance.

Law enforcement and school resource officers

Not every school will have a school resource officer, but schools can still develop relationships with local law enforcement agencies and personnel. Schools can encourage local officers to co-teach classes at the school, serve as coaches or assistant coaches of sports teams, and work with parents and teachers at after-school events. In some communities without school resource officers, local law enforcement agencies have encouraged officers to “adopt a school,” stopping by the school to greet and become familiar with students and teachers, eating lunch on campus, or doing paperwork in an office at the school. Like parents and teachers, local law enforcement and school resource officers need to be aware of the school’s threat assessment process and their own responsibilities once a threat is identified.

Training for law enforcement and school resource officers should also provide familiarity with emergency response procedures the school has in place and the layout of the campus. Officers and school staff might benefit from attending training together so that all parties are aware of the point at which local law enforcement should be involved in an investigation. This would also allow officers to get to know administrators, teachers, counselors, facilities and maintenance personnel, and other school staff. It is much easier to work through an emergency situation when schools and law enforcement are already familiar with each other and their procedures.

Adapted from:

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

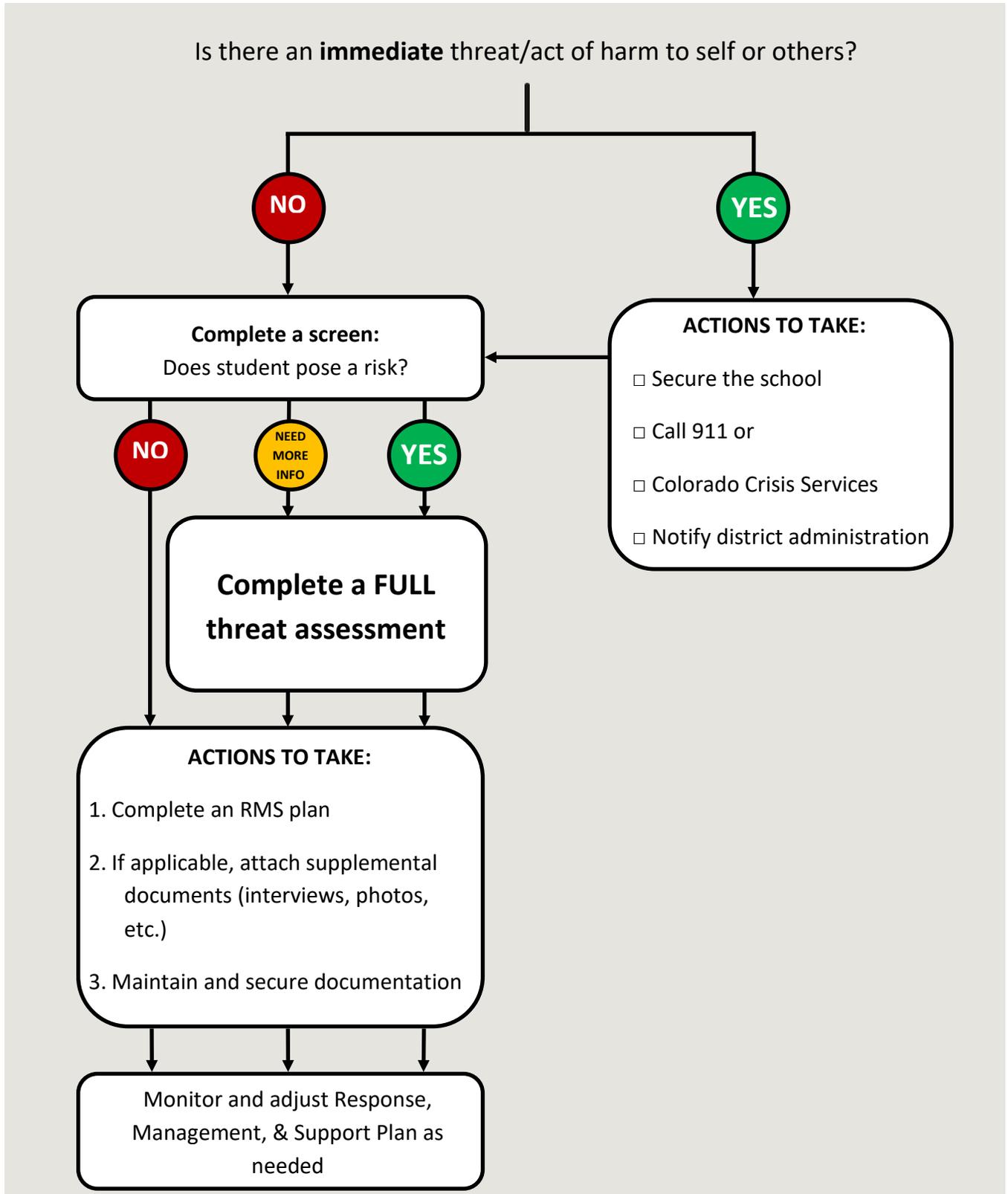
A complete copy of the guide is available online at

https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf



III. The Cycle of Threat Assessment

Follow the steps below to determine how to assess a threat or act of harm to self or others.



IV. Threat Assessment Inquiry Steps

An inquiry should be initiated immediately in any situation of concern. The threat assessment team should also consider: “How much time do we have?” If, at any time, information suggests the need for law enforcement assistance, that assistance should be requested immediately.

When a student’s behavior and communications, or reported behavior and communications, deviate from normal behavior for that student or that student’s peers, and indicates concern for that student’s safety or the safety of others, school officials should initiate a threat assessment inquiry for prevention of targeted school violence. The safety of the school, the student, and the community is a priority consideration. The student of concern should be immediately and safely contained, based on the severity of the concern, until safety procedures are initiated and the assessment process is activated.

Care should be exercised to ensure that a student of concern is treated appropriately, since any allegations regarding the behavior or perceived dangerousness of the student may be unfounded. As the Team begins the inquiry, remember the six principles of Threat Assessment as defined in the 2002 US Secret Service report:

1. Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior.
2. Targeted violence stems from an interaction between the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
3. *An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is needed.*
4. Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or “traits.”
5. An “integrated systems approach” is best.
6. Investigate whether or not a student *poses* a threat, not whether a student has *made* a threat.

THREAT ASSESSMENT INQUIRY STEPS:

1. **ASSEMBLE THE THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM.**
2. **GATHER A VARIETY OF INFORMATION.**
3. **USE MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES.**
4. **ORGANIZE AND ANALYZE THE INFORMATION.**
5. **DETERMINATION OF CONCERN LEADING TO A RESPONSE, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT PLAN.**
6. **DEVELOP A RESPONSE, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT PLAN.**
7. **DOCUMENT THE THREAT ASSESSMENT AND KEEP RECORDS FOR THE INFORMATION “VORTEX”.**
8. **CONTINUE MONITORING OF THE STUDENT AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PLAN.**

Explanation of Threat Assessment Inquiry Steps

1. **ASSEMBLE THE THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM**
 - a. **Suggested membership of a trained multi-disciplinary team includes no less than three members with whom to counsel, with at least two being onsite, including:**
 - (1) A senior, respected, and trained member of the administration who chairs the team, or designee who is trained and chairs the team
 - (2) School disciplinary or safety personnel assigned to school (or faculty member with training)

- (3) A mental health professional, such as a school psychologist, social worker, or counselor with training in threat assessment (may also facilitate the team)
- (4) Local Law Enforcement contact
- (5) Others who may be able to contribute to the process, such as:
 - a) *guidance counselors*
 - b) *teachers, coaches, or club sponsors who know the student well*
 - c) *nurses*
 - d) *transportation bus drivers*
 - e) *custodial and cafeteria staff*
 - f) *representative from IEP team, if applicable*
 - g) *community members with information, such as:*
 1. probation officers
 2. social service workers
 3. experts and consultants
 4. others providing service or knowledge of the student (e.g. therapists)

****Note:** Suicide assessments must be conducted by a trained mental health professional.

2. GATHER A VARIETY OF INFORMATION

a. The facts that drew attention to the student, the situation, and the targets

- (1) How did the student come to the attention of school officials?
- (2) What were the triggering events and possible targets?
- (3) What behaviors and/or communications were reported, and by whom?
- (4) What was the situation?
- (5) Who, if anyone, witnessed the reported behavior of concern?
- (6) What was the context for the reported behavior, i.e. what else was going on at the time of the reported behavior?

b. Information about the student

(1) Identifying Information:

- a) *Name*
- b) *Physical description (hair color, scars, clothes, etc.)*
- c) *Date of birth*
- d) *Identification numbers: student ID, etc.*

(2) Background Information:

- | | |
|---|---|
| a) <i>Residences</i> | g) <i>History of harassing others or of being harassed by others</i> |
| b) <i>Family/home situation</i> | h) <i>History of violence toward self and others</i> |
| c) <i>Academic performance</i> | i) <i>History of having been a victim of violence or bullying or other trauma</i> |
| d) <i>Criminal behavior and law enforcement history</i> | j) <i>Known attitudes toward violence</i> |
| e) <i>Social networks and user names</i> | k) <i>Triggering events</i> |
| f) <i>History of relationships and conflicts</i> | l) <i>Possible targets</i> |

- m) *Criminal behavior*
- n) *Mental Health/substance abuse history*
- o) *Access to and use of weapons*
- p) *History of grievances and grudges*
- q) *History of response to interventions*
- r) *History of inhibitors to aggression*
- s) *Any evidence of radicalization*

(3) Current Life Information:

- a) *Present stability of living and home situations*
- b) *Nature and quality of current relationships and personal support*
- c) *Recent losses or losses of status (shame, humiliation, recent breakup, or loss of significant relationship)*
- d) *Current grievances or grudges*
- e) *Perceptions of being treated unfairly*
- f) *Known difficulty coping with a stressful event*
- g) *Any “downward” progression in social, academic, behavioral, or psychological functioning*
- h) *Recent hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair, including suicidal thoughts, gestures, actions, or attempts*
- i) *Pending crises or change in circumstances*
- j) *Note whether the student has any trusting relationships with adults who are emotionally available to him or her*
- k) *If there is an adult who is connected to the student, that adult may have useful information about the student’s thinking and behavior, and may also have the ability to disrupt the negative behavior patterns of the student*

c. Information about boundary probing and “attack-related” behaviors

Examination of the thinking and behaviors of school attackers suggests that most attacks are preceded by discernible behaviors as the student plans or prepares for the attack. These behaviors are referred to as boundary probing or attack-related behaviors.

Behaviors that should raise concern about potential violence include:

- (1) Ideas or plans about injuring him/herself or attacking a school or persons at school
- (2) Communications (including via any technological means) or writings that suggest that the student has an unusual or worrisome interest in school attacks
- (3) Comments that express or imply the student is considering mounting an attack at school, or has made a threat, written or verbal, to his/her safety or the safety of others
- (4) Recent weapon-seeking behavior, especially if weapon-seeking is linked to ideas about attack or expressions about interest in attack
- (5) Communications or writings suggesting the student condones or is considering violence to redress a grievance or solve a problem
- (6) Rehearsals of attacks or ambushes
- (7) Contextually inappropriate or dramatic change in appearance (e.g. hair, tattoos)
- (8) Abrupt and unexplained cessation in the use of alcohol, drugs, and/or medications (“cleansing/purifying”)
- (9) Creation of a “legacy token” (e.g. manifesto, video) designed to claim credit for an act of violence and to articulate motives behind an attack. Staging of the legacy token for distribution or discovery
- (10) Boundary probing/testing or circumnavigation of security measures to penetrate into a restricted area
- (11) Pre-attack staging or “cocooning” in a secluded location to physically and mentally prepare for the attack

d. Motives

Communicated motives for attack behaviors to self or others have included:

- (1) Revenge for a perceived injury or grievance
- (2) Yearning for attention, recognition, or notoriety
- (3) A wish to solve a problem otherwise seen as unbearable
- (4) A desire to die or be killed

Knowledge of the communications or writings of a student of concern may help the threat assessment team in evaluating the risk of targeted violence. Understanding the circumstances that may have prompted a student to consider attacking others may permit authorities to direct the student away from violence.

e. Target Selection

Information about a student's targets may provide clues to the student's motives, planning, and attack-related behaviors.

3. USE MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES

a. Obtain School Information

A school threat assessment inquiry should begin with what is known about the student from school records, teacher interviews, classmates, and other information such as history from previous schools. Out of school information, including technology sources, parents'/families' information, law enforcement, and mental health records, if available, are also important. In utilizing information from school records in a threat assessment inquiry, the threat assessment team should follow school policies and relevant laws regarding information sharing.

Answers to the following questions may be drawn from information at school:

- (1) Is the student well known to any adult at the school?
- (2) Has the student come to attention for any behavior of concern? If so, what? (Email, texting, website, posters, papers, class assignments, rule breaking, violence, harassment, adjustment problems, depression or despair, etc.)
- (3) Has the student experienced serious difficulties or been in distress?
- (4) Is there anyone with whom the student shares worries, frustrations, and/or sorrows?
- (5) Is there information that the student has considered ending his or her life? (If so, suicide assessment is warranted.)
- (6) Has the student been a victim and/or initiator of hostile, harassing, or bullying behavior directed toward other students, teachers, or staff?
- (7) Is the student known to have an interest in weapons? If so, has he or she made efforts to acquire or use weapons? Does the student live in a home where there are weapons (whether or not the weapons are secured)?

b. Interview the Student of Concern

Interviews with a student of concern oftentimes are critical in a threat assessment inquiry. School administrators and law enforcement officials, and their respective legal counsels, should follow existing policies, or develop policies, regarding interviews with students of concern.

The primary purpose of a student interview is to learn about the student's thinking, motives, and behavior. The tone of the interview should be professional, neutral, and non-confrontational, rather than accusatory or judgmental. Student safety should be maintained as a priority while waiting for, or during, the interview.

Issues that should be considered include:

- (1) When and who is to notify parents/guardians of an interview
- (2) Whether or when to invite parents/guardians to be present during an interview
- (3) Whether and how to use information from an interview for criminal justice proceedings
- (4) Whether and when legal representation should be allowed, offered, or provided
- (5) The search of a student in any context is a sensitive and complex issue that should be examined thoroughly by school administrators and their legal counsel and should be addressed in school policies and in accordance with law

Conducting an interview with a student of concern, the threat assessment team should:

- (1) Be well acquainted with the facts that brought the student to the attention of school administrators and others
- (2) Have reviewed available information concerning the student's background, interests, and behaviors. Knowledge of background information concerning the student prior to the interview may help the threat assessment team judge whether the student is forthcoming and straightforward. Generally, a student should be asked directly about his or her intentions. An interview can also send the message to the student that his or her behavior has been noticed and has caused concern.

Additional resource for interview guidance: Cornell, D. & Sheras, P. (2006). Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

c. Interview Others Who Know the Student of Concern

Students and adults who know the student who is the subject of the threat assessment inquiry should be asked about communications or other behaviors that may indicate the student of concern's ideas or intent.

The focus of these interviews should be factual:

- (1) What was said? To whom?
- (2) What was written? To whom?
- (3) What was done?
- (4) When and where did this occur?
- (5) Who else observed this behavior?
- (6) Did the student say why he or she acted as they did?

d. Interview the Parent/Guardian

The parents or guardians of the student of concern should be interviewed in most cases. Parents may be protective of their children, frightened and/or embarrassed about the inquiry and the possibility that their child may be contemplating a violent act. The threat assessment team, therefore, should make it clear to the student's parents or guardians that the objective of the threat assessment inquiry is not only to help prevent targeted school violence and diminish the chance that the student, and possibly others, would be harmed, but also to *help their child*. The threat assessment team should seek the help of the student's parents in understanding the student's actions and interests, recognizing that parents may or may not know much about their child's thinking and behavior.

- (1) Questions for parents should focus on the student's behaviors and communications, especially those that might be attack-related.
- (2) Parents should be encouraged to explore all methods of their child's communications including internet messaging, cell phone communications, and postings on social network sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, or any other social media sites.
- (3) The student's interest in weapons should be explored, as well as his or her access to weapons at home.

e. **Obtain Outside Sources of Information**

Information may come to the attention of schools through outside sources such as community organizations, clubs, other schools, and anonymous reporting lines, such as Safe2Tell.

f. **Interview the Potential Target**

Individuals who have been identified as potential targets of the student of concern should also be interviewed. The primary purpose of that interview is to gather information about any possible situation of concern.

4. ORGANIZE AND ANALYZE THE INFORMATION – ALSO SEE THREAT ASSESSMENT INQUIRY: SECRET SERVICE ELEVEN KEY QUESTIONS (SECTION V)

- a. Information gathered should be examined for evidence of behavior and conditions that suggest the student of concern is planning for an attack. Is the behavior of the student consistent with movement on a path toward attack?
- b. Do the student’s current situation and setting incline him or her toward or away from targeted violence?
- c. Identify if possible, where the student’s behavior falls on, “The Pathway to Violence”
 - (1) The Grievance
 - (2) Violent Ideation
 - (3) Research & Planning the Attack
 - (4) Pre-Attack Preparation
 - (5) Probing & Breaches (gaining access to the site)
 - (6) Attack
- d. Consider if the student’s behavior is:
 - (1) normal behavior
 - (2) boundary probing behavior (testing safety, security and leadership within the school)
 - (3) attack-related behavior
 - (4) attack behavior
- e. Other assessment tools may also be used to help organize the information (See Selected Threat Assessment Resource List)

5. DETERMINATION OF CONCERN LEADING TO A RESPONSE, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT PLAN

Teams should take all the information they have collected and the analysis conducted of this information and as a team determine how serious the behaviors, the threat, the person and the situation is, so that they may begin building the plan to manage this situation. Below are listed four descriptions of threatening behaviors and suggested responses to these behaviors, an important note is that each list of responses is the development of a Response, Management and Support Plan.

a. Person/situation appears to pose a clear and immediate threat of serious violence toward others that requires containment and action to protect identified target(s).

Descriptors:

- A targeted attack is imminent (can occur at any moment).

Immediate Response Required to Include:

- Immediate containment
- Action to protect targets
- Immediate intervention by Law Enforcement

- Make necessary notifications to appropriate parties (e.g. potential victims and parents/guardians, school staff members, district personnel, etc.)
- Additional Response, Management, and Support Plan work should continue only after immediate threat has been resolved
- If the student has been out of school for any length of time, a Re-Entry Meeting will be necessary before student can return to school following the threat assessment. Parents need to be notified of the details regarding meeting expectations, including the date, time, and location of this meeting.
- Development of a Response, Management, and Support Plan.

b. Person/situation appears to pose a threat of violence, exhibiting behaviors that indicate both a continuing intent to harm and efforts to acquire the capacity to carry out the plan.

Descriptors:

- Threat is direct, specific, and plausible (likely, probable, or possible without appropriate intervention).
- Threat suggests concrete steps have been taken toward carrying out an attack, awareness that the student who made the threat has acquired or practiced with a weapon, or has had the target under surveillance.

Response Required to Include:

- Development of a Response, Management, and Support Plan.
- If the student has been out of school for any length of time, a Re-Entry Meeting will be necessary before student can return to school following the threat assessment. Parents need to be notified of the details regarding meeting expectations, including the date, time, and location of this meeting.

c. Person/situation does not appear to pose a threat of violence at this time, but exhibits behaviors that indicate a continuing intent to harm and potential for future violence.

Descriptors:

- Wording in the threat suggests that the student who made the threat has given some thought to how the act will be carried out.
- There may be a general indication of a possible place and time, although without specific details.
- There is no strong indication that the student who made the threat has taken preparatory steps, although there may be some veiled reference or inconclusive evidence pointing to that possibility.
- There may be a specific statement seeking to convey that the threat is not empty.

Response Required to Include:

- Development of a Response, Management, and Support Plan.
- If the student has been out of school for any length of time, a Re-Entry Meeting will be necessary before student can return to school following the threat assessment. Parents need to be notified of the details regarding meeting expectations, including the date, time, and location of this meeting.

d. Person/situation does not appear to pose a threat of violence and the team believes the matter can be resolved with the development of a Response, Management, and Support Plan.

Descriptors:

- Threat is vague and indirect.
- Information contained within the threat is inconsistent, implausible, or lacks detail.
- Threat lacks realism.
- Content of the threat suggests the person is unlikely to carry it out.

Response Required to Include:

- Development of a Response, Management, and Support Plan.

- If the student has been out of school for any length of time, a Re-Entry Meeting will be necessary before student can return to school following the threat assessment. Parents need to be notified of the details regarding meeting expectations, including the date, time, and location of this meeting.

The determination of the level of threat is not as important as developing the Response, Management and Support Plan (RMS). Teams should be monitoring all students for whom a threat assessment is warranted regardless of the level of threat. Do not allow your team to get so focused on determining the level of threat that careful planning does not go into your RMS Plan. Teams will also be asked to provide their rationale for a decision, why one determination versus others, e.g. Why a B and not an A or C?

As the threat assessment inquiry moves to an investigation status, and law enforcement has been notified, the team might continue to ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the information collected prompt more concern or less concern about the possibility that a student is moving on a path of attack?
- What information might prompt less concern?
- What information might heighten concern?
- What options exist for intervening in the behavior of, or redirecting the student away from, ideas of or plans for a school attack?
- How should potential targets be contacted, warned, and protected?
- It is suggested that you consult with your school district’s attorney about the “duty to warn and/or protect.”

6. DEVELOP A RESPONSE, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT PLAN

A Response, Management, and Support Plan can be developed for any situation, but should be developed if evaluation indicates medium level concern and/or upon re-entry of student of high concern. The purpose is to provide management of the situation, to protect and aid possible targets, and to provide support and guidance to help the student deal successfully with his or her issues. The plan also aids in monitoring of the student in the short-term and long-term. Strategies selected should have the best potential for long-term preventative power. The focus of the process is to connect the student to services and support systems that reduce the likelihood of future threatening behavior.

- Select actions and interventions related to the level of concern.
- Notify the potential target and their parents.
- Consider the history of previous actions, consequences, and interventions and evaluate their effectiveness.
- Start with as intense of a plan as needed, and then adjust based on progress. Timelines for review of progress can be short, if needed.
- Specify consequences, monitoring, and supervision strategies, support for skill development and relationship building. Consider possible trauma history of student and plan accordingly.
- Maximize the resources of the student, family, community agencies, other intervention providers, etc.
- Use community collaborative teams for intervention planning or further assessment, as indicated.
- If additional formal assessment is part of the plan, obtain parent permission as necessary.
- Build in formal follow-up meetings to review progress and response to the plan.
- Adjust plans as necessary.
- If student has missed any time away from school, be sure to conduct a re-entry meeting with the student, parents, and appropriate staff members.

7. DOCUMENT THE THREAT ASSESSMENT AND KEEP RECORDS

Regardless of the outcome of the threat assessment inquiry, the threat assessment team should document the behavior of concern, the inquiry process, and any actions taken. The school and/or district should have a central “vortex” for the information record-keeping, such as an administrator and/or team who would have previous records and information if future concerns are raised.

- a. This should be carried out in compliance with any applicable school or other relevant policies and/or legal considerations, and should include a record of sources and content for all key information considered in the threat assessment, as well as the date that the information was acquired.
- b. It also is important to document the reasoning that led the threat assessment team to its decision.
- c. A well-documented record provides baseline information and can be useful if the student comes to authorities’ attention again, or if, at some point in the future, investigators or school personnel need to determine whether the subject has changed patterns of thinking and behavior.
- d. This documentation can also be an asset in demonstration that a threat assessment process was conducted properly and in compliance with applicable laws, policies, and procedures.

8. CONTINUE MONITORING OF THE STUDENT AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RESPONSE, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT PLAN

- a. Transition the short-term plan to a longer-term plan, as indicated.
- b. Reevaluate the plan and the system process, as needed.

Adapted from:

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2004). *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. A complete copy of the guide is available online at <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>.
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.

Federal Bureau of Investigation Behavioral Analysis Unit. (2018). *The school shooter – A quick reference guide*. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/FBI-SchoolShooterReferenceGuide.pdf>

For Additional Resources:

See Section VI: Selected Threat Assessment Resources.



V. Threat Assessment Inquiry: A Summary of the Secret Service Eleven Key Questions (and Associated Themes)

How should the information from a threat assessment inquiry be organized and analyzed? Information from research and interviews conducted during a threat assessment inquiry can be guided by the following eleven key questions and thirteen associated themes:

1. **WHAT ARE THE STUDENT’S MOTIVES AND GOALS?**
(MOTIVES)
 2. **HAVE THERE BEEN ANY COMMUNICATIONS SUGGESTING IDEAS OR INTENT TO ATTACK?**
(COMMUNICATIONS)
 3. **HAS THE SUBJECT SHOWN INAPPROPRIATE INTEREST IN SCHOOL ATTACKS OR ATTACKERS, WEAPONS, INCIDENTS OF MASS VIOLENCE?**
(INAPPROPRIATE INTERESTS)
 4. **HAS THE STUDENT ENGAGED IN ATTACK-RELATED BEHAVIORS?**
(PLANNING)
 5. **DOES THE STUDENT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT THE ACT?**
(CAPACITY)
 6. **IS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCING HOPELESSNESS, DESPERATION, OR DESPAIR?**
(DESPERATION OR DESPAIR)
 7. **DOES THE STUDENT HAVE A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP WITH AT LEAST ONE RESPONSIBLE ADULT?**
(PROTECTIVE FACTORS)
 8. **DOES THE STUDENT SEE VIOLENCE AS AN ACCEPTABLE OR DESIRABLE WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS?**
(VIOLENCE AS AN OPTION)
 9. **IS THE STUDENT’S CONVERSATION AND “STORY” CONSISTENT WITH THEIR ACTIONS?**
(CONSISTENCY)
 10. **ARE OTHER PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STUDENT’S POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE?**
(CONCERNED OTHERS)
 11. **WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES MIGHT AFFECT THE LIKELIHOOD OF VIOLENCE?**
(STRESSORS)
- ADDITIONAL THEMES:**
(WEAPONS ACCESS)
(EMOTIONAL/DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES)

Explanation of the Secret Service Eleven Key Questions and Associated Themes

1. WHAT ARE THE STUDENT’S MOTIVES AND GOALS? (MOTIVES)

Students may have a variety of motives that place them at risk for engaging in harmful behavior, whether to themselves or others. If you can discover the student’s motivation for engaging in the concerning behavior that brought him/her to the attention of the Team, then you can understand more about the student’s goals. The Team should also assess how far the student may be willing to go to achieve these goals, and what or who may be a potential target. Understanding motive further allows the Team to develop management strategies that can direct the student away from violent choices.

- a. What motivated the student to make the statements or take the actions that caused him or her to come to attention?
- b. Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?

- c. Does the student have a major grievance or grudge? Against whom?
- d. What efforts have been made to resolve the problem and what has been the result? Does the student of concern feel that any part of the problem is resolved or see any alternative?

2. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY COMMUNICATIONS SUGGESTING IDEAS OR INTENT TO ATTACK? (COMMUNICATIONS)

Look for concerning, unusual, bizarre, threatening, or violent communications the student made. The student's communications may reveal grievances held about certain issues or a possible intended target. They may allude to violent intentions or warn others to stay away from school at a certain time. They may reveal information relevant to the other investigative themes by making reference to feelings of hopelessness or suicide, a fascination with violence, interest in weapons, or other inappropriate interests. These statements might be made in person to classmates, teammates, or friends; in writing on assignments or tests; and/or via social media, text messages, or photo or video-sharing sites.

- a. What, if anything, has the student communicated to someone else (targets, friends, other students, teachers, family, others) or written in a diary, journal, or website concerning his or her ideas and/or intentions?

3. HAS THE SUBJECT SHOWN INAPPROPRIATE INTEREST IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING? (INAPPROPRIATE INTERESTS)

Gather information about whether the student has shown an inappropriate or heightened interest in concerning topics such as school attacks or attackers, mass attacks, or other types of violence. These interests might appear in the student's communications, the books the student reads, the movies the student watches, or the activities the student enjoys. The context of the student's interests is an important factor to consider. For example, a student's interest in weapons may not be concerning if the student is a hunter or is on the school's rifle team, with no evidence of an inappropriate or unhealthy fixation on weapons. In other situations, the context surrounding a student's interest in weapons could be of concern. For example, if a student is fixated on past school shooters or discusses what firearm would be best to use in a mass attack.

- a. School attacks or attackers
- b. Weapons (including recent acquisition of any relevant weapon)
- c. Incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers, terror groups)

4. HAS THE STUDENT ENGAGED IN ATTACK-RELATED BEHAVIORS? (PLANNING)

Targeted attacks at school are rarely sudden or impulsive acts of violence. The Team should assess whether the student has made specific plans to harm the school. The student might create lists of individuals or groups targeted for violence, or research tactics and materials needed to carry out the attack. The student may conduct surveillance, draw maps of the planned location, and test security responses at school. He/she may write out detailed steps and rehearse some aspects of a plan, such as getting to the school, the timing of the attack, or whether to attempt escape, be captured, or commit suicide. The student may also acquire, manufacture, or practice with a weapon.

- a. Developing an attack idea or plan
- b. Making efforts to acquire or practice with weapons
- c. Casing or checking out possible sites and areas for attack
- d. Rehearsing attacks or ambushes

5. DOES THE STUDENT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT AN ACT OF TARGETED VIOLENCE? (CAPACITY)

Determine whether the student's thinking and behavior is organized enough to plan and execute an attack and whether the student has the resources to carry it out. Planning does not need to be elaborate and could be as simple as taking a weapon from home and inflicting harm on classmates at school. Other student

attackers may develop more complex and lengthier plans. At the very least, carrying out an attack requires that the student has access to a weapon and the ability to get that weapon to school undetected.

- a. How organized is the student's thinking and behavior?
- b. Does the student have the means (e.g., access to a weapon) to carry out an attack?
- c. Has the student demonstrated the interest, skills, and ability to make a plan, gather the necessary resources, and carry out the plan (e.g. time to organize, finances to support the plan, and transportation to gather the resources)?
- d. Has the student demonstrated the ability to influence others to be part of the plan?
- e. Does the student lack the developmental understanding or capacity to carry out the threat due to a disability?

6. IS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCING HOPELESSNESS, DESPERATION, AND/OR DESPAIR? (DESPERATION OR DESPAIR)

Assess whether the student feels hopeless, desperate, or out of options. Determine if the student has had thoughts about or engaged in behaviors that would indicate the student's desperation. The Team should determine whether the student has felt this way before, how the student managed those feelings then, and whether those same resources for coping are available to the student now. Consider whether the student has tried addressing the problems in a positive way, but was unable to resolve them, thereby leading to a sense of hopelessness about their situation.

- a. Is there information to suggest that the student is experiencing desperation and/or despair?
- b. Has the student experienced a recent failure, loss, and/or loss of status?
- c. Is the student known to be having difficulty coping with a stressful event?
- d. Is the student now, or has the student ever been, suicidal?
- e. Has the student engaged in behavior that suggests that he or she has considered ending his or her life?

7. DOES THE STUDENT HAVE A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP WITH AT LEAST ONE RESPONSIBLE ADULT? (PROTECTIVE FACTORS)

A thorough threat assessment requires understanding the full picture of a student's behaviors and environment, which also includes accounting for the positive and prosocial influences on the student's life. The Team should identify factors that may restore hope to a student who feels defeated, desperate, or in a situation that is impossible to overcome. This includes determining whether the student has a positive, trusting relationship with an adult at school. This could be a teacher, coach, guidance counselor, administrator, nurse, resource officer, or janitor. A trusted adult at school in whom the student can confide and who will listen without judgment can help direct a student toward resources, supports, and options to overcome setbacks. Learn who the student's friends are at school and if the student feels emotionally connected to other students. A student may need help developing friendships that they can rely on for support.

- a. Does this student have at least one relationship with an adult where the student feels that he or she can confide in the adult, and believes that the adult will listen without judging or jumping to conclusions?
- b. Is the student emotionally connected to, or disconnected from, other students?
- c. Has the student previously come to someone's attention, or raised concern in a way, that suggested he or she needs intervention or supportive services?

8. DOES THE STUDENT SEE VIOLENCE AS ACCEPTABLE – OR DESIRABLE – OR THE ONLY WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS? (VIOLENCE AS AN OPTION)

Some students, who are feeling hopeless and out of options, may think violence is the only way to solve a problem or settle a grievance. The Team should look to see whether the student thinks violence is acceptable or necessary, if the student has used violence in the past to address problems, and whether the student has thought of alternative ways to address the grievances. The Team should also assess whether peers, or others, support and encourage the student to use violence as a means to an end. If possible, connect the student

with more positive, prosocial role models who discourage violence and identify more acceptable ways to solve problems.

- a. Does the setting around the student (friends, fellow students, parents, teachers, adults) explicitly or implicitly support or endorse violence as a way of resolving problems or disputes?
- b. Has the student been “dared” by others to engage in an act of violence?

9. IS THE STUDENT’S CONVERSATION AND “STORY” CONSISTENT WITH HIS OR HER ACTIONS? (CONSISTENCY)

The Team should corroborate the student’s statements to determine that they are consistent with the student’s actions and behaviors and with what other people say about the student. When inconsistencies are identified, the Team should then try to determine why that is the case. For example, the student might say that he/she is handling a romantic break-up well, but posts on social media indicate the student is struggling to move on, and friends report that the student is more upset or angry about the break-up than reported. Determine whether the inconsistency is because the student is deliberately hiding something or if the inconsistency stems from another underlying issue. For example, a depressed student may claim that they are isolated, even if they regularly go out with a large group of students. If the inconsistency is deliberate, it is important to determine why the student feels the need to conceal his/her actions. The concealment may be as simple as a fear of facing punishment for some other inappropriate behavior, or it may be related to hidden plans for a violent act.

- a. Does information from collateral interviews and from the student’s own behavior confirm or dispute what the student says is going on?

10. ARE OTHER PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STUDENT’S POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE? (CONCERNED OTHERS)

In previous incidents, many students made statements or engaged in behaviors prior to their attacks that elicited concern from others in their lives. Assess whether parents, friends, classmates, teachers, or others who know the student are worried about the student and whether they have taken any actions in response to their concerns. Gather information on the specific behaviors that caused worry or fear. These could include behaviors that may have elicited concerns about the safety of the student or others, such as unusual, bizarre or threatening statements; intimidating or aggressive acts; indications of planning for an attack; suicidal ideations or gestures; or a fixation on a specific target. Other behaviors that elicit concern may not necessarily be indicative of violence, but do require that the Team assess the behavior and provide appropriate supports. Examples of these behaviors include alcohol or drug use; behavior changes related to academic performance, social habits, mood, or physical appearance; conflicts with others; and withdrawal or isolation.

- a. Are those who know the student concerned that he or she might take action based on violent ideas or plans?
- b. Are those who know the student concerned about a specific target?
- c. Have those who know the student witnessed recent changes or escalations in mood and behavior?

11. WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES MIGHT AFFECT THE LIKELIHOOD OF AN ATTACK? (STRESSORS)

All students face stressors such as setbacks, losses, and other challenges as part of their lives. While many students are resilient and can overcome these situations, for some, these stressors may become overwhelming and ultimately influence their decision to carry out an attack at school. Gather information on stressors the student is experiencing, how the student is coping with them, and whether there are supportive friends or family who can help the student overcome them. Assess whether the student experienced stressors in the past that are still having an effect, such as a move to a new school, and whether there might be additional setbacks or losses in the near future, like a relationship that might be ending.

- a. What factors in the student's life and/or environment might increase or decrease the likelihood that the student will attempt to mount an attack at school?
- b. What is the response of other persons who know about the student's ideas or plan to mount an attack? (Do those who know about the student's ideas actively discourage the student from acting violently, encourage the student to attack, deny the possibility of violence, passively collude with attack, etc.?)

ADDITIONAL THEMES:

WEAPONS ACCESS

The Team should assess whether the student has access to weapons. Because many school attackers used firearms acquired from their homes, consider whether the family keeps weapons at home or if there is a relative or friend who has weapons. Sometimes parents who keep weapons at home incorrectly assume that their children are unaware of where they are stored or how to access them. If there are weapons at home, the Team should determine if they are stored appropriately and if the student knows how to use them or has done so in the past. The Team should also remember that firearms are not the only weapons to be concerned about. Even though many school attackers have used firearms in carrying out their attacks, explosives, incendiary devices, bladed weapons, or combinations of these weapons have been used in past attacks.

EMOTIONAL/DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, and other mental health issues are important factors to consider when conducting an assessment. Keep in mind that students with emotional issues or developmental disorders might behave in a way that is maladaptive, but might not be concerning or threatening because the behavior is a product of their diagnosis. Behaviors exhibited by a student with a diagnosed disorder need to be evaluated in the context of that diagnosis and the student's known baseline of behavior. If the student is experiencing feelings related to a diagnosable mental illness, such as depression, then the Team needs to consider the effect of these feelings on their behaviors when assessing the student's risk of engaging in harm to self or others.

Adapted from:

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2004). *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

A complete copy of these guides are available online at <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf> and https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf



VI. Annotated Threat Assessment Resources

June 2021

- **Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.** In this 2021 study, NTAC examined 67 disrupted plots against K-12 schools from 2006-2018. The key findings of the study are clear and consistent: Individuals contemplating violence often exhibit observable behaviors, and when community members report these behaviors, the next tragedy can be averted.
<https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/202103/USSS%20Averting%20Targeted%20School%20Violence.2021.03.pdf>
- **Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA) Project – Balancing Safety and Support on Campus: A GUIDE FOR CAMPUS TEAMS** This guide, published in 2019, developed specifically for Institutes of Higher Education and their threat assessment teams seeks to assist in naming conventions for your team, who should be on the Higher Ed team, how to operate a team and common obstacles encountered by Higher Ed teams. <http://hemha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/campus-teams-balancing-safety-support-campus-jed-guide.pdf>
- **Protecting America’s Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence.** The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) studied 41 incidents of targeted school violence that occurred at K-12 schools in the United States from 2008 to 2017. This report, published in 2019, builds on 20 years of NTAC research and guidance in the field of threat assessment by offering an in-depth analysis of the motives, behaviors, and situational factors of the attackers, as well as the tactics, resolutions, and other operationally-relevant details of the attacks.
<https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ussc-analysis-of-targeted-school-violence.pdf>
- **Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model.** The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) created this operational guide, published in 2018, that provides actionable steps that schools can take to develop comprehensive targeted violence prevention plans for conducting threat assessments in schools.
https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSC_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.1.18.pdf
- **A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States.** This report, published in 2018, produced by the FBI, covers active shooter incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013, examines specific behaviors that may precede an attack and that might be useful in identifying, assessing, and managing those who may be on a pathway to violence. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>
- **Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks.** This report, published in 2017, produced by the FBI, serves as a practical guide on assessing and managing the threat of targeted violence and contains concrete strategies to help communities prevent these types of incidents. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>
- The **National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)** provides a succinct one-page fact sheet that includes an overview of the Secret Service and FBI findings, a list of policies that should be addressed district-wide, information on building an interdisciplinary team, and threat types and levels of risk. Access the Fact Sheet, published in 2015, *Threat Assessments: Predicting and Preventing School Violence*, online at <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety->

- **REMS TA Center – School Threat Assessment: An Introductory Training by Request** This training introduces participants to various components of school behavioral threat assessments, which were originally put forth by the Safe School Initiative (SSI), alongside new information and guidance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation as presented in the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (School Guide, available at <http://rems.ed.gov/K12GuideForDevelHQSchool.aspx>, and published in 2013. Participants learn about effective characteristics of threat assessments for consideration when forming their own approach and team. Specialized topics are also addressed, such as the use of social media in threat assessments. Participants have the opportunity to discuss concepts in small-group discussions and practice a basic threat assessment in a tabletop exercise.
https://rems.ed.gov/Docs/Threat_Assessment_Website_Marketing_Flyer_508C.pdf
- **Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Education**, developed by the U.S. Secret Service (USS), the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and published in 2010, explores the issue of violence at institutions of higher education (IHEs) in response to the tragic shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University ("Virginia Tech") on April 16, 2007. ED/USS/FBI initiated a collaborative effort to understand the nature of this violence and identify ways of preventing future attacks that would affect our nation's colleges and universities. In total, 272 incidents were identified through a comprehensive search of more than 115,000 results in open-source reporting from 1900 to 2008. The findings are pertinent and far-reaching, and the incidents studied include all forms of targeted violence, ranging from domestic violence to serial killers. The report is available electronically on the REMS TA Center Web site at http://rems.ed.gov/docs/CampusAttacks_201004.pdf.
- The **Adams County Threat Assessment Protocol**, created by the Adams County Youth Initiative and five Adams County school districts, is an example of a school threat assessment protocol. Included in the tool are: Full Team Threat Assessment; Threat Assessment Screen; Sample Interview Forms; Response, Management, and Support Plan; Threat Assessment Summary Form; and Threat Assessment Protocol. The original Adams County Threat Assessment Protocol was last updated by Adams County in 2009. Adams County now only shares the protocol with teams trained either by Adams County staff or staff from the Colorado School Safety Resource Center.
- In November 2009, Virginia Tech published an additional resource document on threat assessment. This document, **Implementing Behavioral Threat Assessment on Campus**, was produced by Virginia Tech with the support of a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. In this publication, Virginia Tech documented their experience in developing and implementing a behavioral threat assessment process in the time following the campus shootings on April 16, 2007. Starting a campus behavioral threat assessment process included creating a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team; strengthening and developing necessary policies and procedures to enhance and support the team's efforts; training the team; identifying and harnessing key resources on and off campus to intervene where necessary; securing case management personnel to implement and monitor intervention efforts; and raising awareness on campus regarding the team's existence, its purpose, and the role that everyone on campus shares in reporting troubling behavior to the team. The report and numerous resources collected during the course of developing this book can serve as a starting point for institutions to consider in crafting their own policies, mission statement, public awareness message, and other relevant materials. Accessible at http://rems.ed.gov/docs/VT_ThreatAssessment09.pdf.

- **Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent A Targeted Attack.** This study, published in 2008, aimed to further prevent attacks by exploring how students with prior knowledge of attacks made decisions regarding what steps, if any, to take after learning of the information. The study sought to identify what might be done to encourage more students to share information they learn about potential targeted school-based violence with one or more adults. The report is accessible at http://rems.ed.gov/docs/DOE_BystanderStudy.pdf.

Historical Resources

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