

# **Suggested Procedures for Threat Assessment in Schools**

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*The recommendations discussed in this document are based on experiences during my twenty-plus years as a school psychologist as well as my personal work on site as either leader or member of crisis teams in the aftermath of eleven school shootings. In addition, I have drawn heavily from the U.S. Secret Service report, their presentations, and conversations with the investigating officers. The information from the FBI and their report entitled, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* has also been very helpful. Included in the recommended reading section are Kris Mohandie's book on threat assessment and the recent publication from Dewey Cornell and Peter Sheras that provides guidelines for responding to student threats of violence. I strongly recommend all of these materials.*

The following basic principals are important with regard to school safety and crisis planning:

- Schools are the safest place for children. Most accidental, homicidal and suicidal deaths occur in the home or community.
- Prevention efforts must include parents, community leaders, community members, and most importantly close working relationships between school personnel and local law enforcement agencies.
- Threat assessment is a process to evaluate the level of risk to the school or to the individuals at school and to design and implement strategies to reduce the level of risk.
- There is no accurate profile of students who commit violence. School shooters have been very diverse in race, family background and academic success. School personnel are encouraged to evaluate each situation independently and carefully.
- Prevention efforts at the local, state and national levels must focus on the origins of youth violence in our society, which are well known and include:
  - Child abuse
  - Ineffective parenting
  - Media violence
  - Poverty
  - Prejudice
  - Substance abuse
  - Gun access
- One violent act committed on school grounds is unacceptable.
- Students themselves must become more involved in prevention because school safety is an inside job that involves an initial commitment from the student body and then from the faculty, parents and community.

- Students always seem to be aware of the fact that a fellow student is planning an act of violence or engaging in reckless behavior.
- The following are strongly recommended:
  - Student safety pledges,
  - Student participation on safety task forces,
  - Classroom discussions,
  - Implementing school/community prevention programs to address the leading causes of death.
- Approximately two-thirds of school shooters were bullied and were suicidal, according to a U.S. Secret Service report. Prevention programs designed to reduce bullying and youth suicide are very important and are recommended methods of improving school safety.
- School personnel are encouraged to become well acquainted with their students and to build relationships with them. This is especially challenging in massive schools.
- Classroom presentations focusing on conflict resolution, anger management and learning to appreciate diversity are an essential element in prevention.

Several key points specifically relating to assessing threats are:

- Each violent threat must be taken seriously and documented. However, the same response is not mandatory for every threat. To help conceptualize procedures, the following is suggested:

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**S. T. O. P. M. E.**

This acronym was chosen to emphasize that most acts of violence committed by students could have been prevented. The majority of the perpetrators talked with their friends about their violent plans. Note these important factors in threat assessment:

- S**ituational factors in perpetrator’s life.
- T**oxicity in our society with proliferation of violence.
- O**ppportunity to intervene and prevent violence.
- P**lanning level in which perpetrator is engaged.
- M**otivation – what does the perpetrator hope to accomplish? Revenge is the most common motive.
- E**nvironment of the perpetrator both in and out of school with special emphasis on whether or not they have the means to carry out their plans at their disposal.

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School administrators are encouraged not to evaluate threats of violence in isolation. Both the U.S. Secret Service report and the Colorado report on the

Columbine shooting recommend that each school have a threat assessment team (TAT) and that the team be composed of at least

- 1) an administrator,
- 2) a mental health professional,
- 3) A teacher who knows the student suspected of threatening violence.
- 4) A law enforcement representative is also ideal

The TAT should obtain information from other school personnel and local police as warranted. TAT meeting documentation (including recommendations) should be kept. A designated central office administrator (DCOA) should be identified, and that person will be trained accordingly. The DCOA should be involved in the following activities:

- Provide consultation to individual building TATs who are working through a threat assessment.
- Organize building threat assessment team training.
- Compile lessons learned from situations worked through by TATs.
- Developing a close collaborative relationship with local and/or school police.
- Communicate and coordinate with the school district's media director or public relations designee.
- Provide district-wide initiatives which emphasize that it is imperative for all school personnel and students to immediately report violent threats to principals. Administrators should take steps to protect the identity of those who report threats and some situations may warrant providing protective measures to ensure their safety. Some states (Colorado, for example) have drafted legislation to prevent those who report violent threats from being sued.

## CHECKLIST FOR RESPONDING TO VIOLENT THREATS IN SCHOOLS

1. Threat Assessment Team (TAT) composed (at minimum) of:
  - Building level administrator,
  - Teacher acquainted with individual(s) threatening violence,
  - A mental health professional.
2. TAT should collect background information on the suspected perpetrator. If perpetrator is a student, review all school records.
3. TAT should interview staff and students acquainted with suspected perpetrator, and perhaps perpetrator's parents.
4. Conduct an interview with the individual threatening violence and include questions such as (moving from general to specific):
  - Have things been difficult or trying for you lately?
  - Why do you think that you have been called in?
  - We are concerned about... (state concern), but I want to hear your side of it.
  - What has been happening in your life lately?
  - Who can help you with problems when you have them? Who or what can help you now?
  - What are you planning to do?
  - I need to let you know the steps that will now be taken here at school.
5. Threat assessment personnel should classify a situation as high, moderate or low risk according to the following criteria:
  - HIGH RISK: Imminent danger to self or others with means and focus to carry out violence. Take steps to isolate the individuals. Incarceration or hospitalization is needed. Follow-up with police/hospital personnel is essential.
  - MODERATE RISK: Substantial risk exists, but there is no evidence that violence is imminent or that the individual has the means to carry out the threat. Further assessment and close monitoring are essential and will probably include removal from the school setting with a re-entry program. Implementation of a restraining or administrative order to stay away from certain individuals upon return to school may also be necessary.
  - LOW RISK: There is little evidence of potential for violence, but a pattern exists of veiled threats against others with the purpose of causing emotional distress. Conference with student's parents and implement classroom and mental

health interventions. Hopefully the student can remain in school with support services and monitoring.

6. Review and incorporate key questions from the Secret Service in how to respond to a threat.
  - What is the motivation for the threat?
  - What did the individual tell others regarding his/her plans?
  - Does the individual have an interest in targeted violence and murder?
  - Has the individual menaced, harassed or stalked anyone?
  - Does the individual have a history of mental illness, hallucinations, delusions or feelings of persecution?
  - How organized is the individual and does he/she have the potential to carry out the plan?
  - Has the individual suffered a recent loss in status?
  - Is the individual depressed?
  - Does his/her actions and statements corroborate violence potential?
  - Do those who are well acquainted with the individual believe he/she is capable of violence?

Other questions that must be considered:

- Does the individual have a fascination with guns, bombs and violence?
- Does the individual have a history of cruelty toward animals?
- Has the individual shown remorse when he/she has injured others physically or hurt others' feelings?
- Does the individual use drugs or alcohol?

It is important to view all these questions as additive, and concern should increase with the number of questions that have worrisome answers.

7. A threat assessment report is completed and copies should be distributed to the building administrator and the designated central office administrator (DCOA). A sample form is included at the end of this document.
8. The TAT should meet, review action taken, and debrief. Discussion should focus on what has been learned, what worked well, and what needs improvement. Developed a specific follow-up plan which makes certain that appropriate interventions are in place for monitoring the suspected perpetrator. School personnel and local/school police should be at an appropriate level of vigilance.
9. Duty to harm procedures were followed to notify those whose safety was threatened as well as the local police.

10. If outside mental health professionals or police were involved, then release of information forms and communication procedures are in place.
11. If the suspected perpetrator was suspended or expelled from school, campus security should be contacted and alert for unauthorized re-entry.
12. Develop a re-entry plan for the student's return to his/her home campus.
13. Notify the DCOA (designated central office administrator) and district public relations designee if necessary.

# **T H R E A T   R E P O R T**

School\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Name of suspected perpetrator, identifying information, schedule, grade level, age.

Names of victims/potential victims and relationship to suspected perpetrator.

History between the victim/potential victim and the perpetrator/suspected perpetrator?

When and where incident occurred.

Events prior to incident.

State specific language of the threat.

Specific means at disposal of perpetrator/suspected perpetrator to carry out threat.

Planning and focus that perpetrator/suspected perpetrator has devoted to carrying out the threat.

Demeanor of the perpetrator/suspected perpetrator during interview.

Comments of others interviewed.

Have parents of perpetrator/suspected perpetrator been contacted?  
If so, list response.

How did the incident end and was anyone else involved?

What information contained in the suspected perpetrator's school records are important to consider?

What steps have been taken to ensure that violence will not occur?

Who is responsible for monitoring and follow-up in this situation?

At what threat level (high, medium, low) was this incident classified?

Administrator Completing This Report\_\_\_\_\_

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Position\_\_\_\_\_

Date Report Completed\_\_\_\_\_

## RECOMMENDED READING

Fein, R., & Vossekuil, B. (2000). Protective intelligence: Threat assessment investigations. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

Mohandie, K. (2000). School violence threat management. San Diego: Specialized Training Services.

Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (1999). Coping with crisis: Lessons learned for schools, parents & communities. Longmont: Sopris West.

Vossekuil, B., Reddy, M., Fein, R., Borum, R., & Modzeleshi, W. (2000). USSS Safe school initiative: An interim report on the prevention of targeted violence in schools. Washington DC: U. S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.

Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (2000). Coping with crisis: A quick reference guide. Longmont: Sopris West.

Cornell, D., & Sheras, P. (2005) Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence. Longmont: Sopris West

### Websites:

National School Safety Center

[www.nssc1.org](http://www.nssc1.org)

U.S.S.C. Safe School Initiative Research [www.treas.gov/ussc/ntac](http://www.treas.gov/ussc/ntac)

Specialized Training Services [www.specializedtraining.com](http://www.specializedtraining.com)

Sopris West Publications & Training [www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)