



Threat Assessment at School: A Primer for Educators

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Threat assessment represents an important component of a comprehensive approach to school safety that gives schools an alternative to zero tolerance discipline policies. Threat assessment is a violence prevention strategy that involves: (a) identifying student threats to commit a violent act, (b) determining the seriousness of the threat, and (c) developing intervention plans that protect potential victims and address the underlying problem or conflict that stimulated the threatening behavior.

The goals of threat assessment are to keep schools safe and to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger, hopelessness, or despair. Effective threat assessment provides adults with useful information about a student's risks and personal resources. Among the other potential student risks that can be identified and prevented are suicide, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse, dropping out, and criminal activity.

IMPLEMENTING THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES IN SCHOOLS

Effective procedures to assess threats include establishing district-wide policies and procedures, creating interdisciplinary assessment teams, and educating the school community.

Establish District-Wide Policies and Procedures

All threats of violence must be taken seriously and investigated, so it is important to have a specific policy and established procedures for dealing with student threats. The policy should clarify the role of educators in relation to that of law enforcement, identify the threat assessment team, and specify the team's training requirements.

Create an Interdisciplinary Assessment Team

Effective threat assessment is based on the combined efforts of a school-based team including representatives from administration, mental health, and law enforcement. In unusually complex cases, the team might draw upon professionals in the local community. The interdisciplinary team approach improves the efficiency and scope of the assessment process and reduces the risk of observer bias.

Educate the School Community About Threat Assessment

Successful implementation of a threat assessment approach hinges on educating the entire school community about the importance of a positive school climate that focuses on providing help for students before problems escalate into violence. Schools should regularly assess their climate, with particular emphasis on students' trust in adults and willingness to seek help for problems and concerns. All members of the community, especially students, must understand the distinction between seeking help to prevent violence and "snitching," or informing on someone for personal gain. Written materials should be publicly available and specific efforts should be made to explain relevant aspects of the threat assessment policy to staff members, students, and families.

TYPES OF THREATS

A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something. It may be spoken, written, or symbolic. Many students who make a threat will never carry it out. Conversely, others who pose a real danger may not make an explicit threat. Threats may be communicated to the intended victim or related to a third party. There are a number of different types of threats:

- *Direct threats* indicate a specific act against a specific target delivered in a straightforward, clear, and explicit manner.
- *Indirect threats* tend to be vague, unclear, and ambiguous. Violence is implied, but threat is phrased tentatively and suggests that a violent act *could* occur, not that it *will* occur.
- *Veiled threats* strongly imply but do not explicitly threaten violence.
- *Conditional threats* are often seen in extortion cases, with a warning that a violent act will happen unless certain demands or terms are met.

CONDUCT AN INDIVIDUALIZED ASSESSMENT OF EACH THREAT

Threat assessment is most properly concerned with risk reduction and prevention efforts rather than statements of prediction.

Considering Risk for Violence

There is no easy formula or profile of risk factors that accurately determines whether a student is going to commit a violent act such as a school shooting. Most students who display multiple risk factors will never become violent offenders, and some who pose a real threat will not demonstrate a prescribed level of risk. The use of profiling (i.e., ranking a student's behaviors and risk factors against a set of criteria) strongly increases the likelihood of *misidentifying* students who are thought to pose a threat. Moreover, the process focuses solely on identification, not intervention, and fails to provide the necessary help to troubled students.

In considering the risk of violence, teams should consider the following: (a) Is the student responsive to efforts to resolve the problem or conflict that precipitated the threatening behavior? and (b) Has the student engaged in behavior that indicates intent and capability to carry out the threat?

The assessment process should incorporate referrals to appropriate mental health and social services, as well as a system for following up on the effectiveness of the intervention. In addition, it is essential for threat assessment teams to be aware that homicide and suicide are correlated with each other. The assessment of suicide risk should be included in appropriate cases.

Roles for School Psychologists

An appropriate role for a school psychologist on a threat assessment team is to evaluate the student's need for educational and psychological services, seek information that helps the team understand the student's motives and reasons for making a threat, and make recommendations focused on meeting the student's needs and

resolving the problem or issue that stimulated the threatening behavior.

Virginia Model

The Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment is a set of guidelines for school administrators to use in responding to a reported student threat of violence. School authorities navigate through a decision tree process of investigation and efforts to resolve the conflict or problem that precipitated the threat (see Appendix). The reader is referred to Cornell and Sheras (2005) for more information about the model.

THREAT MANAGEMENT

Once the initial assessment has taken place, the team must be prepared to act expeditiously based on the imminence of danger.

Options for Intervention

Some interventions might need to be staged immediately (e.g., bringing the student in question under adult supervision) while others require long-term planning and monitoring (e.g., conflict resolution efforts). The team must consider whether the student can stay in school, what alternatives may be needed, how and when to notify families, if and when to involve law enforcement, and what mental health, social service, and school-based interventions are required to reduce the student's risk for violence. In cases where a criminal offense has been committed, law enforcement may choose to conduct a criminal investigation and pursue legal action against the presumed offender or offenders. In these cases, the team may need to distinguish its actions from those of law enforcement.

Threat Management Plan

If the school determines that an individual poses a threat of violence, a plan should be developed that involves individual management, monitoring, and support. Three functions of threat management are: (a) controlling and/or containing the situation to prevent a possible attack, (b) protecting potential targets of the threat, and (c) providing support and guidance to aid the student who is at risk for violence in dealing with his or her problems in an appropriate and adaptive manner.

SUMMARY

A comprehensive interventions-based approach can reduce the risk to both potential victims and perpetrators. Threat assessment must be an integral part of a system that fosters a safe, supportive, and effective school environment, characterized by trust between students and adults, respect for others, parent involvement, and collaboration between school and community.

REFERENCE

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

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24, 119-129.

Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., et al. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 527-546.

Fein, R. A., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W. S., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. Available: http://www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

Jimerson, S. R., & Brock, S. E. (2004). Threat assessment, school crisis preparation, and school crisis response. In M. J. Furlong, M. P. Bates, D. C. Smith, & P. M. Kingery (Eds.), *Appraisal and prediction of school violence: Context, issues, and methods*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.

Online

National Association of School Psychologists, *Crisis and safety resources*: <http://www.nasponline.org/educators/index.aspx#crisis>

O'Toole, M. E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective* (Critical Incident Response Group Report). Quantico, VA: Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available: <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>

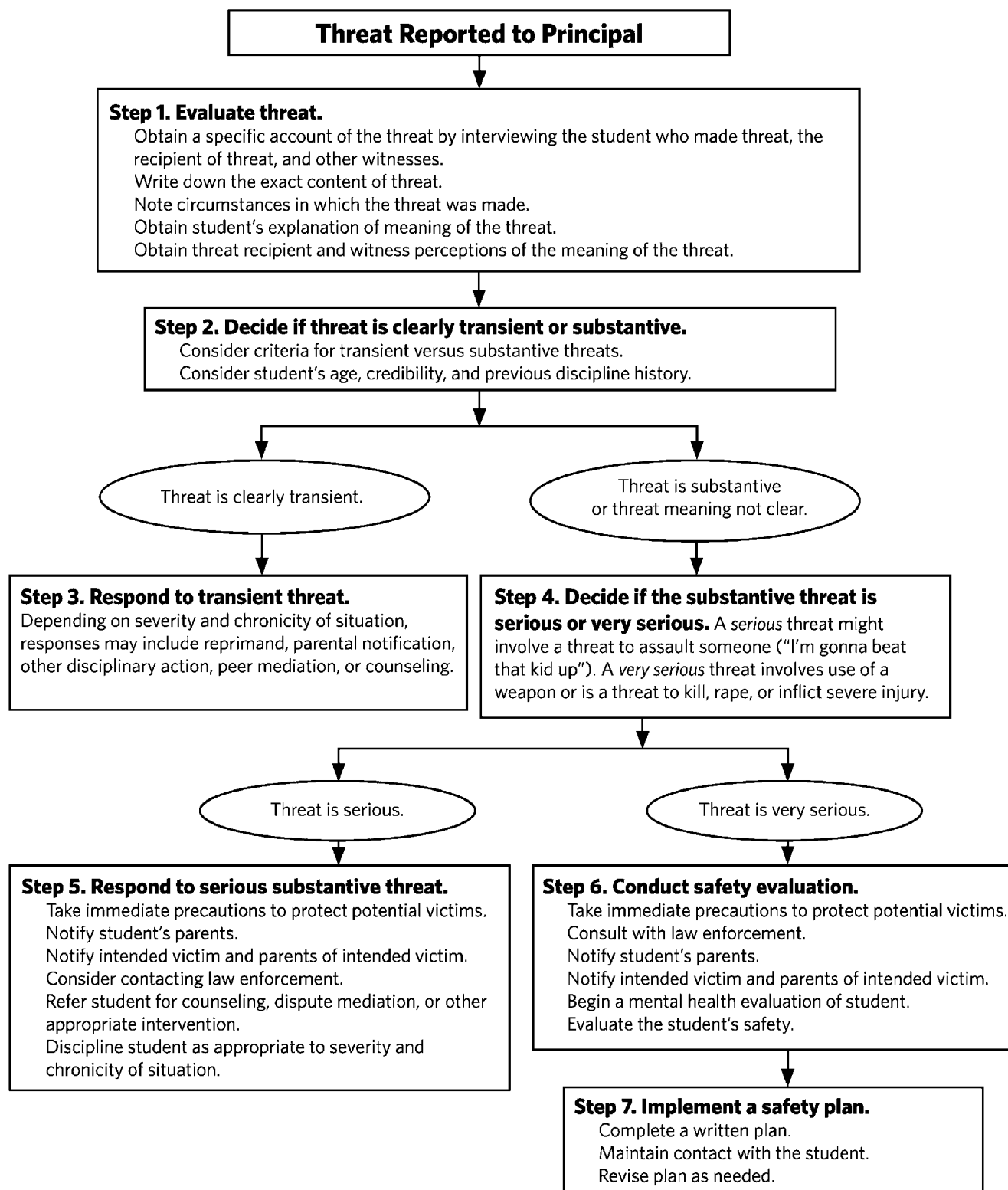
U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center: http://www.ustreas.gov/usss/ntac_ssi.shtml

Virginia Youth Violence Project: <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

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Appendix. The Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment



Note. From *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence*, by D. Cornell and P. Sheras, 2005, Longmont, CO: Sopris West. Copyright 2005 by Sopris West Educational Services. Reprinted with permission.