



Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

FS-SC18

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Steps to Conducting a School Threat Assessment

Threat assessment was first pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service as a mechanism for investigating threats against the president of the United States and other protected officials. Based upon findings from the *Safe School Initiative*, the Secret Service and the Department of Education created a modification of that threat assessment process for use by school personnel, law enforcement officials and others to prevent targeted school violence. The following are steps to conducting a school threat assessment on an individual student.

Identifying Students of Concern

1. Circumstances that bring a student to official attention
 - Engaging in communications that cause concern
 - Causing concern to second or third parties
 - Using anonymous communications such as tip lines, letters or calls
2. Management of communications about students of concern
 - Establishing low barriers for reporting on information of concern
 - Advising students and adults of the kinds of information that should be brought forward
 - Ensuring that a thoughtful process is in place to assess information brought forward about a potential attacker
 - Recognizing that what is reported may often be different than what actually was said or occurred
 - Establishing and reinforcing a policy that it is everyone's responsibility to help develop and maintain a respectful, safe school environment
 - Reinforcing positive behaviors by teachers, students and staff
 - Building linkages to others who can offer support and assistance to students and the school

Creating a Central Point of Contact

The threat assessment team should designate a member of the team to serve as the initial point of contact. This person should screen information and determine whether to initiate a threat assessment inquiry or consult other members of the team. Individuals who provide information should receive a follow-up acknowledgment.

Information Needed in a Threat Assessment Inquiry

1. The facts that drew attention to the student, the situation, and the targets
Individuals who report information about possible threatening situations may have multiple motives. Alleged accounts of behaviors may be inaccurate and may be subjective interpretations of events. Careful attention to the facts, with corroboration wherever possible, will help determine whether the situation warrants scrutiny.
2. Identifying information and information about the student's background and current life situation
Of particular note is whether the student has a trusting relationship with an adult who may have useful information about the student's thinking and behavior and may be able to help.
3. Information about "attack-related" behaviors such as:
 - ideas or plans about injuring him/herself or attacking a school or persons at school;
 - communications or writings that suggest the student has an unusual or worrisome interest in school attacks;
 - comments that express or imply the student is considering mounting an attack at school;

- recent weapon-seeking behavior, especially if linked to ideas about an attack;
 - communications suggesting the student condones or is considering violence;
 - rehearsals of attacks or ambushes.
3. Information about a student's motive
 4. Target selection and how interest in a target may shift over time

Sources of Information

1. School (records, teacher interviews, and other information that can be easily accessed)
2. Collateral school interviews (students and adults who know or have observed the student)
3. Parent/Guardian interviews
4. The student of concern
5. The potential target

Organization and Analysis of Information Gathered

Evaluation of information gathered from research and interviews should be guided by the following key questions:

1. What are the student's motive(s) and goals?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
3. Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in school attacks, weapons, or incidents of mass violence?
4. Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors?
5. Does the student have the *capacity* to carry out an act of targeted violence?
6. Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair?
7. Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
8. Does the student see violence as an acceptable or desirable way or the only way to solve problems?
9. Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
10. Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?
11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

Possible Outcomes of a Threat Assessment Inquiry

1. There is enough reliable information to be convincing that the student does not pose a threat of targeted school violence and that the team may conclude the inquiry.
2. The team may determine that closure of the inquiry is warranted but conclude that the student or previously suggested targets need help coping with the behavior or problems that initially brought the threatening situation to the attention of authorities. The team should work with school administrators and others to ensure that these individuals receive the assistance and continued support that they might need.
3. If there is insufficient information for the team to be reasonably certain that the student does not pose a threat or the student appears to be on a path to an attack, then the team should recommend that the matter be referred to the appropriate law enforcement agency for a threat assessment investigation.

The Threat Assessment Investigation

The scope of an investigation will be broader than in an inquiry, reaching outside the school and across systems within the community. Investigators may explore a student's prior contacts with civil authorities, criminal and juvenile justice officials and may request permission to search a student's computer, room, home, car, or workspace. They also may consult with professionals who possess special skills and experience in handling situations involving potential targeted violence, such as law enforcement officers, mental health service providers, social workers, physicians, etc. As with a threat assessment inquiry, it is critical that investigators document and keep a record of the information that they gather and evaluate.

References:

United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2004) *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, D.C.