



Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

FS-SC17

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Establishing a School Threat Assessment Process

The primary purpose of a threat assessment is to prevent targeted violence. The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior in a given situation. The appraisal of risk focuses on actions, communications and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to mount an attack and is engaged in planning or preparing for that event. Below is information regarding how to establish a school threat assessment process.

Principles of the threat assessment process:

1. Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior.

Findings of the U.S. Secret Service's *Safe School Initiative* indicate that students and former students who committed targeted attacks at schools almost always thought about their attacks in advance and did not "just snap" suddenly. These findings suggest that students who carry out school attacks may:

- consider possible targets;
- talk with others about their ideas and intentions;
- record their thinking in diaries and journals or on a Web site;
- seek out weapons and practice with them in preparation for an attack;
- plan the attack for days, weeks, months or years.

2. Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, situation, setting, and target.

- Individuals, who in times of great stress have considered or acted upon ideas of suicide or violence toward others, or both, should be considered persons of increased concern.
- Investigators should examine circumstances and significant events in the life of the individual, especially recent events that have been overwhelmingly stressful.
- Messages about the acceptability of violence communicated to a potential attacker by students and/or adults may facilitate, or alternatively help to prevent, an attack.
- The attacker may target a particular person or group over some perceived injury or loss.

3. An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.

- Threat assessment requires thoughtful probing; viewing information with healthy skepticism; and paying attention to key points about pre-attack behaviors.
- Threat assessors should question information continuously; verify all "facts"; and corroborate information about a potential attacker's interests, statements, and actions.
- The investigative mindset also relies on common sense to assure that information gathered makes sense and supports any hypothesis developed about the risk posed.

4. Effective threat assessment is based upon facts rather than on characteristics or "traits."

- Inferences and conclusions about risk should be guided by an analysis of relevant facts, not on "traits" or "characteristics" of a given individual or a class of individuals.
- Blanket characterizations or student "profiles" do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments about threats posed. The use of profiles can shift attention away from more reliable facts and evidence.

5. An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment investigations.

Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school and the surrounding community are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a risk.

6. The central question of a threat assessment is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student made a threat.

The *Safe School Initiative* found that in more than 80 percent of the cases, school shooters did not threaten their targets directly, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the attack. Every threat should receive prompt attention as students may make threats with a variety of intents and for a wide range of reasons.

Elements of an effective school threat assessment program:

1. Authority to conduct an assessment

- A formal policy authorizing school officials to conduct a threat assessment should include:
 - the purpose and scope of the policy;
 - the role of educators and the threat assessment team in relation to the role of law enforcement;
 - the identity of, and delegation of authority to, school officials concerning determination that a threat assessment inquiry should be pursued;
 - the definition of the threshold of concern for initiating a threat assessment inquiry;
 - the description of the types of information that may be gathered;
 - the designation of the individuals or group responsible for gathering and analyzing information; &
 - the steps and procedures to be followed from initiation to conclusion of the threat assessment inquiry.
- Information should be gathered from multiple sources—teachers, parents, friends, guidance counselors, after-school program staff, part-time employers, and others. This information should be stored in an accessible format and kept in a central location.
- Team members should be well-briefed by legal counsel on existing laws and regulations for accessing and disclosing student information. Federal statutes (in particular, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)) and state laws (which vary from state to state) may affect access to and sharing of information about a particular student.

2. Capacity to conduct inquiries and investigations

- School administrators should create a multidisciplinary threat assessment team which should include (1) a respected member of the school faculty or administration; (2) an investigator, such as a school resource officer or other police officer assigned to the school; (3) a mental health professional, such as a forensic, clinical or school psychologist; and (4) other professionals or someone from the school or community who knows the student of concern.
- The qualifications, skills, knowledge and experience of the members of the threat assessment team should include:
 - a questioning, analytical, and skeptical mindset;
 - an ability to relate well to parents, colleagues, other professionals, and students;
 - familiarity with childhood and adolescent growth and development, the school environment, the need for safe schools, and the community;
 - a reputation within the school and the community for fairness and trustworthiness;
 - training in the collection and evaluation of information from multiple sources;
 - discretion, and an appreciation for the importance of keeping information confidential; and
 - cognizance of the difference between harming and helping in an intervention.

3. Systems relationships

A successful threat assessment program must build relationships among individuals and organizations both within and external to the school. Ideally, community systems would have well-established policies and procedures for cooperation and collaboration. Often, they are large and overburdened and tend to carry out their functions independently. In a well-functioning threat assessment program, effective systems relationships are most likely to occur between individuals, not institutions. These individuals serve as an effective formal link or liaison between various systems. Their understanding of other systems helps in integrating ongoing interagency relationships, developing written protocols, and in facilitating the resolution of conflicts.

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.

United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2004) *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. Washington, D.C.