


Best Practices in School Threat Assessment: Building Teams and a Process in Vermont Schools

SIGMA Threat Management Associates



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SESSION AGENDA

- Overview of Targeted School Violence & Prevention
- What is School Threat Assessment?
- Building a School Threat Assessment Program
- School Threat Assessment Process
- Group Exercise
- The Art of Case Management
- Group Exercise
- Information-Sharing and Record Keeping
- Other Things We Can Do
- Summary / Q&A



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COURSE OBJECTIVES


At the conclusion, participants will:

- Understand why school violence prevention is possible
- Be able to identify the four functions of school threat assessment
- Know the elements of an effective school threat assessment program
- Be able to conduct a threat assessment inquiry and develop a case management plan
- Understand how information can be shared in threat cases
- Gain practice working through threat scenarios





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Overview of Targeted School Violence and Prevention




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 *SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE*

Background:

- Largest federal study of school shootings in the US.
- Collaboration between US Secret Service and US Department of Education.
- 37 incidents, 41 attackers
- Focus was on operational information – what could be detectable and usable

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Major research question: Can we prevent these attacks from happening?

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MAJOR FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

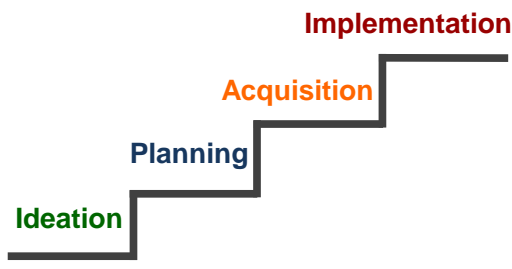
1. School-based attacks are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of Targeted School Violence in the U.S.* (2002).



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PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE



Ideation **Planning** **Acquisition** **Implementation**

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MAJOR FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

2. Prior to the attacks, others usually knew of attacker's idea/plan.

3. Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to the attack.

4. There is no accurate or useful profile of the "school shooter."

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of Targeted School Violence in the U.S.* (2002).



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MAJOR FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

- 5. Most attackers had seriously concerned others in their lives prior to the attack.**
- 6. Most attackers had significant difficulties with losses or failures. Most were suicidal.**
- 7. Many felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.**

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of Targeted School Violence in the U.S.* (2002).

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MAJOR FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

- 8. Most attackers had access to weapons – and has used weapons -- prior to the attack.**
- 9. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.**
- 10. Despite prompt law enforcement response, most incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.**

Most were very brief in duration.

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of Targeted School Violence in the U.S.* (2002).

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION

- Incidents of school violence can be prevented.
- Information about a student’s ideas and plans for violence can be observed or discovered before harm can occur.
- But information available is likely to be scattered and fragmented.
- Key is to act quickly upon an initial report of concern, gather other pieces of the puzzle, then assemble to see what picture emerges.


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IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION

- Threat assessment involves asking: Is this student on a pathway toward violence?
- Using a team can be particularly effective for gathering and evaluating information, and intervening if necessary.
- Threat assessment and case management is not an adversarial process. Engagement with a person of concern can be critical to preventing violence or harm.

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What is School Threat Assessment?

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WHAT IS SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT?

A systematic process that is designed to:

- 1 Identify students of concern
- 2 Gather information/investigate
- 3 Assess student and situation
- 4 Manage the student / situation

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THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Threat assessment is fact-based and deductive:

Facts **Conclusions** **Strategies**

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**Building a School / District
Threat Assessment Program**

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THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- Threat Assessment Team
 - School-based team and/or
 - District-level team / Supervisory Union – level team
- Administration support
- Basic procedures and necessary policies
- Threat assessment training
- Legal counsel input on information-sharing
- Support resources (school, region, state)

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THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM

Team composition (school level or district level):

- Multi-disciplinary (within/outside school)
- Include SRO / Local law enforcement
- Include mental health consultant / expertise
- Ad hoc members when needed
- Link with other organizations with student contact


Multi-disciplinary composition enhances team's ability to:

- Identify
- Gather
- Assess
- Manage

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SKILLS OF EFFECTIVE TEAM MEMBERS

- Passionate about the goals of the team
- Familiar with threat assessment principles and practices
- Demonstrates an inquisitive, skeptical mindset
- Exercises good sense of judgment, objectivity, and thoroughness
- Effectively facilitates team discussion
- Advocates for necessary resources
- Relates well with others

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WORKING WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

- Identify and list local resources (school-based, community-based)
- Establish liaisons with resources and secure access (including after-hours)
- Develop relationships with other districts / supervisory unions
- Identify state-level resources
- Identify virtually-accessible subject matter expertise

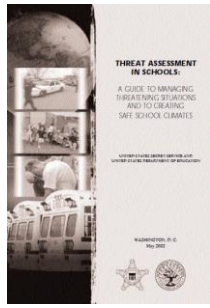
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ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS

- Table-top exercises
- Database or other record-keeping
- Reporting procedures/mechanisms
- General awareness training
- Communications with parents and community
- Community partnerships

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Steps in the School Threat Assessment Process




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SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Steps in the School Threat Assessment Process:

1. Learn about a student of possible concern.
2. Gather information about the student and his/her situation.
3. Use information to answer 11 Key Questions.
4. Make evaluation / assessment
5. Develop and implement case management plan


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1. LEARN ABOUT A STUDENT OF CONCERN

May happen through a variety of means:

- Teacher
- Anonymous tip line
- Student
- Parent
- Law enforcement

- Where do you get the most referrals? The least?
- Identify areas where additional liaison may be needed
 - After-school programs
 - Weekend sports teams
 - Parents
 - Employers


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2. GATHER INFORMATION

Seek out information from multiple sources about the student and his/her situation:


Who might have information?

- Teachers / Administrators
- School Staff
- Coach / Employer
- Parents
- Social media sites / Internet
- Local law enforcement
- After-school / weekend programs
- Community-level entities
- Student of concern
- Others?

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2. GATHER INFORMATION

- Recognize that violence is a dynamic process. It stems from interaction between the student, their situation, and their setting.
- Avoid reliance on single factors.
- Utilize multiple collateral data sources
 - Credible
 - First-hand knowledge
 - Evaluate and minimize impact of bias
- Anticipate and assess impact of the investigative process on the student and his/her situation.

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3. ANSWER ELEVEN KEY QUESTIONS

1. What are the student's motive(s) and goals? / What first brought him/her to someone's attention?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
3. Has the student shown any inappropriate interest in school attacks/attackers, weapons, incidents of mass violence?

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* (2002).

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3. ANSWER ELEVEN KEY QUESTIONS

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?

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* (2002).

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3. ANSWER ELEVEN KEY QUESTIONS

7. Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
8. Does the student see violence as an acceptable, desirable – or the only – way to solve a problem?
9. Are the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* (2002).

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3. ANSWER ELEVEN KEY QUESTIONS

10. Are other people concerned about the student’s potential for violence?

11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood the student will engage in violence / resort to violence?

Source: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* (2002).

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4. MAKE EVALUATION / ASSESSMENT

- Focus on facts of specific case.
- Focus on the student’s behavior rather than the student’s traits.
- Focus on understanding of context of behavior.
- Examine progression of behavior over time.
- Corroborate critical information.

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4. MAKE EVALUATION / ASSESSMENT

Answer two assessment questions:


1. Does the student pose a threat of harm, whether to himself, to others, or both? That is, does the student’s behavior suggest that he or she is on a pathway toward harm?
 - *If YES, then develop and implement a case management plan.*
 - *If NO, proceed to second question:*

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4. MAKE EVALUATION / ASSESSMENT

Answer two assessment questions:

- If the student does not pose a threat of violence, does the student otherwise show a need for help or intervention, such a mental health care?
 - If YES, then develop and implement a referral and monitoring plan.
 - If NO, the case can be closed.

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Group Exercise

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5. DEVELOP A CASE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Develop an individualized plan based on information gathered in the investigation and other facts known about the student.

- Case management is more art than science.
- Plan must be fact-based and student-specific.
- Engagement is essential, even when dealing with someone who is very angry.
- Distancing makes monitoring and intervention more difficult.
- Personalities involved matter.

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CASE MANAGEMENT

- **Use the concept of “crew resource management”^{1*}:**
 - Team leader may make ultimate decision, but everyone is obligated to share opinions and raise concerns and ideas.
 - Focus on what still works – for the student and their situation.
 - Focus on what the team, or school/district, can change or fix.
 - Think creatively about resources, as well as “eyes and ears.”
- **Anticipate what might change in the short- and mid-term, and how the student may react.**
- **Monitor using available resources. Who sees the student regularly, inside school, outside, on weekends, online, etc.?**
- **Document decision-making, implementation, and progress.**

* Source: NASA and major airlines

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CASE MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

Try to involve someone whom the student trusts:

- Team member
- Teacher
- Academic advisor
- School counselor
- School nurse
- Parent / family member
- Coach
- Outside counselor
- Pastor
- Other


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CASE MANAGEMENT


A case management plan can include any of the following, and others:

- Outpatient counseling/mental health care.
- Emergency psychiatric evaluation
- Mentoring relationship
- Academic accommodations
- Suspension/expulsion
- Alternative schooling/home schooling
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities
- Social skills training
- Behavioral contract
- Parental involvement
- Law enforcement involvement
- Diversion programs
- Management by walking around/alliance
- Others?

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Group Exercise




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**Information-Sharing
and
Record Keeping**



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LEGAL ISSUES IN THREAT ASSESSMENT


- State-specific legal issues
- FERPA applicability
- Confidentiality of medical / mental health records and provider communications
- Record-keeping considerations



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INFORMATION SHARING: FERPA

- FERPA should not be an impediment to effective threat assessment and case management.
- FERPA governs records only, not observations, communications, etc.
- FERPA does not govern police records (for police/investigative purpose).
- New guidance from ED encourages information sharing where public safety is a concern (document rationale).
- FERPA does not permit a private right of action.

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INFORMATION SHARING: HIPAA

- Confidentiality is held by patient, not mental health provider.
- In cases where HIPAA applies, can try these strategies:
 - No legal prohibition against providing information to health/MH professionals.
 - Can inquire about *Tarasoff* - type duty.
 - Can ask student/parent for permission to disclose.

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RECORD KEEPING

- Check with legal counsel
- Incident tracking database
- Range of documentation options
- Document steps taken, process followed
- Document answers to 11 Key Questions, assessment, management plan, progress

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Other Things We Can Do

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ENCOURAGING REPORTING

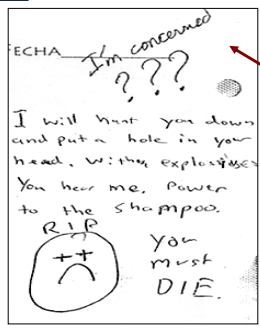
- Bystanders can play a critical role in prevention
- Role of threat assessment team is not punitive
- Goals are to maintain safety and connect person with necessary help
- Earlier reporting allows greater range of options
- Reporting allows something to be done

"If you see something, say something."

Source: NYC Metropolitan Transportation Authority

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NEED FOR TIMELY REPORTING




From Kip Kinkel's Spanish homework.
Note comment by teacher at top.

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GUIDANCE ON REPORTING

What can be reported:

- Any concerns about potential violence
- Threats
- Any concerns about potential suicide/self-harm
- Behavior that disrupts the learning or living environment
- Behavior that seems troubling or disturbing
- Anyone unknown to the school
- Anything out of the ordinary

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ENHANCING SCHOOL CLIMATE


Assess and enhance school climate:

- Surveys for faculty, staff, students, parents, others
- Data-driven enhancements
- Student input for solutions and implementation


Connection with all students:


- Powerful protective factor
- Low-cost or no-cost options

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Summary / Q&A

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 **SUMMARY**



- Prevention is possible.
- Threat assessment teams can identify and help address a broad array of problematic behavior.
- A multi-disciplinary team, liaison relationships, and a positive climate can facilitate the overall process.
- Periodic training and/or process review are critical to effective threat assessment.
- Consult, consult, consult!

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Report and Guide available for download at: www.SigmaTMA.com

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