

School-Based Threat Assessment: Best Practices and Resources



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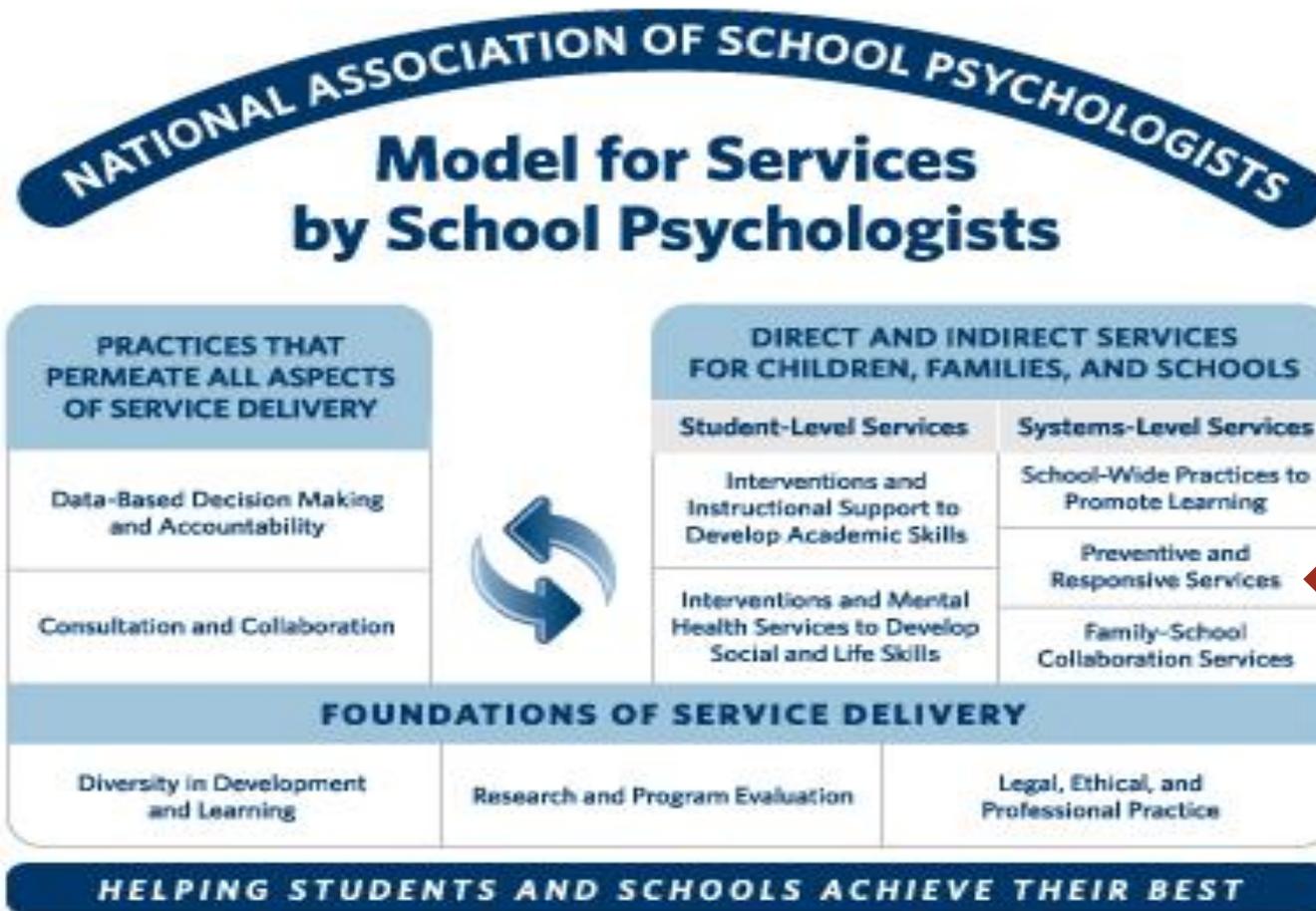
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Workshop Objectives

1. Increase participant awareness of a school-based threat assessment process and how it fits within a comprehensive approach of school safety
2. Enhance participant knowledge of processes and models of school-based threat assessment
3. Augment participant school-based threat assessment skills
4. Provide resources for continued learning

NASP Practice Model



Key Concepts



Getting on the Same Page

How are we defining a “threat?”

- “Any expression of intent to harm someone”

(Cornell & Sheras, 2006)



- Communication of a threat varies. May be:
 - Directly spoken, in person
 - Written
 - Electronically
 - Through a 3rd party
 - Through behavior (e.g., carrying a weapon)
 - Specific (“I’m going to kill you!”)
 - Veiled (e.g., “Watch your back!”)

What is ‘Threat Assessment?’

“Threat assessment is a specialized form of risk assessment that is conducted when an individual threatens to commit a violent act or engages in threatening behavior.”
(Cornell, 2014, p. 259)



Dewey Cornell, Univ. of Virginia

Threat assessment cornerstones

- ❑ Focuses on actions, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest an intent and means to commit a violent act
- ❑ Based on facts, rather than characteristics or traits
- ❑ Ultimately concerned if a student poses a threat, not whether a student made a threat
- ❑ **IMPORTANT:** Includes developing an intervention plan (emphasis is not on delivering punishment, primarily)
- ❑ **More on all of this later...**

Why do threats happen?

“Students usually make threats when they are frustrated and face a problem or situation they cannot resolve.”

(Cornell, 2014)

60 Second Pair & Share:

Why is this point important?

Transient vs. Substantive Threats

- ❑ **THREATS** of violence are relatively common. In many cases, threats are transient (i.e., no real intent or means).
- ❑ **ACTUAL** violence in schools is somewhat rare.
- ❑ Systematic threat assessment helps teams decide if threats are likely to be transient or substantive. It is a helpful alternative to “zero tolerance” and exclusionary policies (e.g., expulsion).



The Big Picture

Where does threat assessment fit in schools?



**Comprehensive School Safety
and Crisis Response Services**

Five Missions of Crisis Management

1. Prevention
2. Protection
3. Mitigation
4. Response
5. Recovery



Preventing Violence & Threats of Violence: Creating a Climate of School Safety

- **Empower students by involving them**
 - Especially important for adolescents
 - Teach difference between “snitching” and seeking help
 - Students more likely to report threats when the system is not punitive/zero tolerance.

- **Ensure caring-adult connections**
 - Relationships are a powerful protective factor
 - Connections can easily be assessed
 1. Alpha List of student body
 2. Staff place checks on list after names of students to whom they feel “connected”
 3. Emphasize relationships with those who are not checked

Video: The Path to Violence

Crisis/Violence Prevention Systems are a Good Start...



...but we must prepare for
threats we do not prevent

Threat Assessment Team

- Trained Multi-disciplinary Threat Assessment Team
 - A TEAM process – **Must include a minimum of 3 professionals!**
 - Administrator
 - School-based mental health professional (e.g., school psychologist, counselor, social worker)
 - School Resource Officer or other Law Enforcement (if moderate to serious risk of violence is suspected)
 - Other potential members: Teacher, coach, nurse, SPED
 - The team can expand and contract as needed
 - Risk level is a team decision!

Leading a Threat Assessment Team



ALWAYS have 1-2 backup team leaders identified

- The principal is one option
- A school-based mental health professional is also a good option
 - ▣ Skilled interviewer
 - ▣ Counseling skills
 - ▣ Intervention focus
- The team leader...
 - ▣ Receives initial threats/concerns and activates the threat assessment process
 - ▣ Coordinates the process and ensures a collaborative process

What's in a Name?

- ❑ "Threat assessment team"
- ❑ "Conflict resolution team"
- ❑ "Student assistance team"
- ❑ "Intervention assistance team"
- ❑ "Leadership council"
- ❑ Other?

Critical Data



The Good News...Schools are Relatively Safe!

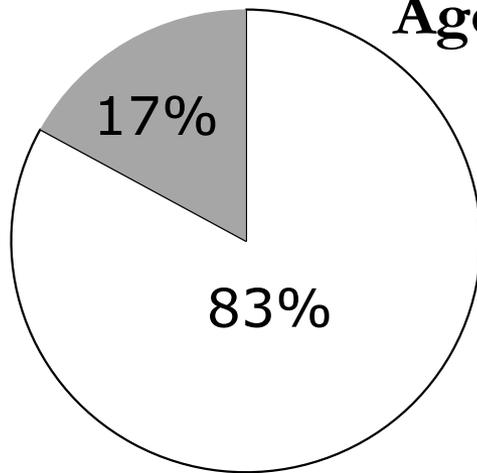
□ Homicides at School

- Less than 1% of student homicides take place at school, on the way to or from school, or at a school- sponsored event.
- During the 09/10 school year, the odds of a student (age 5-18) being the victim of a school-associated homicide was **one in 4.5 million**.
 - Odds of a youth death in a motor vehicle accident?
 - About 1 in 16,000, annually.
 - Odds of suicide in young people?
 - About 1 in 10,000, annually.
- Schools are getting safer!
 - 1992/93 to 2000/01 there were a total of 246 school associated student homicides (nine year average of 27 deaths per year)
 - 2001/02 to 2009/10 there were a total of 187 school associated student homicides (nine year average of 21 deaths per year)

SOURCE: Brock, S. E., Nickerson A., & Serwacki, M. (2013, February).

School-Associated Violent Acts

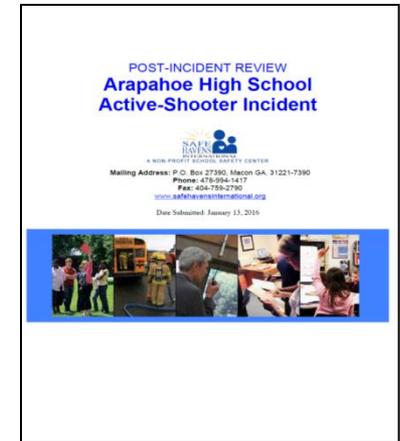
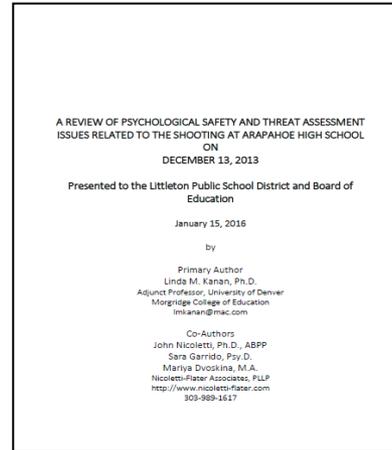
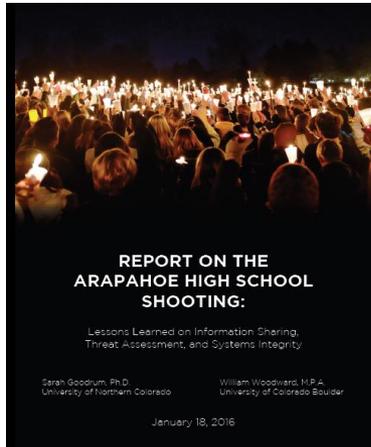
Serious Violent Crimes
(rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault)
Against Students
Ages 15 to 18



□ Away from School ■ At School

17% are school associated

ARAPAHOE HIGH SCHOOL- Post Incident Reports



<http://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/AHS-reports/CSPV.AHSFullReport.pdf>

<http://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/AHS-reports/LINDAKANAN.AHSFINALREPORT.pdf>

<http://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/AHS-reports/TotheSSYICCommittee1.27.16.pdf>

<http://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/AHS-reports/SafeHavensInstitute.AHSPost-IncidentReview.pdf>

Post-Incident Reports: What Have We Learned?

□ **Activity:**

- See handout of key take-away points from the post-incident reports [e.g., Arapahoe High School (CO) and Sandy Hook Elementary (CT)].
- **Pair & Share (5 minutes).** What do you see on the list that is already present and strong in your school? What needs improvement or development?

Threat Assessment



Awareness of Associated Laws
and Lessons Learned
from Legal Cases

Critical Threat Assessment Legal Issues



- A. FERPA exception
- B. Duty to warn
- C. Civil rights and anti-discrimination laws
- D. Foreseeability and Negligence
- E. Professional Immunity
- F. 1st Amendment (Free Speech)
- G. 4th Amendment (Search & Seizure)
- H. 14th Amendment (Due Process)

SEE APPENDIXES FOR DETAILS

Okay, so what really needs to happen in a good school-based threat assessment system?



Threat Assessment Best Practice Strategies

First, Recognize What is NOT Effective



- Profiling
- A lot of the general characteristics of students who make threats is too common to make it useful for accurate prediction:
 - White males
 - Preoccupations with violent movies, video games
 - Problematic family relationships
 - Many are victims of bullying

Profiling Problems

- Significant risk factor variation...
 - Attackers differ from one another in terms of academic achievement
 - Attackers vary in the types of social relationships they have
 - Histories of disciplinary problems at school vary
 - Most attackers show no marked change prior to an attack
 - Most attackers have no history of prior violent or criminal behavior

A Specific Example of Profiling Problems...

- In about 2/3 of cases, the perpetrator of school violence felt bullied or harassed and wanted revenge.
 - Data from the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011 (YRBS)* indicate that during the 2010-11 school year, 20.1% of high school students nationally reported having been bullied on school property during the 12 months before the survey
- It is helpful to monitor and assist students who are bullied, IF we know who they are!
- But we may never know many bully victims AND most of those students will never threat anybody.

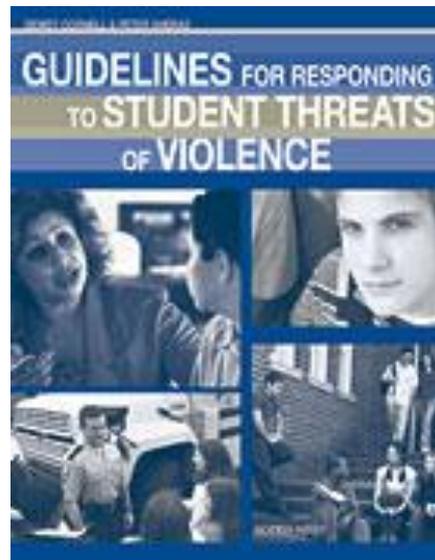
Emphasize
prevention, not
prediction!

Get Familiar with Warning Signs of Violence *

- **Emphasis is on current and specific behaviors or communications:**
 - Suicidal ideation and behaviors
 - Gun use/purchase/possession
 - A need for revenge
 - Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
 - Severe destruction of property
 - Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
 - Detailed threats of lethal violence
 - *"Leakage" – telling friends, warning others, recruiting others, school assignments*
 - *Violent postings on social media sites*

*MAY signal that a youth is considering acting on thoughts of violence

Use an Evidence-Informed System (such as The Virginia Model)



Handout: Flowchart of Model

SOURCE: Cornell, D.G & Sheras, P.L. (2006).

More information:

https://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/Virginia_Model_for_Student_Threat_Assessment_overview_paper_7-16-10.pdf

Threat Assessment

The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student **poses** a threat, not whether the student **made** a threat.



The Virginia Model

□ **Transient Threats:**

- “I’m gonna kill you...” (Ha!Ha!Ha! JK)
- Two students use their finger to shoot each other (at recess while playing cops and robbers)
- “I’m going to mess you up.” (retracts after calms down)

□ **Substantive Threats:**

- “I’m gonna kill you.” (intent to injure is clear)
- “I’m gonna mess you up” (but does not retract)
- “I’ll get you next time.” (does not retract and refuses to problem solve; shows no remorse)

- **If unclear – CONSIDER IT SUBSTANTIVE**

Presumptive Indicators of a Substantive Threat

- ❑ **Details become available about:**
 - Who will be attacked
 - When it will happen
 - How it will be carried out
 - Physical evidence of intent (e.g., a weapon)

- ❑ **Consider totality of all**
 - Use reasoned judgment, not strict “checklist”
 - There is no definite “cut off” or “threshold”



What's the Evidence of Effectiveness for the Virginia Model?

- In a study of 188 high school student threats, when systematic threat assessment was used...
 - About 70% of student threats were deemed transient and were resolved relatively quickly
 - About 30% were substantive, but most of those students returned to school after a brief suspension
 - Only three students were expelled
 - None of the stated threats were carried out

SOURCE: Cornell, Sheras, Kaplan, McConville, Douglass & Elkon, 2004

The Virginia Model: Other Findings

- ❑ Schools with the model:
 - Students had greater willingness to seek out assistance
 - Students had more positive view of staff
 - Reduced suspensions (compared to a control school)
 - More likely to receive counseling and parent conferences (compared to control)
 - Consistent with PBS approach (not just reactive)
 - Less bullying

- ❑ Recognized by the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs & Practices (<https://www.samhsa.gov/nrepp>)

School-Based Threat Assessment



Gathering Data

Interviewing the Student

□ **Focus of a student threat assessment interview**

1. Identify possible stressors
2. Identify thoughts of revenge
3. Identify experiences with/attitudes toward weapons
4. Explore history of/attitudes toward violence
5. Identify signs of depression, helplessness, and/or hopelessness
6. Identify suicidal ideation
7. Identify homicidal ideation
8. Explore motivations for violence
9. Identify additional psychiatric disorders
10. Identify possible helping resources

[Handout: Threat Assessment Questions](#)

SOURCE: Adapted from Borum (2000); Fein et al (2004)

Keep in Mind...

- Intent is usually not a secret
 - About $\frac{3}{4}$ of school shooters communicated their interest in attacking someone
 - Usually to a friend or a classmate

Interviewing Others

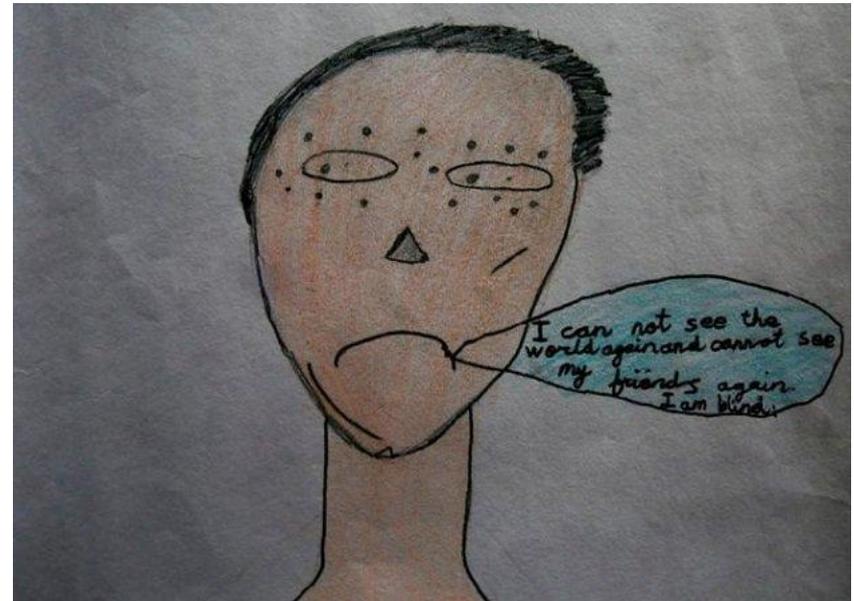
- **Gathering information from friends, family members, staff members**
 1. Sample questions:
 - Has the student at-risk told you of any ideas or plans to commit a violent act against the school?
 - Against any specific person(s)? If so, describe those ideas/plans.
 - Has he or she taken any steps to act on these ideas/plans?
 - How capable do you think he/she is of acting on his/her ideas?
 - How concerned do you think staff and family members should be about the safety of the target(s)?
 - How concerned are you about your safety?
 - It is infrequent (less than 25% of cases) for direct threats to be made to the intended victims.
 - What changes could make an attack less likely?

Other Information to Consider

- Review other known data for the student at-risk:
 - Attendance records
 - Discipline records
 - Language proficiency status
 - School history - interventions or assessments: academic, behavioral, mental health, etc.
 - Comments from teachers
 - History of parent involvement
 - Frequent moves
 - Test and/or evaluation data

Assessing Written or Artistic Material

- ❑ Understand the context of the writing or drawing
- ❑ Think of written and artistic material as attempts to practice violence
- ❑ Look for themes
- ❑ Monitor past & future materials
- ❑ Assess access to or knowledge of weapons
- ❑ Share information with team



School-Based Threat Assessment



**After Gathering Data,
Estimate Level of Threat**

Threat Assessment

Levels of Risk

Low Risk

Vague, indirect threat.

Threat lacks detail, is inconsistent, or implausible.

Threat lacks realism.

Content suggests person is unlikely to carry it out.

Medium Risk

Threat is more direct and more concrete.

Wording suggests some thought as to how act will be carried out.

May be indication of time, place, but no detailed plan.

No strong indication that preparatory steps have been taken. May have general statement about availability of weapons.
May have specific statement to convey threat is not empty.

High Risk

Threat is direct, specific and plausible.

Threat suggests that steps have been taken toward carrying it out.

Statements include acquiring or practicing with weapons.

School-Based Intervention:

Low Risk

If the student's risk is evaluated by the team to be low, then:

- i. Notify parents/family/guardians
- ii. Create an individualized safety plan
- iii. Identify school-based supports
- iv. Coordinate with parents/family/guardians to connect the child and family with community mental health services

School-Based Intervention:

Moderate Risk

If the student's risk is evaluated to be moderate, do the same as low risk, plus:

- i. Determine if distress is the result of parent or caretaker abuse, neglect, or exploitation - if so call child protective services or police
- ii. Meet with the student's parents/family/guardians
- iii. Create a safety plan
 - i. Determine what to do if the parents are unable or unwilling to assist with a suicidal crisis.
- iv. Coordinate with parents/family/guardian and make appropriate referrals
- v. Identify school-based supports- increase frequency of visits with school-based mental health professionals
- vi. Keep regular phone contact with parents/family/guardians and community mental health provider (re-evaluated risk on an ongoing basis)
- vii. Other possible options: Review of medications, family therapy, access to crisis services and hotlines

School-Based Intervention:

Extreme/High Risk

If the student has the means to carry out threatening behavior and/or refuses to relinquish such then follow the Extreme Risk Procedures.

- i. If a weapon is involved:
 - i. immediately call SRO/police.
 - ii. Calm the student by talking and reassuring until the police arrive.
 - iii. Continue to request that the student relinquish the means of the threat and try to prevent the student from harming self/others (if own safety at risk, remove yourself from imminent danger).
 - iv. Call the parents/family/guardians and inform them of the actions taken
- ii. If no weapon but intent and access:
 - i. Arrange with parents/family/guardians, law enforcement, or other professionals to transport student to hospital or outpatient community mental health center

School-Based Threat Assessment



Other Intervention Ideas

Before a Threat Happens:

Violence-Prevention Programming

*Physical **and** psychological safety
are both critical!*

- **Physical Safety**

- Focused on the physical structures of the school environment

- **Psychological Safety**

- Focused on the emotional and behavioral well-being of students and staff

Before a Threat Happens (and Ongoing):

Staff Development and Training

- All school staff members are responsible for recognizing warning signs and knowing the referral procedure to report concerns whenever warning signs are displayed.

- Staff members know all reporting procedures for:
 - Bullying
 - Suicide risk
 - Child abuse & neglect
 - Sexual assault
 - Harassment
 - Violence or danger concerns
 - Substance abuse
 - Cyber/internet/texting concerns

After a Threat Occurs

Inform the Parents/Family/Guardians
of the student making the threat

- ❑ Even when threat is evaluated to be low-risk
- ❑ Call police if parent/guardian refuses to acknowledge
- ❑ Police can take legal custody, protective custody, or custody with an involuntary mental health hold
- ❑ Document phone call/meeting

After a Threat Occurs

Monitoring Measures

- Check-in/Check-out
- Track attendance
- Modify schedules (reduce free, unsupervised time)
- “No contact” agreements
- Community agency involvement
- Communication between staff, parents, and other care givers
- Probation, parole, tracker, ankle monitors
- Fade monitoring as appropriate

Skill Building Activity



Reminders, Challenges, and Limitations



Threat Assessment - Reminders

- **Do no harm**
 - ▣ Consider warning signs as a means to identify the need for interventions, rather than as a punishment tool
- **Avoid stereotypes, labeling, and profiling**
 - ▣ Appearances should direct attention not action
- **View student behavior developmentally**
 - ▣ Developmentally-typical behavior should not be misinterpreted

Threat Assessment – Challenges

- ❑ Drift from team approach can happen, especially when there is staff turnover
- ❑ Avoid making categorical predictions about student dangerousness or “certify” that a student is “safe to return to school.”



Instead, make recommendations for reducing risk.

Threat Assessment - Limitations

- ❑ Not a fool-proof method
- ❑ Is not reliable for incidents of violence motivated by gang involvement, drugs or alcohol, sexual gratification.
- ❑ Doesn't provide predictions of future behavior, placement, or eligibility.

Questions, Comments, Needs for Clarification?



Other Resources

Threat Assessment at School – Brief Facts & Tips:

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/threat-assessment-at-school>

Threat Assessment for School Administrators & Crisis Teams:

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/threat-assessment-at-school/threat-assessment-for-school-administrators-and-crisis-teams>

Secret Service Guide to School-Based Threat Assessment:

<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>

The Virginia Model of Threat Assessment – Overview:

http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/Virginia_Model_for_Student_Threat_Assessment_overview_paper_7-16-10.pdf

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Appendixes



Legal Issues - Details

APPENDIX A

Legal Issue: What is the exception to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974?

- Applies to educational records - New Exception (December 2008): 34 CFR § 99.36
 - May disclose information to appropriate parties without consent when knowledge of information is necessary to protect the health and safety of a student or other individual, if there is a significant and articulable threat to the health and safety of an individual
 - Must be directly related to a threat of actual, impending, or imminent emergency

APPENDIX B

Legal Issue 2: What is “duty to warn?”

- When a student is a danger to self or others there is a duty to warn
 - Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California



APPENDIX C

Legal Issue: Did we violate student civil rights?

Some misconduct can trigger federal antidiscrimination law(s)

- ❑ “School districts **may violate these civil rights statutes and the Department’s implementing regulations** when peer harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability is sufficiently serious that it creates a hostile environment and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees.”

- ❑ Schools must do more than take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment.
 - Must also *“eliminate any hostile environment and its effects, and prevent the harassment from occurring.”*

APPENDIX D

Legal Issue: Can educators foresee threats? What makes us negligent?

- If a child writes or talks in a threatening manner (harm to self and/or harm to others), adults are often able to *foresee* potential safety issues.
- It is *negligent* on the part of the school not to notify parents or guardians or potential victim when students are known to be dangerous
- It is *negligent* not to supervise the student closely
- It is *negligent* not to provide staff training in regards to identification, reporting, intervening/supervision, and parent notification
 - Courts have required schools to produce records of staff training
 - Immunity: school professionals can be sued for failing to protect students even if district has been found to have immunity from such a lawsuit

APPENDIX E

Legal Issue: Do we have professional immunity?

(Colorado Senate Bill 15-213 - Claire Davis School Safety Act)

- Allows school districts and charters to be held liable if they fail to exercise reasonable care in protecting students, faculty or staff from reasonably foreseeable acts of violence that occur within school facilities and during school-sponsored activities.

June 3, 2015

APPENDIX F

Legal Issue: How do the 1st and 4th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution play a role?

- **1st Amendment: Freedom of speech**
 - **Not entitled to protection:**
 - Fighting words, obscenity, and defamation
 - Student speech that causes substantial disruption or material interference with school activities or invades rights of others

- **4th Amendment: Unreasonable Search and Seizure**
 - Reasonable suspicion
 - Scope of search reasonably related to objective and not excessively intrusive

APPENDIX G

Legal Issue: Free speech or not?

Biom v Fulton County SD (July 31, 2007):

Georgia school district did not violate student's right to free speech when it suspended her for writing a narrative about shooting her math teacher; also not entitled to expunge incident from her school records

Wisniewski v. Bd. of Educ. of Weedsport Cent. SD (July 5, 2007):

Upheld suspension of a student who created an instant message (IM) icon depicting his teacher being shot

Francisco T. vs. the People, CA Solano County (Super. Ct. No. J41032, Nov 2011)

Student had no First Amendment defense to making threats to a teacher and principal; a true-threat analysis consists of more than just the actual language spoken; threat analysis focuses heavily on context; any threatening gestures, physical behavior and other aggressive action will be factored into the equation in court

APPENDIX H

Legal Issue: How does the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution play a role?

- ***14th Amendment: Due Process and Equal Protection***
 - Action must be related to school's interest in protecting students or maintaining order in school
 - Failure to adopt and implement adequate safety measures can be grounds for tort claim (i.e., negligence claim for failure to intervene) in event of school violence

APPENDIX I

Legal Issue: What are some cases involving due process and Search and seizure?

Pace v. Talley (Nov. 21, 2006):

Louisiana high school did not violate a student's constitutional rights by reporting the alleged threat of school violence to law enforcement without first affording the student an opportunity to respond to the accusation (did not violate confidentiality)

Shuman v. Penn Manor SD (Sept 7, 2005):

School did not violate student's 4th Amendment protections against search and seizure when it detained him in a conference room for several hours while it investigated sexual misconduct

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