

KEEPING OUR STUDENTS SAFE—A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

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With the seemingly ever-increasing propensity for America's youth to resort to violence to resolve conflict—real or imagined—school administrators are collectively searching for guidance in preventing violence before it occurs. In response, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) recently release [a valuable guide](#) to assist school administrators in reducing the prevalence of targeted violence within their schools.

Although there is no typical “profile” of a student attacker, there are certain behaviors and environmental factors that can be used to identify students at risk of engaging in acts of violence at school. Assessing a student's risk of committing acts of violence requires teachers and administrators to look beyond the student's personality or academic performance to focus on actual communication and behaviors of the student. When viewed in conjunction with a student's ongoing life experiences and the availability or lack of resources to assist in overcoming setbacks or challenges, schools can create a real opportunity to identify at risk students and decrease the risk of those students engaging in harm to themselves or the school community.

The 32-page NTAC guidance—entitled “[Enhancing School Safety Using A Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence](#)”—provides a pragmatic and detailed eight-step threat assessment and violence prevention plan. Its aim is to help school stakeholders identify students of concern, assess the risk of that student engaging in violent or destructive acts, and come up with intervention strategies for mitigating that risk. The eight steps are summarized as follows:

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Step 1: Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team. The team should receive reports about students or events of concern, gather additional information about the individuals involved, assess the level of risk to the school community, and develop strategies to mitigate any such risk. Members of the team should include a diverse collection of teachers, staff, administrators, coaches, school nurses, and other stakeholders within the school environment. The team should be responsible for establishing its own procedures and protocols to carry out its responsibilities.

Step 2: Define prohibited and concerning behaviors. You should have policies that clearly define behaviors and conduct that are unacceptable in the school environment. These behaviors might include bringing weapons to school, engaging in physical violence, or bullying. Such policies should also describe behaviors that may not necessarily be prohibited but are nonetheless indicative of students under stress, including excessive absenteeism, isolation from peers, drug or alcohol use, or a sudden decline in academic performance. These actions may warrant some level of school intervention.

Step 3: Create a central reporting mechanism. Students and other stakeholders need to have a readily available reporting channel to express concerns about student behavior. The reporting process should include some avenue for anonymous reporting to encourage students to speak up without fear of reprisal. A member of the threat assessment team should be assigned to regularly monitor all incoming reports to ensure an immediate response where there is a safety risk to the student or others.

Step 4: Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention. While most reports can be handled effectively by school personnel, reports that pose an imminent threat of harm require immediate involvement of law enforcement. If there is a school resource officer on the threat assessment team, responsibility for determining the level of law enforcement involvement should rest with that team member. Otherwise, your school should establish a clear threshold for identifying situations that require immediate law enforcement involvement.

Step 5: Establish assessment procedures. The threat assessment team should establish a clearly defined protocol for gathering, evaluating, and documenting information needed to assess the situation. Information about the

student should be obtained from a number of sources both inside and outside the school environment. The information-gathering process should be organized around answering certain questions about the student: motivation, accessibility to weapons, a heightened interest in violence, stressors, depression or isolation, and other similar factors. Special attention should be given to social media activity and items found in the student's locker or desk. Information should be evaluated in the context of the particular student's age and social and emotional development.

Step 6: Develop risk management options. Once your threat assessment team has gathered and assessed information about the student, it can develop risk management strategies designed to reduce the likelihood the student will engage in acts of violence and increase the opportunity for a positive outcome. You should remember that simply removing a student from the school does not eliminate the risk of violence to your community. There are numerous examples of students who engaged in school attacks while suspended from school or after they were no longer attending class.

Step 7: Create and promote safe school climates. It is imperative to create an environment focused on a culture of safety, respect, and trust so that students will feel empowered to come forward and share their concerns with adults. This is accomplished by helping students feel more connected to their classmates, teachers, and the school in general. Social interaction and community involvement are crucial in creating a climate where students can readily identify a trusted adult with whom they can share their concerns.

Step 8: Conduct training for all stakeholders. The final piece to complete a comprehensive and effective violence prevention plan is to ensure all stakeholders—teachers, staff, administrators, students, parents, and local law enforcement—are adequately trained in the threat assessment process and the role they play in keeping your school environment as safe as possible. Working together as a team, the community can significantly reduce the risk of a violent attack at your school.

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