School Threat Assessment TOOLKIT

Section 1
How to Select and Train Your School Threat Assessment Team
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Readiness for School Threat Assessment 19
Steps for Establishing School-Based Threat Assessment 19
Team Membership 21
Training 23
Questions to Ask When Selecting a Training Program 26
How Training Should Be Evaluated 27
Education of School Community Members 27
Research on School Threat Assessment Training 28
Free Online Educational Programs 28

Implementation Tools

- Checklist for establishing school-based threat assessment
- Questions to ask when selecting a training program

SECTION 1 OBJECTIVE

Threat assessment can be one part of a comprehensive school safety plan. This section addresses what schools need to consider in deciding to use a threat assessment approach in an equitable way that protects student rights. This includes a review of existing safety practices and discipline policies, examination of staff resources, and administrative and school community support for threat assessment.

SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

This toolkit is authored by University of Virginia professors Dewey Cornell and Jennifer Maeng, with input from school safety leaders, experts, government agencies, and the National Center for School Safety.

To access all three sections of the toolkit, as well as the introduction and appendices, visit our website at nc2s.org or visit the toolkit's web page directly.

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Readiness for School Threat Assessment

Implementation of a threat assessment program requires a clear commitment and active leadership from a school system’s central administration. It may be helpful to create a mission statement for the program to guide policy development and implementation. Consider the following items to assess your school system’s initial readiness for a threat assessment program:

- Your central administration supports the use of a threat assessment program.
- Your central administration can identify and allocate sufficient resources to support a threat assessment process, including supporting the identification of 3 or more staff members in each school to serve on teams, providing them with training, and allowing them to allocate work time to manage threat assessment cases and attend team meetings (as needed, but at least monthly).
- Your school system is prepared to allow teams to evaluate the seriousness of a student’s threatening behavior and advise the school administration on disciplinary actions and supports needed, if any are indicated.
- Your central administration will develop and endorse policies guiding the establishment of threat assessment teams as reflected in the sections listed below.

Steps for Establishing School-Based Threat Assessment

The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) of the U.S. Secret Service published their seminal work Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence in 2018, which serves as one possible framework for threat assessment programs. The NTAC identified eight key steps in establishing school-based threat assessment. The eight steps are presented below, augmented with recommendations based on the threat assessment literature and our cadre of experts. A checklist including these steps and relevant recommendations is included in the tools for this section, which be found on the previous page.

1. **Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team**
   
   Establishing a multidisciplinary threat assessment team is a primary step in preparing your school to conduct threat assessments. Team composition may vary depending on the resources and unique needs of school districts. It is recommended that teams include representatives from school administration, mental health (e.g., counselor, psychologist, social worker), and law enforcement, as well as other areas (e.g., special education).

2. **Define prohibited and concerning behaviors**
   
   Before implementing a threat assessment program, your school or school district should have policies defining prohibited behavior requiring immediate intervention, such as bullying and fighting, as well as behaviors that may not be indicative of violence, but merit intervention, such as a marked decline in academic performance or increased absenteeism. School policies should define the kinds of communications or behaviors that warrant referral to the threat assessment team. Communications of intent to harm someone and concerning behaviors such as getting into a physical fight or bringing a lethal weapon to school warrant a threat assessment. Behaviors such as expressing admiration for persons who committed a mass shooting raise concern and merit inquiry that also might lead to a threat assessment.
3. Create a central reporting mechanism
Schools using threat assessment should establish one or more mechanisms for all members of the school community to report threatening or concerning behavior. Reports should be confidential to protect the identity of the reporter. There also may be a provision for anonymous reporting to encourage individuals who would not otherwise make a report.

4. Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention
Most threats can be handled by school personnel. However, schools using threat assessment should establish procedures and policies for involving law enforcement. A national group of experts recommended that there be a school resource officer (SRO) or law enforcement officer on each threat assessment team, especially for secondary schools. In addition, there may be state laws that determine when certain kinds of incidents must be reported to law enforcement. Law enforcement involvement in a threat assessment can range from consultation to direct action, such as investigation and arrest in the most serious cases. Schools can achieve greater collaboration and consistency in threat assessment practices if law enforcement officers are included in training.

5. Establish threat assessment procedures
Teams should have clearly defined procedures to guide their assessments. These procedures should lead teams to form a reasonably accurate understanding of the threat posed by the student or person of concern and to identify appropriate interventions. Having these procedures in place ensures that the threat assessment process can be evaluated to ensure that students’ rights are being protected. Please see Section 2 for a discussion of record-keeping practices.

6. Develop risk management options
Once the team has completed their initial assessment of the student, they should develop risk management strategies that reduce the student's risk of violence rather than attempt to make a prediction of violence. Threat assessment teams should keep in mind that prevention does not require prediction. Teams can identify risk factors and appropriate strategies to reduce risk without making a prediction that labels a student as dangerous or likely to commit a violent act. Often, the most effective way to reduce risk is to address the problem or stressor(s) motivating the threat. Threat management should involve interventions and supports to help the student move on a more positive pathway. Threat assessment teams function more effectively as problem-solvers than fortune-tellers.

7. Create and promote safe school climates
A positive school climate can help prevent violence. A positive climate is characterized by mutual respect and trust and social and emotional support for students. Teachers and staff support diversity and encourage communication between faculty and students. They intervene in conflicts and work to stop bullying and harassment. Students feel comfortable seeking help from adults and share concerns about the well-being of their peers. This is a key piece of comprehensive school safety.
8. **Conduct training for all stakeholders**

As part of the threat assessment program, it is important to educate all stakeholders, including faculty and school staff, students, and parents. Each member of the school community should know about the threat assessment program and their role in reporting concerns and providing information relevant to a threat of violence.

**Team Membership**

This section uses results from the survey of K-12 threat assessment experts and a literature review to examine the roles of school administrators, counselors, law enforcement officers, psychologists, social workers, teachers, and others who might be on a school team. It also includes a discussion of team membership recommendations for various threat assessment models.

There is substantial agreement that threat assessment is best accomplished via a team approach to draw on diverse perspectives and expertise and to facilitate prevention and intervention efforts. Our experts, as well as several models, recommend a minimum of three team members.

- **School administrator** is often a principal or assistant principal who may function as a team leader. This individual may be responsible for student discipline and safety and, in these roles, can coordinate threat assessment and disciplinary actions. The school administrator may be involved in an initial review of the seriousness of the case and bring in additional team members and resources as needed. The leader convenes and chairs regular team meetings.

- **School mental health professionals**, such as counselors, school psychologists, or school social workers, are staff who bring expertise in helping troubled students resolve personal problems and conflicts. They may be involved in an initial interview, as well as an assessment of mental health status and need for services. They may guide long-term follow-up and monitor the student's participation in the intervention plan and assess its effectiveness.

- **Law enforcement** or school security officer is, ideally, a school resource officer trained to work in schools. The officer can advise the team on relevant criminal law, conduct criminal investigations, contribute information from community sources and social media, and provide protective services in the most serious cases. More generally, the officer builds and reinforces positive school relationships.
Note that there is no expectation that teachers serve on a team, although this is an acceptable practice and is required in some states. Teachers are often less involved because they have instructional responsibilities, and threat assessment is regarded as a student support activity. Nevertheless, teachers should be asked to provide information and input in cases involving their students. A school staff member with expertise in special education can be a valuable member of the team, especially when cases involve students with special education needs. Teams will need to coordinate with special education teams or programs serving any student who receives a threat assessment.

Figures 4 and 5 present results from a survey of our K-12 threat assessment experts. The team should have a designated leader and regular membership, although some models allow for a more flexible team composition.

**Figure 4: Who Should Be on a Threat Assessment Team?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin (principal or AP)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRO/LE</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED rep</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities staff</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation staff</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% Responding Position is "Essential"

**Figure 5: Who Should Lead the Threat Assessment Team?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School admin</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School mental health professional</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone outside school</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRO/LE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other school staff</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% Responding Leader is "Preferred"
Team members should train together with clearly defined roles and expectations. The Secret Service identified particular skills and training necessary for team participation, including a questioning mindset, strong interpersonal relationships within the school community, familiarity with child and adolescent growth and development, and discretion and training in information gathering and evaluation.\textsuperscript{9,10}

## Training

High-quality training is essential to the successful implementation of school threat assessment. A comprehensive training program includes specific training for the threat assessment team as well as educational programs for all members of the school community, such as students, parents, and all school staff.\textsuperscript{10} For example, a statewide survey of threat assessment needs in Virginia schools found two primary needs: general education about threat assessment for the larger school community and case management training for team members.

Each member of a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team brings unique expertise and background to the table. However, the literature supports training team members collectively, so they have a common understanding of the threat assessment process.\textsuperscript{9,10,43,45,46} Several studies have demonstrated that threat assessment training can produce similar knowledge gains and shared perspectives among administrative, mental health, and law enforcement disciplines.\textsuperscript{34}
The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that all threat assessment teams have training on how bias and racism would affect perceptions of student behavior and lead to discriminatory judgments or actions. To help assure fair treatment of students with disabilities, there should be training on topics such as common characteristics and behaviors associated with certain disabilities, when and how to make reasonable modifications for students with disabilities, and how disabilities can affect student interactions with others. In addition, threat assessment training should cover student rights and privacy laws (see Section 2 of the toolkit) and how student information should be protected and not used for purposes outside the threat assessment process.

Table 1 presents a list of 37 training topics that were rated by at least 75% of the experts as either essential or high priority (highly desirable, but not essential). This list illustrates the extent and variety of topics covered in initial threat assessment training, but it should be recognized that the topics overlap and do not require equal amounts of time to cover.

Table 1: Training Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Topic</th>
<th>% of Experts Rating Topic as High Priority or Essential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic principles of threat assessment</td>
<td>99.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining when to conduct a threat assessment</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk factors and warning signs for violence</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining the seriousness, level of concern, or risk level of a threat</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of multidisciplinary team and team members</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information about threats within the school</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term strategies for students who need follow-up monitoring or services</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record keeping and documentation</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of a threat or other concerning behavior(s) that would merit a threat assessment</td>
<td>95.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case exercises to practice threat assessment process</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education of staff about threat reporting</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of law enforcement</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of threat management to reduce risk of violence</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of behavioral threat assessment</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health services and supports</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of social media</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide assessment</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biases that can affect the threat assessment process</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty to Warn/Duty to Inform (e.g., Tarasoff duties)</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing strategies</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Challenge: Threat Assessment and Suicide

There is no consensus on how suicide fits in with school threat assessments. Although some experts believe that threats to self and others should be distinguished, many states require that threat assessment teams consider all students who have made threats. In addition, many students who committed mass shootings had suicidal motives and it is regarded as a factor that increases risk when a student has also threatened others. Consider your state laws and make sure that there are policies and protocols for how to assess and support threats to self with a systematic process.

### Research Finding

More than 75% of our experts rated the following as essential training topics for threat assessment team members:

- Basic principles of threat assessment
- Definition of a threat or other concerning behavior that would merit assessment
- When to conduct a threat assessment and how to determine the seriousness of a threat
- Role of the multidisciplinary team and team members
Experts endorsed the use of case practice and tabletop exercises to practice the threat assessment process, both in initial and advanced training.

Training and practice standards need to be adapted to the different needs, circumstances, and resources of schools. This is especially important because schools vary in staffing patterns, and the availability of potential team members from mental health and law enforcement fields may differ across schools.

**Questions to Ask When Selecting a Threat Assessment Training Program**

Here are questions for school authorities to consider when selecting a threat assessment training program. These questions do not represent necessary or sufficient criteria but are intended to help educators make an informed decision. The selection of a training program must consider the context, needs, and resources of the school system, as well as program features. Therefore, these questions are intended as guidance rather than a prescription for making a selection.

- Who will provide the training and what are their credentials in the field of school threat assessment?
- How long is the training, and what topics are covered? Does the training cover the following topics?
  - Principles of threat assessment as an investigative and preventive process, including specific guidance on when to conduct a threat assessment and how to determine the seriousness of a threat
  - The role and functions of a multidisciplinary team
  - The role of law enforcement in threat assessment
  - The role of interventions and risk management options in reducing the risk of violence
  - Threat assessment records, information sharing, and FERPA
  - Protection of student rights, including equity of outcomes across students of different racial/ethnic groups and disability status
  - Case exercises that allow teams to practice using the model
- What is the evidence that the training program is effective in training school personnel, including the multiple disciplines that will be trained in your schools?
- What is the model of threat assessment covered in the training?
  - Is this model recognized in the field of school threat assessment?
  - Is there evidence the model has been field-tested and found to be safe and effective?
  - Does this model meet the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Department of Education standards for an evidence-based program?
- Does the program include a procedure or standards for evaluating the quality of implementation after training is completed?
- What is the impact of the program on student disciplinary outcomes?
- Does the program provide support or resources for the school to educate students, parents, and staff about threat reporting?
How Should Training Be Evaluated

There are multiple ways to evaluate the quality of threat assessment training. The most common approach is to ask participants to evaluate their training experience with a series of post-training ratings. A more rigorous approach is to measure the participants’ knowledge of threat assessment before and after training. Still more rigorous is to examine how well the participants retain their knowledge months after training, and how well they apply their knowledge in performance on mock cases. Ultimately, it is important to measure how well the team performs on cases conducted at their school. School districts should consider an annual review of each school’s case data and examine how well the team followed its threat assessment procedures.

Education of School Community Members

Threat assessment cannot prevent violence if community members do not understand the need to report threats. Thus, it is essential that all members of the school community, including faculty, staff, administrators, law enforcement and security personnel, students, and parents understand the goals of threat assessment, as well as how and when to report concerning information.
The NTAC’s threat assessment guide suggested some common training goals for all stakeholders, including:¹⁰

- Knowing that the school has a threat assessment team process
- Understanding the basic idea of a threat assessment
- Knowing how to report information to the team
- Learning what kind of information should be reported
- Understanding the difference between “snitching” and seeking help for a problem
- Learning ways they can support a safe school climate

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**Research Findings on Training Effects**

Studies have shown the following training effects:

- Decreased fears of school violence
- Reduced support for a zero tolerance approach
- Increased knowledge of threat assessment principles and ability to classify threats
- Improved confidence in the school’s organizational structure and feelings of safety

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**Free Online Educational Programs on School Threat Assessment**

There are free online educational programs that schools can use to educate their community about threat assessment; alternatively, schools can create their own videos. Here are some examples, listed in alphabetical order, focusing on different aspects of school safety relevant to threat assessment:⁸

- Contra Costa County, California, Office of Education
- Educator’s School Safety Network
- Ohio School Threat Assessment Training videos
- Pennsylvania K-12 Threat Assessment Training and Technical Assistance Network
- Readiness and Emergency Management (REMS) Technical Assistance Center Threat Assessment Training
- School District of Lee County, Florida
- Texas School Safety Center Threat Assessment toolkit
- University of Virginia, Youth Violence Project
- Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Threat Assessment video
- Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of School Safety