

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE

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**A manual for school-based teams to assess and
respond effectively to students who threaten violence**



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IMPLEMENTING

THREAT ASSESSMENT

HOW CAN THREAT ASSESSMENT BE IMPLEMENTED AT MY SCHOOL?

In order to implement threat assessment, there should be formal approval and support from the central administration of the school division. Ideally, threat assessment should be implemented on a divisionwide basis, with divisionwide training and uniform policies at each school. Implementation should begin with the superintendent's office and school board, which must understand and support the change in order for it to be successful.

It is understandably difficult for schools to make systematic changes and for school personnel to assume new roles and responsibilities at a time when there is great pressure to meet new federal and state requirements to improve student achievement and respond to other provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002). Nevertheless, threat assessment should be regarded as part of a comprehensive effort to maintain school safety, and this effort serves the larger purpose of creating an environment that is conducive to learning. Threat assessment should not be regarded as an additional burden for school staff but rather a means of maintaining a safe environment in which learning and achievement can take place.

Properly implemented, threat assessment should save time and facilitate the work of school administrations and student support services. Successfully resolving a threat and preventing a violent act are certainly more cost-effective than dealing with the aftermath of a violent incident. Moreover, by using threat assessment to quickly resolve transient threats and take prompt action in

Threat assessment should not be burdensome to school staff, because it is a means of increasing efficiency by quickly resolving transient cases and targeting resources to the most serious cases. Preventing a violent act is always more efficient than dealing with the aftermath.

response to substantive threats, school personnel can work more efficiently and focus resources for student support and intervention where they are needed most.

WHAT POLICIES MUST BE CHANGED?

Threat assessment does not require major changes in school discipline policy for most school divisions. School principals retain a wide degree of latitude in determining disciplinary consequences, and, if anything, threat assessment gives principals a basis for even greater latitude, because they are guided to consider the meaning and context of the student's behavior.

A threat assessment team must consider the legal rights and special learning needs of students who have special education eligibility, but this is not a change from existing discipline policies. Threat assessment can be conducted in a manner that is consistent with all provisions of IDEA '97, although it is usually necessary to review and, in some cases, revise the student's IEP. School administrators are advised to remain up to date on federal and state laws and regulations that govern general and special education services.

WHAT WRITTEN POLICIES SHOULD BE IN PLACE?

Most schools have written documentation of discipline practices or a student code of conduct. Below and continuing on the following page is a list of provisions that school administrators should consider including in their student code of conduct or in other documentation of their practices.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTING THREAT ASSESSMENT?

Each school must consider how to integrate threat assessment into its existing policies and practices and how to identify the personnel who are most qualified and able to serve on threat assessment teams. These guidelines are truly guidelines and not a rigid prescription that must be followed in

MODEL POLICY FOR ADDRESSING STUDENT THREATS TO HARM OTHERS

Rationale: All students have the right to attend school in a safe and orderly environment that is conducive to learning. For this reason, there will be a standard procedure for investigating and responding to student threats to harm others.

Threat to harm others: A threat to harm others is defined as any spoken, written, or behavioral communication of intent to physically injure or harm someone else. A threat may be communicated directly to the intended victim or communicated to a third party.

Threat assessment: In order to maintain the safety of students and school personnel, student threats to harm others will be reported to the school principal. The principal or designee will lead a threat assessment team whose purpose is to conduct an assessment to determine the seriousness of the threat and take necessary steps to protect others and maintain a safe and orderly learning environment. The threat assessment team may include a representative from law enforcement, a school psychologist, a school counselor, and other members of the school staff designated by the principal.

Substantive and transient threats: A threat that is judged to involve sustained, serious intent to harm someone is termed a *substantive* threat. A threat that is judged not to be serious, because it can be immediately resolved so that there is no sustained intent to harm someone, is termed a *transient* threat. Judgments about the seriousness of a threat will be based on a consideration of its context and meaning. When the seriousness of a threat is unclear, the principal will treat the threat as substantive until its status is determined.

Disciplinary consequences: Both substantive and transient threats are subject to the full range of disciplinary consequences. In deciding on disciplinary consequences, the principal or designee will consider the seriousness of the threat and the degree to which the threat is disruptive to a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning for all students.

Continued on next page.

Parent notification: A threat assessment may include interviewing the student who was reported to make a threat and interviewing other students who have knowledge of the threat or information relevant to the safety of others. Parents will be notified promptly when a student has been interviewed about a reported threat.

Law enforcement notification: If a student is determined by the principal or designee to have made a substantive threat to harm others, and this threat involves a threat to kill, severely injure, or commit a sexual offense, the threat will be reported to law enforcement.

Notification of intended victims and their parents: If a student is determined by the principal or designee to have made a substantive threat to harm others, and the threat targets specific, identifiable victims, the intended victim(s) of the threat will be advised of the nature of the threat and the identity of the student who made the threat. If an intended victim is a student, the student's parent will also be notified.

Mental health assessment: If a student is determined by the principal or designee to have made a very serious substantive threat to harm others, the student may be seen by a school psychologist, counselor, clinical social worker, or other mental health professional to determine the student's immediate mental health status and safety needs.

Student suspension: When a student is determined to have made a substantive threat to harm others, the student may be suspended from school. During the suspension period, the threat assessment team will gather information necessary to develop a plan for meeting the student's educational needs and maintaining a safe and orderly school environment.

every respect. School divisions may need to adapt these recommendations for the staffing of threat assessment teams or to make slight modifications in procedures. (We welcome suggestions and feedback on improving these guidelines.) Very large school divisions may have different needs than smaller school divisions. Schools for students with special needs, especially alternative schools for students who have aggressive behavior problems, may need more resources and support options to deal with student threats than other schools. Threat assessment should be a cornerstone of an overall school security plan (Trump, 1998).

For all schools, a training process is recommended to prepare all school staff for the implementation of threat assessment procedures. Threat assessment team members require the most extensive training, but all school staff should be familiarized with the rationale and

basic procedures for threat assessment. All school staff should be willing and able to identify and report threats and to cooperate with a threat investigation. After the staff have been trained, it is important to explain to students that threats are not acceptable behavior and that threats will receive disciplinary consequences. Students should be taught the difference between snitching on a peer and seeking help to prevent someone from being hurt, and they should be encouraged to report threats to a teacher or other school staff member. Every teacher and school staff member should let students know they are available to listen to their concerns. Parents and students should be informed that threats will be carefully investigated according to a standard procedure.

On the following pages are summaries that can be used as handouts or overheads in presenting information to school staff, parents, and students.

IMPLEMENTATION: STEP BY STEP

1. Obtain approval from the superintendent to adopt a threat assessment approach.
2. Revise the student code of conduct and discipline policies as needed.
3. Train the school administrators, law enforcement officers, and mental health professionals (counselors, psychologists, social workers, and others). Training should include a thorough review of the guidelines and team practice with mock cases.
4. Review the violence prevention and student support resources and programs available—in the school and in the community—that can be called upon in planning a response to individual student threats.
5. Hold inservice training to orient teachers and other school staff to threat assessment and clarify their role in reporting threats. See the staff handout.
6. Inform parents how the school will respond to student threats. (See the parent handout.)
7. Review school discipline policies with students and make clear that threats are not acceptable behavior. Explain the difference between “snitching” and seeking help and encourage students to seek help for threats. See the student handout.
8. Begin using threat assessment. Be sure to document all threats.
9. At the end of the year, review the threat assessment program and revise it as needed.
10. Each year, repeat the orientation for teachers, parents, and students.

Threat Assessment Documentation

This form should be used to document the threat assessment team's response to a student threat of violence. School administrators are advised to consult their division policy on record keeping for these forms.

General Information

Your name: _____ Position: _____ School: _____

Name of student _____

Date learned of threat: ____/____/____ Date threat occurred: ____/____/____

Type of threat: Transient Serious Substantive Very Serious Substantive

Who reported threat? _____ Location of Threat _____

What student said or did to express a threat (quote student if possible):

Student Who Made Threat

Grade: _____

Gender: M F

Race:

Caucasian African Am. Hispanic
 Asian Am. Other: _____

Special Education (if applicable):

LD OHI MR
 ED Other: _____

- Yes No—Had or sought accomplices
Yes No—Reported the threat as a specific plan
Yes No—Wrote plans or a list
Yes No—Repeated the threat over time
Yes No—Mentioned weapon in the threat
Yes No—Used weapon in the threat
Yes No—Had prior conflict with recipient
(within 24 hours of threat)
Yes No—Student previously bullied the recipient

Victim or Recipient of Threat

Number of Victims:

1 2 3 4 5 or more

Primary Recipient:

Student Teacher Parent
 Administrator Other: _____

Grade (if applicable): _____

Gender: M F

Race:

Caucasian African Am. Hispanic
 Asian Am. Other: _____

Special Education (if applicable):

LD OHI MR
 ED Other: _____

- Yes No—Recipient witnessed the threat
Yes No—Recipient previously bullied the student

Evaluation of Threat (Use these questions as the interview foundation; modify them and use additional pages as needed.)

Student Interview

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk with you? Tell me.

2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?

3. What exactly did you say? And what exactly did you do? (Write the student's exact words.)

4. What did you mean when you said or did that?

5. How do you think [person who was threatened] feels about what you said or did? (See if the student believes it frightened or intimidated the person who was threatened.)

6. What was the reason you said or did that? (Find out if there is a prior conflict or history to this threat.)

7. What are you going to do now that you have made this threat? (Ask if the student intends to carry out the threat.)

Witness Interview

Recipient (target) of threat or Witness to threat, but not recipient

Witness name and grade or title: _____

1. What exactly happened today when you were [place of incident]?

2. What exactly did [student who made the threat] say or do? (Write the witness's exact words.)

3. What do you think he or she meant when saying or doing that?

4. How do you feel about what he or she said or did? (Gauge whether the person who observed or received the threat feels frightened or intimidated.) Are you concerned that he or she might actually do it?

5. Why did he or she say or do that? (Find out whether witness knows of any prior conflict or history behind this threat.)

Threat Responses

Disciplinary Action

Yes No — Reprimanded student

Yes No — Parent conference

Yes No — In-school time-out

Yes No — Detention (number of days): _____

Yes No — Suspension (number of days): _____

Yes No — Expulsion recommended

Yes No — Other disciplinary action: _____

Interventions and Safety Precautions

Yes No — Interviewed and advised student who made threat

Yes No — Interviewed and advised student's parents

Yes No — Consulted with one or more school staff members

Yes No — Interviewed and advised other students

Yes No — Law enforcement consulted

Yes No — Law enforcement contact with the student who made the threat

Consequence of legal action (probation, detention, release into parent's custody, etc.):

Yes No — Student might be eligible for special education services; referred for evaluation

Yes No — Student already receiving special education services; referred to the IEP team for review

Yes No — Student referred for a 504 plan.

Yes No — Mental health assessment conducted by school-based staff

Yes No — Mental health assessment conducted by an outside agency (court, DSS, psychologist, etc.)

Yes No — Parents of the threat recipient notified of the threat

Yes No — Conflict mediation

Yes No — School-based counseling

Yes No — Alter schedule of the student to increase supervision or minimize contact with the recipient

Yes No — Alternative educational placement (alternative school, day treatment program, homebound, etc.)

Yes No — Change in transportation (bus suspension, special transportation, etc.)

Yes No — Inpatient mental health services

Yes No — Outpatient mental health services (counseling or therapy with outside mental health provider)

Yes No — Other safety precautions (please list):

For behavior interfering with the student's learning or the learning of others

This BSP attaches to . . .

IEP date: _____ 504 plan date: _____ Team meeting date: _____

Student name _____

Today's date _____ Next review date _____

1. The behavior impeding learning is . . . (Describe what it looks like.)

2. It impedes learning because . . .

3. The need for a BSP is early-stage intervention moderate serious extreme.

4. Frequency, intensity, or duration of behavior:

reported by _____ observed by _____

PART I: PREVENTION—ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND NEEDED CHANGES

5. What are the predictors for the behavior (situations in which the behavior is likely to occur—people, time, place, subject, etc.)?

6. What supports the student using the problem behavior? (What is missing or what needs changing in the environment or curriculum?)

Remove student's need to use the problem behavior.

7. What environmental changes, structure, and supports are recommended to remove the student's need to use this behavior?

Who will establish the above? _____

Who will monitor the above? _____

PART II: ALTERNATIVES—FUNCTIONAL FACTORS AND NEW BEHAVIORS TO SUPPORT

8. Team believes the behavior occurs because (function of behavior in terms of obtaining, protesting, or avoiding something):

Support an alternative behavior that meets same need.

9. What does the team believe the student should do instead of the problem behavior? (How should the student escape, protest, or avoid the behavior or get his or her need met in an acceptable way?)

10. What teaching strategies, curriculum, or materials are needed to teach the alternative behavior?

By whom? _____

How frequently? _____

11. What are reinforcers to use for establishing, maintaining, and generalizing the new behavior(s)?

Selection of reinforcer based on . . .

reinforcer for using replacement behavior reinforcer for general increase in positive behaviors

By whom? _____

How frequently? _____

PART III: REACTIONS—STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO PROBLEM RECURRENCE

12. What strategies will be employed if the problem behavior occurs again (prompt student to switch to the replacement behavior, review negative consequences of undesirable behavior, etc.)?

By whom? _____

PART IV: OUTCOME—BEHAVIORAL GOALS

13. Behavioral goal(s):

The above behavioral goal(s) is to . . .

- reduce frequency of problem behavior increase use of replacement behavior
 develop new general skills that remove student's need to use the problem behavior

Conclusions

- Yes No Are curriculum accommodations or modifications also necessary?
If so, where are they described? _____
- Yes No Are environmental supports or changes necessary?
- Yes No Is reinforcement of alternative behavior alone enough? (No new teaching is necessary.)
- Yes No Are both teaching of new alternative behavior and reinforcement needed?
- Yes No Is this BSP to be coordinated with other agencies' service plans?

Person responsible for contact among agencies: _____

PART V: COMMUNICATION

Type and frequency of communication (all participants):

Among _____

How frequently? _____

PART VI: PARTICIPANTS IN PLAN DEVELOPMENT

- Student _____
- Parent or guardian _____
- Educator and title _____
- Educator and title _____
- Educator and title _____
- Administrator _____
- Administrator _____
- Other _____
- Other _____