

# THREAT ASSESSMENT/THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM

## T.A.T.

### I. PURPOSE

A **threat** is defined as an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something and may be spoken, written or symbolic.<sup>1</sup> Threats can be either **transient** (expressions of anger or frustration that can be quickly or easily resolved) or substantive (serious intent to harm others, involving a detailed plan or means).<sup>1 6</sup> Threats can be direct (a specific act against a specific target) or indirect (a threat that is vague, unclear or ambiguous).<sup>1</sup>

**Threat assessment** is a violence prevention strategy that is widely used in schools to both intervene before an act of violence occurs and to respond to threats once they have occurred. Threat assessment is a process that involves identifying student threats, determining the seriousness of threats and developing intervention plans to protect potential victims and address the underlying conflict that led to the threat. The goals are to protect potential victims from harm and to intervene to address the cause and underlying issues affecting the student(s) who made the threat.<sup>1</sup>

The **key principles of threat assessment** include the following:<sup>2,3</sup>

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior;
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction between the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target;
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is needed;
- Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or “traits”;
- An “integrated systems approach” is best;<sup>2</sup>
- An investigation to determine whether or not a student poses a threat, not whether a student has made a threat, is needed. It is important that the threat assessment process be completely fact based.

**School safety relates to threat assessment** by evaluating threats and intervening, improving school safety also includes creating a safe, supportive school climate. One way to improve school climate is by creating an environment where students and adults respect one another. This involves respect for diversity, conflict resolution, bullying prevention and staff who serve as positive role models. Another factor that influences school climate is relationships between adults and students. Schools should encourage supportive connections between students and staff, and all students should have at least one adult in the school who they trust and feel comfortable going to for support or advice. Schools should have processes for identifying students with few connections to adults and establishing relationships with them.<sup>4</sup>

It is common for students, and sometimes adults, to perceive a “**code of silence**,” which discourages them from telling someone if they notice another student who is in pain or who has made a potential threat. Safe school climates are ones in which this “code of silence” is broken, and students feel comfortable talking with adults about concerns they have about their peers’ behaviors. It is necessary to include all members of the school community in developing and

maintaining a safe, respectful school climate<sup>4</sup>. In addition to breaking the “code of silence,” adults should encourage students (and others) to report things as quickly as possible.

A **threat assessment team (TAT)** should be a multidisciplinary team and include one or more individuals from the following categories: administrator(s), law enforcement and mental health professional(s). Threat assessment teams are typically led by the principal or assistant principal, and members often include a school resource officer and a school counselor or school psychologist.<sup>1</sup> Additional members of the team may include professionals from the local community, educators and school support staff. All teams consist of: an administrator (particularly one who is trained and respected by staff), school disciplinary or safety personnel (e.g., school resource officer), mental health professional(s) (e.g., school psychologist, social worker or counselor), and a local law enforcement contact. Other team members who may be helpful include teachers, coaches, nurses, custodians, cafeteria staff, members from the student’s IEP team and community members (e.g., probation officer, social worker).

The Superintendent or designee will form a District-wide Threat Assessment Committee to coordinate the **Building Threat Assessment Teams**, their ongoing training, and awareness training of others (see below).

Each building should develop a building T.A.T. In developing a threat assessment team and process, leadership and authority must be identified. When a student is acting (or reported) in a way that suggests he or she may be a threat, school personnel can be authorized to conduct a threat assessment. It is important that the threat assessment team has an understanding of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act,<sup>7</sup> also known as FERPA, which dictates what student information is allowed to be shared (and with whom). Threat assessment team members need to understand FERPA so they know what information is protected by it and when there are exceptions to those protections. When the safety of students or others is at risk (e.g., in the case of threat assessment), there often are exceptions that allow necessary information to be shared with appropriate personnel (e.g., law enforcement). The information that is gathered during a threat assessment should be accessible to the team members and kept in a central location.<sup>2</sup> It is important to establish relationships and partnerships with community agencies and professionals.

Additionally, **ongoing training** should be provided to threat assessment team members. Members should understand their roles and responsibilities. It is recommended that teams are trained together in best practices for threat assessment.

An important consideration in the development of a threat assessment process is to provide **awareness training** for the school staff, students, parents and community members. Everyone needs to have an understanding of what to look for in terms of warning signs, as well as how to report these. Students (and others) should be encouraged to report things as quickly as possible and should be given multiple methods for reporting (e.g., reporting through a tip line, telling a trusted adult, calling law enforcement, and others as are made available) Ideally, this awareness training should be provided every year.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Threat Assessment Checklist

This checklist is intended to provide a general overview of the steps to consider when establishing threat assessment plans, procedures and policies. It should be considered a basic introductory overview that condenses the best-practice strategies into simple steps for school personnel that are easy to understand, rather than a complete guide for establishing threat

assessment plans, procedures and policies. It compiles information from nationally recognized resources referenced at the end of the checklist

### **Threat Assessment Checklist for K-12 Schools**

- 1) Establish districtwide threat assessment policies and procedures, and establish authority and leadership to conduct an inquiry.** (Aligns with step 1 of NASP's<sup>1</sup> procedures, step 1 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> threat assessment process and step 3 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
  - Develop specific policies and adopt clear procedures for addressing threats.
  - Clarify the role of educators in relation to that of law enforcement.
  - Disseminate the established policies and procedures to the community.
- 2) Assemble a multidisciplinary threat assessment team.** (Aligns with step 2 of NASP's<sup>1</sup> procedures, steps 2 and 3 CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> threat assessment process and step 1 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
  - Include multidisciplinary representatives from school administration, school-based mental health professionals, and law enforcement.
  - Consider inviting others to join the threat assessment team, such as professionals from the local community, educators, and school support staff.
  - Establish integrated and interagency relationships and partnerships to respond to public safety concerns (if appropriate).
- 3) Provide ongoing education and training in threat assessment.** (Aligns with step 3 of NASP's<sup>1</sup> procedures and steps 2 and 4 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> threat assessment process.)
  - Train the threat assessment team in the process of threat assessment.
  - Educate students, school staff, parents and community partners in how to recognize warning signs and how to report them.
- 4) Report the threat to the appropriate authorities.** (Aligns with step 4 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> threat assessment process and the Virginia Model Policies.<sup>6</sup>)
  - When they are made aware of a threat, school employees or volunteers should report it immediately to a school administrator.
  - Once they are made aware of a threat, school administrators should determine if the threat must be reported to law enforcement (refer to pages 11-12 of Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.<sup>6</sup>)
  - The administrator also should notify the student's parents (refer to page 12 of Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.<sup>6</sup>)
- 5) Interview the student who made the threat.** Aligns with step 1 of the Virginia Model, 4 steps 1-3 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps, step 2 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans<sup>5</sup> and the Virginia Model Policies<sup>6</sup>).
  - The interview should be done by the threat assessment team leader (typically the principal). (For more information on this inquiry stage, refer to page 12 of Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.<sup>6</sup>)
  - The interview protocol should follow a set of standard questions. TAT to determine this tool.
  - Witnesses and the potential victim(s) also should be interviewed.
  - The inquiry should consider the context (e.g., what did the student intend?).
  - For guidance on what information to gather during the inquiry stage, refer to pages 8-13 and 16-18 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> guidance document and pages 48-59 of the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education's guide to threat assessment.<sup>5</sup>

- 6) **Determine whether it is a transient (low) or substantive threat** (Aligns with step 2 of the Virginia Model,<sup>4</sup> step 4 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and step 2 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- This should be determined by the threat assessment team leader/principal.
  - For examples of **substantive versus transient** threats, refer to NASP's Threat Assessment for School Administrators & Crisis Teams.<sup>1</sup>
  - If there is any doubt, assume that the threat is **substantive**.
- 7) **If transient, resolve the threat at this point (see below). If substantive, go to step 8.** (Aligns with step 3 of the Virginia Model, 4 step 5 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps, step 2 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans<sup>5</sup> and the Virginia Model Policies.<sup>6</sup>)
- Transient threats can be resolved at this point without involving the rest of the threat assessment team.
  - The threat assessment team leader may resolve the transient threat by:
    - Requiring the student to apologize.
    - Responding with a disciplinary consequence if the threat was disruptive or violated the school's code of conduct.
    - Involving other team and/or staff members to help resolve the conflict.
    - The threat assessment team leader/principal may notify the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the student(s) who made the threat, as well as the potential victim(s).
    - The threat assessment team leader/principal should notify the threat assessment team of the actions taken to ensure proper communication among team members.
    - Ensure that everything is adequately documented (refer to pages 12-13 of Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines<sup>6</sup>).
- 8) **Determine whether the substantive threat is serious or very serious.** (Aligns with step 4 of the Virginia Model, 4 step 5 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and step 2 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- The threat assessment team leader/principal makes this determination based on the intended severity of injury of the threat (e.g., any threat involving a weapon is typically considered very serious).
  - For a description of serious versus very serious threats, refer to page 7 of the Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment<sup>4</sup>.
  - If the threat is determined to be **serious**, move to step 9.
  - If the threat is determined to be very **serious**, move to step 10.
- 9) **If deemed a serious threat.** (Aligns with step 5 of the Virginia Model, 4 steps 5 and 6 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and Steps 4 and 5 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- The threat assessment team has the responsibility to take immediate action to protect potential victims.
  - These actions may include:
    - Warning the student(s) who made the threat about the consequences of carrying out those actions.
    - Contacting students' parents.
    - The team has the responsibility to warn/notify potential victims and their parent(s)/guardian(s).

- 10) **If deemed a very serious threat.** (Aligns with step 6 of the Virginia Model, 4 steps 5 and 6 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and steps 4 and 5 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- The threat assessment team has the responsibility to take immediate action to protect potential victims.
  - The student(s) who made the threat should be suspended from school until the threat assessment team has completed a comprehensive assessment of the threat and has determined appropriate school placement.
  - Very **serious threats** should in most cases be shared with all staff/faculty in an expedient manner. A threat deemed Very Serious takes precedence over most FERPA concerns.
  - The threat assessment team should conduct comprehensive safety evaluations:
    - Mental health assessments should be conducted by the school psychologist (or other qualified mental health professionals).
    - Law enforcement investigations should be conducted by the school resource officer (or other law enforcement officers).
- 11) **Develop a written safety plan.** (Aligns with step 7 of the Virginia Model, 4 steps 6 and 7 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and steps 4 and 5 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- The threat assessment team should use the findings from the comprehensive safety evaluations to develop a written safety plan.
  - The safety plan should be used to protect potential victims, as well as address the needs of the student(s) who made the threat.
  - The threat assessment team leader/principal should determine if the student(s) may return to school or will need to be placed in an alternative educational setting.
  - If the student(s) will be returning to school, the plan must address conditions that will be met and how these conditions will be monitored to ensure everyone's safety.
  - There should be a designated case manager to oversee the plan.
  - For more information and a sample Threat Assessment and Response form, refer to page 13 of Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.<sup>6</sup>
  - For more information on managing threatening situations, refer to pages 63-66 of the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education's guide to threat assessment.<sup>5</sup>
  - For a Response, Management, and Support Plan template, refer to pages 22-24 of the CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> guidance document.<sup>2</sup>
- 12) **Ongoing monitoring of the students' safety and the effectiveness of the safety plan.** (Aligns with step 8 of CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> inquiry steps and step 6 of the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.<sup>5</sup>)
- Develop a plan to regularly monitor students' safety and well-being and identify school personnel (e.g., designated case manager) who will regularly check in with the students.
  - Determine how to transition from immediate, short-term interventions to longer term support of students' safety and well-being.
  - Continually evaluate the safety plan to ensure that students' safety and well-being are prioritized and make changes, as needed.
  - For more information, refer to page 14 of the CSSRC's<sup>2</sup> guidance document

## References

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  7. U.S. Department of Education (2018). Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.
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