Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

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The Columbine Effect

- Inside the mind of the California teen killer
- Confronting the classroom code of silence
- Why some kids snap—and others don't
Public Fear of School Violence

Why?

The Monsters Next Door

Wild in the Streets

Blood Everywhere

These Are Cold-Blooded, Evil Children
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Drugs</th>
<th>No Toy Guns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Guns</td>
<td>No Nail clippers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Knives</td>
<td>No Plastic utensils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Threats</td>
<td>No Finger-pointing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Rubber band shooting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>No Accidental violations</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nervous Officials No Longer Ignoring Threats by Students

Around the Country, Children Are Being Arrested

- 4 Kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers during recess.
- New Jersey district zero tolerance policy resulted in 50 suspensions in 6 weeks, mostly in kindergarten and 3rd grade for verbal threats.
- 7 yr old transferred to a different school after talking about his grandma’s gun
- 3rd grader suspended for drawing a soldier with grenades and knives.
- 8 yr old suspended for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher, saying pow-pow
- 10 yr old expelled for a 1” GI Joe toy gun
- 14 yr old convicted of felony for e-mail threat
- 17 yr old arrested & expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band
American Bar Assoc. Opposes Zero Tolerance

“1) schools should have strong policies against gun possession and be safe places for students to learn and develop;

2) in cases involving alleged student misbehavior, school officials should exercise sound discretion that is consistent with principles of due process and considers the individual student and the particular circumstances of misconduct; and

3) alternatives to expulsion or referral for prosecution should be developed that will improve student behavior and school climate without making schools dangerous; and

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the ABA opposes, in principle, "zero tolerance" policies that have a discriminatory effect, or mandate either expulsion or referral of students to juvenile or criminal court, without regard to the circumstances or nature of the offense or the student's history.” Feb 2001
FBI Recommendations on School Violence

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.” (FBI report p 1)
Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

Download at: www.secretservice.gov
Threat Assessment

1. *Identification* of threats made by students.
2. *Evaluation* of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. *Intervention* to reduce risk of violence.
4. *Follow-up* to assess intervention results.
School Work Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team composition</th>
<th>Albemarle</th>
<th>Charlottesville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>Frank Morgan</td>
<td>Ron Hutchinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Carole Hastings</td>
<td>Robert Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>Chris Love</td>
<td>Nancy Cornell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor for School Resource Officers</td>
<td>Sgt James Bond</td>
<td>Sgt Allen Kirby</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth Violence Project staff – Dewey Cornell, Peter Sheras, and graduate students Sebastian Kaplan, Andrea Levy, David McConville, and Lela McKnight.
# Advisory Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donna Bowman</td>
<td>Director, Virginia School Safety Center, Dept of Criminal Justice Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlene Cundiff</td>
<td>Director, Office of Safe &amp; Drug-Free Schools, Virginia DOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capt. Chip Harding</td>
<td>Charlottesville Police Dept. &amp; State Board of Juvenile Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk Heilbrun</td>
<td>Professor of Clinical Psychology, Hahnemahn University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Monahan</td>
<td>Professor of Law, Clinical Psychologist, University of Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ellen O’Toole</td>
<td>FBI Supervisory Special Agent, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri Royster</td>
<td>FBI Supervisory Special Agent, National Academy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Development of Guidelines

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

**Purpose and Goals of These Guidelines**

The purpose of these guidelines is to help school personnel deal with student threats of violence in a safe, fair, and responsible manner. Our goals are to maintain a safe school environment and to respond to student needs that are indicated by threats.

**Perceived risk of violence**

Media attention to a series of school shootings has stimulated fears that schools are not safe, and generated inaccurate perceptions that all students who make threats are likely to engage in lethal violence. In fact, the risk of violence at school is very low relative to the risk outside of school. Moreover, violent crime by youth, including school homicide, has declined substantially since 1993. Contrary to public perceptions, the overall risk of violence and injury at school has changed very little over the past 20 years, and weapon carrying at school has declined for almost ten years.

Schools have an obligation to take a factual, rational approach to student threats of violence—to protect students and staff; and to maintain a safe and orderly school environment, but at the same time to avoid over-reacting to threats in a manner that is disruptive to learning or results in excessive consequences for students who engage in inappropriate behavior.

**Predictions of violence**

Reports by the FBI,4 the Secret Service,5 the U.S. Surgeon General6 and the U.S. Department of Education7,8 emphasize that there is no profile or formula that will accurately determine whether or not a student will engage in lethal acts of violence. Severe violence is too rare, and can result from too many different factors, to be accurately predicted. However, there is useful scientific information about the behavioral and psychological antecedents of violence, and it is possible to reduce the risk of violence by appropriate interventions.9 Therefore, our approach is to evaluate student threats of violence, and to make measured and systematic responses aimed at reducing the risk of violence by addressing the problem or circumstances that precipitated the threat. These guidelines will be most useful in helping school personnel gather relevant information necessary to make an individualized assessment of student threats, and to make decisions based on their professional judgment, considering the unique circumstances and needs of their students.

**What is a threat?**

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone. Threats may be spoken, written, or expressed in some other way, such as through gestures. Threats may be direct (“I am going to bash you up”) or indirect (“You better watch out” or “If I wanted to, I could blow this place up”). Illegal possession of weapons should be pressured to indicate a threat unless careful investigation reveals otherwise (e.g., a student accidentally brought a knife to school). Uncertainty about whether a student’s behavior is a threat, evaluate it as a threat.

**For more information:**

Field-Test Schools

22 Elementary schools
6 Middle schools
4 High schools
3 Alternative schools
35 Total
Field-Test Training Recipients

- 59 Principals and assistant principals
- 33 School psychologists
- 07 School resource officers
- 46 Counselors, other administrators
- 500 Staff at introductory sessions
### Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Role Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal or Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Leads team, conducts Step 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>Team member, conducts mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Counselor</td>
<td>Team member, lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, aides, other staff</td>
<td>Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.
Manual Contents

1. Guidelines
2. Case Examples
3. Mental Health Assessment
4. Resources
5. Documentation
What is a threat?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.

Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I’m going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.
Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

- Threat is clearly transient.
  
  Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

- Threat is substantive.
  
  Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

  - Threat is serious.
    
    Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

  - Threat is very serious.
    

- Step 7. Follow up on action plan.
Step 1. Evaluate the threat.

- Obtain an account of the threat and the context from the student and witnesses.
- Write down the exact threat.
- Obtain student’s explanation of the threat’s meaning and his/her intentions.
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat’s meaning.

Document your evaluation.
Transient versus substantive threats

Transient Threats

Substantive Threats
Transient threats

- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.
Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.
Presumptive indicators of substantive threats

- Specific, plausible details. ("I am going to blast Mr. Johnson with my pistol.")
- Threat has been repeated over time. ("He’s been telling everyone he is going to get you.")
- Threat reported as a plan ("Wait until you see what happens next Tuesday in the library.")
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices.
- Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)
Three types of threats

- Transient Threats: 70%
- Substantive Threats: 30%
- Very Serious Threats: 8%

188 Total threats reported
Very Serious Substantive Threats

Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

- Threat is clearly transient.
  - Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

- Threat is substantive.
  - Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.
    - Threat is serious.
      - Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
    - Threat is very serious.

Step 7. Follow up on action plan.
Step 6.

Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat.

Safety Evaluation conducted by a team.

- Principal leads the team.
- School psychologist or other mental health professional conducts Mental Health Assessment.
- School Resource Officer consults on legal issues.
- Other school staff as needed.
Immediate responses to a Very Serious Substantive Threat

- Take precautions to protect potential victims.
- Consult with law enforcement promptly.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Begin Mental Health Assessment.
- Determine safety during suspension.
Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.
Sources of information for mental health assessment

Mental health professional will interview:

- Student
- Intended victim/witnesses
- Student’s parent
- School staff who know student (including SRO, guidance counselor, teachers)
- Outside professionals who know student
Step 7.
Follow up with action plan.

- Determine action plan to reduce risk of violence.
- Identify appropriate interventions for student.
- Schedule follow-up contact with student to assess current risk and update plan.
Data Collection Procedure

• On-line threat submission
• Research assistant/consultant
• Follow-up interviews with school staff (end of year and next fall)
• School record review
Sample of Threat Cases

- 35 schools
- 16,640 students enrolled K-12
- One school year
- 188 *reported* threat cases
What did the students threaten to do?

- Hit/Beat Up: 77 cases
- Kill: 27 cases
- Shoot: 24 cases
- Cut/Stab: 18 cases
- Vague: 32 cases
- Other/Bomb: 10 cases

N = 188 cases
Where did threats take place?

- Classroom: 86
- Hallway: 19
- Outdoors: 18
- Other rooms: 16
- Bus/Bus stop: 16
- Cafeteria: 13
- Gym/Restroom: 6

Number of threats
Who reported the threats?

- Teachers: 82
- Students: 71
- Parents: 14
- Admin/coun: 12
- Other: 8

Number of threats
Who was the victim of threats?

- Student: 141
- Teacher: 23
- Other: 6
- Multiple: 17

Number of threats
### Student and Victim Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Victim</th>
<th>Female Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boy Made Threat</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl Made Threat</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transient versus substantive threats

Transient Threats 70%
N = 132

Substantive Threats 30%
N = 56
Grade Level Comparison of Transient and Substantive Threats
School responses to 188 student threats

Based on 132 transient threats and 56 substantive threats. Arrests were for assaults at time threat was made. This chart presents raw frequencies, not percents.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th grade Alt Ed boy</td>
<td>Threatened to shoot people after being teased by girl</td>
<td>Upset &amp; suicidal, so hospitalized. Later returned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Very Serious Middle School Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8th grade girl</td>
<td>Threatened peer and teacher with scissors.</td>
<td>Suspended. SRO contact. MH treatment. Detailed plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade OHI girl</td>
<td>Bullied &amp; assaulted smaller boy, then assaulted SRO</td>
<td>Arrested &amp; in detention. Alt school. Court required counseling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Very Serious Elementary Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade LD boy</td>
<td>Threatened to burn down school, had written plans.</td>
<td>Suspended. SRO saw boy. On homebound, FAPT referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade OHI boy</td>
<td>Threatened to bring gun on bus and shoot everyone</td>
<td>Suspended. SRO saw boy, Plan developed. Returned to school and bus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Follow-up interviews on student threats

- Interviews conducted with school principals at end of school year and again the following fall.
- Follow-up time periods averaged 148 days until end of school year.
- Four students did not return to school after the threat, 17 left within 30 days after threat.
Change in student’s behavior after the threat

As rated by school principals, followed up after the school year. $N = 176$. Chi-square = 10.6, $p < .01$
Change in student’s relationship with victim after the threat

As rated by school principals, followed up after the school year. N = 126. Chi-square = 9.3, p < .01
Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.
Conclusions

• Threat assessment is a feasible school practice, deserving further study.

• Threat assessment appears to be a viable alternative to zero tolerance and profiling.

• School staff can make differentiated judgments about student threats.
Research Needs

- Controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment.
- Research on threat context and student characteristics.
- Research on unreported threats.
- More follow-up studies of threat outcomes.
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction).