Student Threat Assessment as a Method of Reducing Student Suspensions

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Topics

1. Zero tolerance
2. Threat assessment as an alternative to zero tolerance
3. Controlled studies
4. Large-scale study

Zero Tolerance Expanded after Columbine

From No Guns to
• No Toy Guns
• No Nail clippers
• No Plastic utensils
• No Finger-pointing
• No Jokes
• No Drawings
• No Rubber band shooting
No Accidental violations
Zero Tolerance Suspension for a 6-year-old Cub Scout

Cub Scout utensil gets boy, 6, school suspension

First grader brought it to eat his lunch with; now he’s facing reform school

By Mike Collins

Dressed in a button-down shirt and tie and sporting a baseball cap, 6-year-old Gary Davis looked as cute as the other first-graders in his class as he walked into his classroom on Monday morning. But, thanks to a zero-tolerance policy, he’s now facing reform school.

Zero Tolerance Suspension for a 6-year-old Cub Scout

http://www.sott.net/article/255552-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

6 year old pointed finger and said “pow!”

http://www.sott.net/article/305653-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

9 year old with toy gun

12 year old doodler

Poem about Sandy Hook, “I understand the killings...”


**FBI Recommends Threat Assessment Approach**

“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.” (p. 1)

**Secret Service/Dept Education Recommend Threat Assessment**

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

**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.
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Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

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

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

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

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.


Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

- Legally defensible procedures for responding to student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Research-based and field-tested
- Covers K-12, regular and special education

Available from sopriswest.com

Threat Assessment Studies

1. Initial field trial
2. Memphis field trial
3. Virginia High school climate study
4. High school discipline study in Fairfax
5. Randomized controlled trial in Newport News
6. Statewide implementation study
High School Discipline Study

- Compared 23 high schools implementing threat assessment with 26 control high schools (no threat assessment).
- Used school records of suspensions and discipline infractions for baseline year prior to training and follow-up year after training.

Cornell, Fan & Gregory (2011), NASSP Bulletin
High School Discipline Study

Randomized Controlled Trial

• 40 schools (K-12)
• Randomly assigned to training or wait one year
• Data collected on 201 students
• Teams monitored for compliance

Randomized Controlled Trial

Hypotheses
Schools using threat assessment will be more likely to take a counseling approach and keep students in school compared to schools pursuing usual disciplinary approach.
Randomized Controlled Trial

Students in threat assessment schools...
• Received more counseling
• More parent involvement
• Fewer long-term suspensions
• Fewer alternative placements

Logistic regression odds ratios:
3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

Outcome Odds for Students in Threat Assessment versus Control Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Threat Assessment Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Term Suspension</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative School Placement</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Odds ratios control for effects of student gender, race, grade, and threat severity.
Table shows how likely an outcome would be for a student attending a school with threat assessment in comparison to a control school without threat assessment.

Virginia Public Schools

133 school divisions
1,800 public schools
1.2 million students

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Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

Regression Analyses with Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Long-Term (B (S.E.))</th>
<th>Short-Term (B (S.E.))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>2.641** (0.203)</td>
<td>1.834** (0.075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>2.668** (0.145)</td>
<td>1.675** (0.061)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>0.142** (0.017)</td>
<td>0.102** (0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infractions '06</td>
<td>0.055** (0.019)</td>
<td>0.064** (0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>-1.078** (0.293)</td>
<td>-0.700** (0.117)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRPM</td>
<td>1.571** (0.369)</td>
<td>2.512** (0.162)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used UVA TA (yes/no)</td>
<td>-0.210* (0.103)</td>
<td>-0.082 † (0.046)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01  *p < .05  †p < .10  N = 1795

Association of Threat Assessment with Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp(θ)</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines</td>
<td>19% fewer</td>
<td>8% fewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional Findings

1. Reductions in suspensions were consistent across racial groups.

2. Schools using the guidelines longer had greater reductions.

3. Schools with formal training had greater reductions than schools without training.
Limitations

• Quasi-experimental design; schools were not randomly assigned.
• Fidelity of implementation not measured.
• How use of threat assessment affects decision-making not directly measured.

Future Directions

• Does use of threat assessment influence non-threat cases?
• Can staff training focused on suspensions lead to greater reductions?
• Can training reduce the disparity in suspension rates?

Concluding Thought

We can reduce school suspensions when we provide schools with the training and resources to implement a better approach to school discipline.