Student Threat Assessment
The Virginia Model for Schools

Morning Topics

1. Case example
2. Prevention, not prediction
3. Threat assessment process

Bullying in middle and high school:

- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Uneven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation

Bullying led to:

- Change in peer group
  - Freaks vs preps
  - Shoot up the school
- Mental deterioration
  - Depression
  - Threatening voices
  - Man under the house
  - You gotta do this

School shooting from "The Basketball Diaries"
Warning: Violent Content

West Paducah, Ky.

Three girls were killed when
MICHAEL GARNEAL, 14, opened
fire on a prayer meeting that had
assembled in
school just
before
the start
of class-
es. He had warned a classmate
that "something big" would
happen. When a friend pushed
him to a wall to stop the ran-
page, Corneal said, "Kill me,
please. I can't believe I did
that." He faces trial as an adult

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Contributing Factors

Bullying
Mental Illness
Peer Influences
Access to guns

Prevention Opportunities

Bullying
Mental Illness
Peer Influences
Access to guns

No one reported his threats

Why is snitching so reviled?

Snitch: blabbermouth, canary, fink, nare, rat, sneak, squealer, stoolie, stoolpigeon, tattletale, etc.

Teach students to distinguish snitching from seeking help

Snitching: informing on someone for personal gain
Seeking help: attempting to stop someone from being hurt
What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.

Crisis response is not prevention.

A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

Prevention means “to keep something from happening”

Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.
Three levels of Prevention

- **Tertiary**
  - Persons already engaged
- **Secondary**
  - At-risk persons
- **Primary Prevention**
  - All persons

**Three levels of Prevention**

"Shootings are unpredictable, so, prevention is not possible”

???

House Education and Labor Committee
Hearing on Campus Safety
May 15, 2007

**Shootings seem unpredictable, but, Prevention does not require prediction!**

House Education and Labor Committee
Hearing on Campus Safety
May 15, 2007

**Prevention does not require prediction.**

We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

Universal, primary, or tier 1 prevention

**Prevention to reduce risk factors**

We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

Selected, secondary, or tier 2 prevention

**Prevention at a crisis**

We can intervene to resolve crisis situations before they deteriorate into violence.

Intensive, tertiary, or tier 3 prevention
Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

- Intensive Interventions
  - Action plan
  - Individual behavior problems
  - Psychiatric treatment

- At-Risk Persons
  - Some problem behaviors or conflicts

- Campus Prevention
  - All students, staff, etc.

- Campus security programs
- Student code of conduct
- Employee standards
- Campus services for all students and staff

Intensive Interventions
- Student advising
- Short-term counseling
- Mental health services
- Job changes and transfers
- Disciplinary actions

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)

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 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 assessment is not designed to determine whether a student has MADE a threat, but whether a student POSES a threat.

Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech
Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal or Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Leads team, conducts Step 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments. Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required to serve on team Teachers, aides, other staff</td>
<td>Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.</td>
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School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.

Transient Threats

**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.

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.
Typical Questions

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say and do?
4. What did you mean when you said/did that?
5. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
6. What was the reason you said that?
7. What are you going to do now?

Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?

All Threats are not the same.

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)
“I’m gonna kick your butt.”
“There’s a bomb in the school.”
“Wait until I get my gun!”
“Let’s really make them pay for what they did.”

Context matters...

Transient versus substantive threats

Substantive Threats 30%
Transient Threats 70%

Step 2. Transient or Substantive?

- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat.
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive.

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.

Substantive threats: Factors to consider

- Age of student
- Capability of student to carry out the threat
- Student’s discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- Credibility of witness accounts
- 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.)

Case examples: Transient or substantive threat?

1. Two elementary students to throw paper wads pretending to bomb one another.
2. Two middle school students get in a shoving match. One says, “I’m gonna bust you up.”
3. A boy turns in an English essay that describes an especially violent scene from a war.
4. Two students get into a fight. After they are separated, both are sullen and quiet.
5. A student says he is being bullied. He was warned that if he told anyone, they would beat him up.

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
- Threat is substantive

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

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

- Threat is serious
- Threat is very serious

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.


Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

Step 4. Serious or very serious substantive threat?

- Substantive assault threats are classified serious. (“I’m gonna beat him up.”)
- Substantive threats to kill, rape, or inflict very serious injury are classified very serious. (“I’m gonna break his arm.”)
- Substantive threats involving a weapon are classified very serious.
Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

- Take precautions to protect potential victims. May consult with law enforcement.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Discipline student for threat.
- Determine appropriate intervention for student, such as counseling or dispute mediation.
- Follow up to verify that threat has been resolved and interventions in progress.

Substantive Case Steps

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
- Interview the student who made threat and any witnesses.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made, the student’s intentions, and the victims’ interpretations of the threat.

Step 2. Decide whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- Does the student express remorse and retract the threat?
- Is the student willing to make amends or resolve the conflict?
- What is the student’s history of discipline problems?

Step 4. Decide whether the threat is serious or very serious.
- Did this threat involve a weapon, or a threat to kill, rape, or inflict severe injury?

Step 5. Respond to the serious substantive threat.
- Take disciplinary action consistent with school policy.
- Identify any other student support or intervention needs.

Very serious cases are relatively rare

Substantive Threats

Transient Threats

Very Serious

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

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

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

Very Serious Substantive Threats

Threat Reported to Principal

Step 3. Evaluate if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Step 4. Determine if threat is serious or very serious.


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.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.
In a threat assessment, we try to determine why a student made a threat, and therefore how we can prevent the threat from being carried out.

Law Enforcement Investigation of Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Interview suspects and witnesses.
- Conduct searches for weapons and other evidence of planning.
- Serve as a resource for students with fears or information to share.
- Take appropriate protective action.

Mental Health Assessment

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

Our mental health assessments are not designed to predict violence, but to find ways to prevent violence.

Reviewed 221 studies of diverse school-based violence prevention programs
Average effect size = .25 for demonstration programs, which would reduce fighting 50% in a typical school

- Routine practice programs much less effective than demonstration programs (ES .10 vs .25)
- Need to study routine school practices.
Numerous Effective Programs

- Anger management
- Bullying prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Parenting skills
- Problem-solving
- Social competence
- Substance abuse resistance

Etc.

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.

Mental Health Assessment Report Template

Identifying Information
Give the student's name, age, grade, school, and other relevant identifying information.

Reason for Referral
State that this evaluation was requested by the school principal because the student made a threat of violence that was judged to be a very serious, substantive threat. Describe the threat, including the exact statement or threatening behavior, and where and when it took place.

Sources of Information
Describe or list the sources of information used in this report, including interviews from the principal, interviews with the student and witnesses, any parent interviews, and any psychological tests or scales administered.

Major Findings
Describe how the child presented and any important aspects of his or her mental state, including any indications of mental disorder. Identify any stresses, conflicts, or unmet needs that affect the child's functioning or bear on the threat incident.

Review the child's understanding of the threat and its meaning from his or her perspective. Note whether the child has a history of violent or aggressive behavior, and any findings from the assessment that raise concern about the child's potential for violence, such as access to firearms, peer encouragement to fight, drug use, or inadequate home supervision.

Recommendations
In general, the mental health professional should not be expected to make a definitive statement that a child is or is not dangerous; such statements go beyond current knowledge in the field of risk assessment. The report may identify risk factors and protective factors, and express concerns where there appear to be compelling risk factors. More importantly, the report should present recommendations for reducing the risk of violence, and it is the nature of these recommendations that should convey the nature and degree of concern about the potential for violence. In all cases, the goal is to reduce the risk of violence rather than predict violence. Recommendations may include a wide range of strategies, such as counseling, behavior modification, or other interventions that need to protect potential victims and broader efforts to reduce causes or prevent that precipitated the threat.

Behavior Support Plan

For use with:
- IEP
- 504 plan
- Any student

Virginia Legislation

(2013)

§22.1-79.4 "Each division superintendent shall establish, for each school, a threat assessment team that shall include persons with expertise in counseling, instruction, school administration, and law enforcement."
Virginia Legislation
(2013)

- 1,958 public schools
- 1.2 million students
- 2,952 threats to harm others

Student Threat Assessment:
The Virginia Model for Schools

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Topics
1. Evidence-based practice
2. Initial field-tests
3. Controlled studies
4. Statewide implementation

How can threat assessment become an established practice?

The Era of Evidence-Based Practice
Many groups identify evidence-based practices
“Research on threat assessment is not possible”

- The base rate for shootings is too low.
- Threat assessment is an art, not a science.
- Threat assessment cannot be quantified.
- Threat assessment requires clinical judgment.
- Schools would never permit research on such a sensitive topic.

Research on Threat Assessment


Memphis Field-Test

Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.
- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out

Behavioral Disorders, 2008

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Cross-sectional Study

- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
- 131 using locally developed models
- 54 not using threat assessment

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009
Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

School Psychology Review, 2012

Research on Threat Assessment

1. Threats are not carried out
2. Reduced suspension rates
3. Increased use of counseling
4. Improved school climate
   - Less bullying
   - More student willingness to seek help

2013 NREPP Listing

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VTAG) is a school-based mandated process designed to help school administrators, mental health staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threat students meeting criteria as defined through the guidelines. The VTAG is not designed to provide students in need of mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or other forms of mental health intervention. The VTAG should not replace mental health professionals. There is a link to the site for more information.

Governor’s School and Campus Safety Task Force

40 members, Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and Health and Human Resources

Student Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

1. Statewide inventory of practices
2. Identification of best practices
3. Assessment of outcomes by race
4. Develop education/training
5. Randomized control trial on training effectiveness

Problem Areas
1. Training needs
2. Full implementation
3. Identification of threats
4. Quality of assessment & intervention
5. Quality of data

Types of Threats (%)

- Unspecified: 13%
- Kill: 23%
- Use weapon: 18%
- Hit, beat: 15%
- Stab, cut: 10%
- Bomb: 5%
- Arson: 1%
- Sexual: 1%

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

Student Threats to Harm Others

Selected sample of 1,865 threat assessment cases reported by 785 Virginia public schools during the 2014-15 school year

Intended Victim (%)

- Student: 38%
- Teacher: 15%
- Whole school/group: 13%
- Staff/administrator: 7%
- Other: 4%

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.
Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools.

**Communication Method (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestured</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Threat Classification (%)**

- Very Serious Substantive: 6%
- Serious Substantive: 17%
- Transient: 77%

**Threat Outcomes (%)**

- Threat Not Attempted: 97.7%
- Attempted and Averted: 2.6%
- Threat Carried Out: 0.7%

**Disciplinary Outcome (%)**

- Reprimand: 53%
- Suspension out of school: 44%
- Suspension in school: 16%
- Expulsion reduced to suspension: 5%
- Detention after school: 1%
- Placed in juvenile detention: 1%
- Arrested: 1%
- Expelled: 1%

**School Placement Outcome (%)**

- No Change: 84%
- Transferred to alternative school: 8%
- Homebound instruction: 5%
- Transferred to regular school: 1%
- Other: 2%

**Schoolwide Suspension Rates (%)**

- Short-term suspensions among all students for any infraction in schools with at least one threat assessment case, 2014-2015
Student Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

- Although there are training needs and fidelity concerns, analyses show generally positive results for statewide implementation of student threat assessment.
- Schools are making differentiated assessments, recognizing that most cases are not serious.
- Most students are able to return to school, with few arrests or expulsions.
- Similar outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and White students.

Virginia Youth Violence Project

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Research Team

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How is violence prevention like Rubik’s Cube?

1. Not one problem - multiple problems
2. Not one solution - multiple solutions