Student Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going
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Overview

1. The origins of K-12 threat assessment
2. Research using the UVA threat assessment model
3. Future directions

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

- Bullied and teased for years
- Depressed and withdrawn
- Paranoid delusions and auditory hallucinations
- Befriended by a fringe group of students
- Encouraged an attack
- Warned peers
- No one told an adult

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)

Download at www.fbi.gov
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.

Objections to Threat Assessment
- Schools will over-react to students and increase suspension.
- You cannot do research on threat assessment because shootings are so rare.

K-12 Challenges
- Developmental differences
- Pervasive bullying and peer conflict
- High frequency of threats
- High rate of aggressive behavior

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence
A collaborative project of:
University of Virginia Curry School of Education
Albemarle County Public Schools
Charlottesville City Public Schools
Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund

Team roles
Principal or Assistant Principal
Leads team, conducts Step 1.

School Resource Officer
Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.

Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)
Team member to conduct mental health assessments.

Not required to serve on team
Teachers, aids, other staff
Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.
Field-Test Schools

22 Elementary schools
6 Middle schools
4 High schools
3 Alternative schools
35 Total

What did the students threaten to do?

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

N = 188 cases

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

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 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.

Transient versus substantive threats

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.
  - If serious, Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
  - If very serious, Step 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.
  - Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

Very Serious Substantive 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.
  - If serious, Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
  - If very serious, Step 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.
  - 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.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.

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.
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.

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.

Research on Threat Assessment

1. Initial field-test study
2. Memphis field test
3. High school climate study
4. High school suspension study
5. Randomized controlled trial
Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

What did the students threaten to do?

N = 188 cases

How did schools respond to 188 threats?

Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

Memphis Field-Trial

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

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

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

Behavioral Disorders, 2008

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009
Findings for Virginia Model Schools

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

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Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

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.

2011, NASSP Bulletin
High School Discipline Study

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

Randomized Controlled Trial

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

2013 NREPP Listing


Virginia Public Schools

133 school divisions
2,002 public schools
1.2 million students

Virginia Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

Source: UVA training records and Safety Audit Survey records
Governor’s School and Campus Safety Task Force

40 members, Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and Health and Human Resources
http://dcjs.virginia.gov/vcss/SchoolCampusSafetyTaskForce/

2013 Legislation HB 2344

A. Each local school board shall adopt policies for the establishment of threat assessment teams, including the assessment of and intervention with students whose behavior may pose a threat to the safety of school staff or students consistent with the model policies developed by the Virginia Center for School Safety....

2013 Legislation HB 2344

C. 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. Threat assessment teams may be established to serve one or more schools as determined by the division superintendent....

2013 Legislation HB 2344

E. Each threat assessment team established pursuant to this section shall report quantitative data on its activities according to guidance developed by the Department of Criminal Justice Services.
Future Directions

- Statewide implementation
- Inventory of practices
- Fidelity standards
- Assessment of outcomes
- Technical assistance
- National dissemination