

SAFE SCHOOLS PLAN – THREAT ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL

Based upon recent research by the United States Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, done in concert with physicians, psychologists and school social workers, the following procedure will be used for dealing with threats made by students. While this procedure is developed specifically for school students, it has applicability to instances of potential workplace violence as well.

This threat assessment procedure is not profiling. It is a method, based upon sound research, to (1) classify the level of threat and (2) give guidance for responding to the threat, based upon a four pronged analysis. The purpose of this procedure is (1) to help to make sure students and staff *are* safe, (2) to help make sure students and staff *feel* safe, and (3) to help to determine what services are needed by the student making the threats. Finally, this procedure is a guide; it does not purport to be predictive of future violence, when a student has not acted violently or threatened violence. It is used only after a student has made some type of a threat.

What is a threat? A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something. It can be written, spoken or symbolic, such as a hand gesture. Not all threats or threateners are the same. Many, in fact, most threateners are unlikely to carry out their threats. Some persons act out violently and never utter a threat. Because threat assessment relies upon an analysis of the threatener's background, identifying the threatener is necessary for an informed assessment. In some, perhaps many cases, the identity of the person making the threat is not known. In those cases, the assessment must be made on the threat alone.

Types of Threats

A **direct threat** identifies a specific act against a specific target or person and is delivered in a straightforward, explicit manner.

An **indirect threat** tends to be vague, unclear and ambiguous. Violence may be implied, but the plan, victims, etc., are unknown, such as "I could kill everyone at this school." They are also sometimes phrased tentatively, such as "If I wanted to..."

A **veiled threat** is one that strongly implies, but does not explicitly threaten violence, such as "We would be better off without the principal around anymore." The interpretation is left to the potential victim or others.

A **conditional threat** is the type often seen in extortion cases. It warns that violence will occur if certain conditions are (or are not) met.

Other Factors in Threat Assessment

- Specific plausible details
- The emotional content of the threat
- Precipitating stressors
- Predisposing factors (four pronged approach)

Levels of Risk

Low level threat-a threat that poses minimal threat to the victim or public safety.

- Threat is vague and indirect
- Information is inconsistent, implausible or lacks detail
- Threat lacks realism
- Content suggests the person is unlikely to carry out the threat

Medium level threat at threat that could be carried out but does not appear entirely realistic.

- Threat is more direct and concrete
- Wording of the threat suggests the actor has given some thought to how the act will be carried out
- General indication of a possible place and time
- There are no strong indicators that the actor has taken preparatory steps to carry through on the threat, but there may be a veiled allusion to the possibility, such as a reference to a book or movie
- There may be a statement seeking to convey the threat is not empty, such as "I really mean it!"

Safe Schools Plan – Threat Assessment Protocol – page 2

High level threat a threat that appears to pose an imminent and serious danger to the safety of others

Threat is specific, plausible and direct

Threat suggests that concrete steps have been taken to carry out the threat, such as allusions to having practiced with a weapon or to the fact that the threatener has the victim under surveillance.

Four Pronged Assessment Approach

In dealing with threats, a multidisciplinary four pronged approach is suggested. Whenever possible, the parent or guardian should be a part of the assessment process, as soon as possible.

Prong one: The personality of the student- refers to the way (within a specific developmental context) a student copes with conflict, disappointment, humiliation and other negatives. It includes how the student feels about himself, what kind of resiliency they have and what kinds of attitudes they have toward others. These are just a few of the areas to be considered.

Prong two: Family dynamics- refers to the patterns of behavior, belief systems, roles and customs of the family. The degree to which a student is or is not supported in the family unit is looked at. Specifically, the presence of family violence is determined.

Prong three: School dynamics- refers to the patterns of behavior, belief systems, roles and customs of the school culture. It looks at what values and behaviors are rewarded or castigated, either formally or informally within the school

Prong four: Social dynamics- refers to the patterns of behavior, belief systems, roles and customs of the larger community in which the student lives. These patterns have an impact upon the way a student feels about herself and others, as well as how they cope with stress.

School Organization and Procedures

1. Principals should designate one person in the building to be the threat assessment coordinator. This is the person who will be responsible for:
 - Receiving the initial information from any source and commencing the assessment process.
 - Ensuring that the security department is made aware of the threat.
 - Calling together the multidisciplinary team, if that is warranted.

In a secondary school, the threat assessment coordinator should be the assistant principal in charge of security if possible. In elementary schools, the principal will probably perform this function, but social workers or psychologists may also be assigned this task.

2. The four pronged approach can be used as follows: A preliminary assessment is done on the level of threat itself, as outlined above. If the identity of the threatener is known, the assessor(s) quickly collect as much information as is available in the four areas categorized above. The assessor can be a counselor, principal, social worker, psychologist, or security staff member. If possible, a team should be developed to assess the threat.
3. Security should always be apprised of a threat assessment that is ongoing.
4. If the student appears to have serious problems in the majority of the four prongs or areas, and if the threat is assessed as high or medium, the threat should be taken more seriously and appropriate action initiated by the school and law enforcement should be initiated as soon as possible.
5. In order to effect a rapid assessment, it may not be possible to evaluate a student thoroughly in each of the four prongs. Nonetheless, having as much information as possible about a student and his or her life is important in order to determine if that student is capable and under enough stressors and predisposing factors to carry out the threat.

Safe Schools Plan – Threat Assessment Protocol – page 3

Future Training

Security will continue to offer training to more fully acquaint appropriate staff with the assessment protocol and its use.