

Threat Assessment Teams in our Schools:

A Guide for School Personnel and Parents



The School District of Lee County is continuing to take steps to protect our children and employees from threats or violence in our schools. In 2018, the Florida Legislature passed and the governor signed into law the *Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act*, and the School District is establishing amending policies and procedures for the prevention of violence on school grounds, including the assessment of and intervention with individuals whose behavior poses a threat to the safety of the school community.

Threat Assessment is an important aspect of the changes being made. Threat Assessment is a violence prevention strategy that involves identifying student threats to commit a violent act, determining the seriousness of the threat, and developing intervention plans that protect potential victims and address the underlying problem or conflict that stimulated the threatening behavior.

The goals of threat assessment are to keep schools safe and to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger, hopelessness, or despair. Effective threat assessment provides school professionals with useful information about a student's risks and personal resources. Among the other potential student risks that can be identified and prevented are suicide, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse, dropping out, and criminal activity.

What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a behavioral approach to violence prevention that focuses on threats and other forms of student conflict before they escalate into violent behavior. The threat assessment team uses a problem solving team approach to evaluate the risk of violence posed by someone and to intervene and resolve the issues that underlie the threatening behavior.

Is Threat Assessment Punitive or Preventative?

The goal of the threat assessment process is to be preventative, not punitive...a threat assessment focuses principally upon the following four factors:

1. Identifying persons whose behavior is threatening, aberrant or concerning;
2. Gathering relevant information (through lawful and ethical means) and investigating the situation;
3. Assessing the person and the situation; and
4. Managing the person and situation to prevent violence and mitigate risk of harm.

Threat assessment programs incorporate core findings from research on intentional violence occurring in schools, including the fact that:

- Prior to such incidents, others usually knew of a perpetrator's ideas, plans, or preparations;
- Most perpetrators did not threaten their targets directly prior to the act of violence;
- Most perpetrators had significant difficulties with losses or failures;
- There are no accurate or useful profiles for a person who engages in targeted violence in schools;
- School based attacks are rarely sudden or impulsive acts; and
- Despite prompt law enforcement response, most incidents were stopped by other means, and were short in duration.

This process addresses the question: *Is the person on a pathway to violence?*

The threat assessment process is not designed to be adversarial or punitive, but to be a fair, objective, reasonable and timely approach to prevent violence or harm to self or others, where possible. A critical aspect of this process involves school community members reporting any potential threats in a timely and accurate manner.

It is important to remember that the role of the threat assessment team is protective and preventative.

The team's goal is to maintain the safety of all persons involved, while also connecting the potential perpetrator with appropriate intervention.

What is a Pathway to Violence?

A pathway to violence often follows four steps:

- 1 Ideation or expressed thoughts, of the use of violence to address a perceived grievance,
- 2 Planning as to how to implement that violence,
- 3 Preparation for violence including acquisition of means, method, and opportunity, and
- 4 The implementation of violence.

The guiding principles of the threat assessment process center around the basic tenet that targeted school violence is the end result of an often discernible process of thinking and behavior which the threat assessment team, with the right training and processes, can identify and act upon to prevent violence.

What approach to Threat Assessment does the District use?

The School District has been implementing the Threat Assessment guidelines, an evidence-based model developed by Dr. Dewey Cornell and the University of Virginia. The guidelines have been widely adopted by schools in Virginia and other states. The school district will have a multi-disciplinary team at each school that conducts the threat assessment process. Teams will include individuals with expertise in counseling, instruction, school administration, and law enforcement. Persons with other expertise that may be helpful in a given case will be consulted. The team will evaluate and manage any potential threat.

Communication is essential to the overall effectiveness of school threat assessment teams. Everyone must share timely information!

Teams will implement the policies adopted by the school board and report quantitative data on its activities to the Florida Department of Education Office of Safe Schools.

Essential items of an effective threat assessment team include:

- Developing basic procedures and guidelines;
- Conducting threat assessment training;
- Consulting with legal counsel;
- Keeping records and tracking data;
- Communicating with parents and the community; and

- Forging partnerships with mental health and community support resources.

Who is on the Threat Assessment Team?

The threat assessment team includes a School Administrator; School Counselor, School Psychologist, Security Specialist, and School Resource Officer, each with different roles for supporting the assessment and intervention process.

What are Teams looking for?

When a potential threat comes to the threat assessment team it is their job to determine not only whether a threat has been made or communicated, but also if a person poses a danger to self or others and is potentially on a pathway to violence. A threat may involve threatening statements to others or behaviors that are threatening, aberrant, or concerning. The team then implements a strategy to continue to assess, monitor, and manage the case.

The goal of the threat assessment process is the safety of the school community, ensuring that a range of strategies such as mentoring, counseling, support, confrontation, addressing inappropriate behavior and setting reasonable boundaries, termination of employment, or an arrest or prosecution are used in a measured and appropriate manner. The ultimate objective is to prevent violence.

What happens during a Threat Assessment?

The threat assessment model follows three basic steps:

1. reporting and identifying threats,
2. assessing and classifying threats, and
3. responding to and managing threats.

In the first step, students, staff, or other individuals who identify a threat are to report this behavior to a school administrator, such as the principal or assistant principal. When a threat is reported, the school administrator should immediately conduct a threat assessment that includes reviewing the threatening behavior or communication; reviewing educational records; and interviewing the individual who made the threat, the recipients of the threat, and other witnesses who have knowledge of the threat. The purpose of this interview is to assess the threat in context, so the meaning of the threat and whether the individual intends to carry out the threat is understood.

The threat assessment team determines if the threat is easily and readily resolved, otherwise known as a "transient" threat. Examples of transient threats are jokes or statements made in anger that are expressions of feeling or figures of speech rather than expressions of a genuine intent to harm someone. Any threat that cannot be clearly resolved as "transient" and contains indicators that expresses a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate incident is treated as a "substantive" threat.

Substantive threats always require protective action to prevent the threat from being carried out, such as notification. In response to very serious substantive threats, the threat assessment team takes additional safety precautions a referral for a mental health evaluation. The team will consider recommendations from the mental health evaluation to reduce the risk of violence and to address the problem or conflict underlying the threat. For both transient and substantive threats, there is an emphasis on helping students to resolve conflicts.

What are key questions in the Threat Assessment Process?

Key questions in the threat assessment process include the following:

Has the person shown inappropriate interest, fascination or fixation indicating identification with any of the following?

- Incidents of mass violence such as terrorism, school or workplace violence, or mass murderers;
- Weapons used in such incidents, including recent acquisition of any relevant weapons;
- Specific perpetrators of mass violence such as terrorism, workplace violence, or mass murderers;
- Particular grievances or motivations for the use of violence; and
- Obsessive pursuit, stalking or monitoring of others.

A “yes” to any of these circumstances does not necessarily indicate the person in question poses a threat, or is otherwise in need of some assistance. Many people are interested in these topics, but never pose any threat. However, if a person shows some fascination or fixation on any of these topics and has raised concern in another way; such as expressing an idea to do harm to others or to themselves, recently purchasing a weapon, or showing an attitude of helplessness or despair – the combination of these facts should increase the team’s concern about the person in question.

- *Has the person engaged in attack-related behaviors – that is, any behavior that moves an idea of harm forward toward actual harm?*
- *Does the person have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?*
- *Is the person experiencing hopelessness, desperation and/or despair?*
- *Does the person have a trusting and sustained relationship with at least one responsible person such as a parent, teacher, coach, advisor, and colleague?*
- *Does the person see violence as an acceptable, desirable, or the only way to solve problems?*

- *Is the person's conversation and "story" consistent with their actions?*
- *Are other people concerned about the person's potential for violence?*
- *What circumstances might affect the likelihood of violence?*

What is aberrant or threatening behavior and how should a report be made?

Where an immediate threat to life or physical safety exists immediate notification to law enforcement must be made.

Aberrant behavior is that which is atypical for the person or situation and causes concern for the safety or well-being of those involved. Aberrant behavior for an individual involves out-of-character responses or actions which could lead to violence. These can include:

- Unusual social distancing or isolation of individuals from peers and family members;
- Sullen or depressed behavior from an otherwise friendly and positive person;
- Out of context outbursts of verbal or physical aggression;
- Increased levels of agitation, frustration and anger;
- Confrontational, accusatory or blaming behavior;
- An unusual interest in weapons; and
- Fixation on violence as means of addressing a grievance.

If an individual exhibits out of character behaviors, witnesses should seek to respond in a reasonable, fair, timely, and systematic manner to help teams to identify signs that a person may be on a pathway to violence, ensuring that appropriate measures are taken before violence occurs.

Concerns should be shared with someone on the school's threat assessment team. If team members are not known, concerns should be shared with a school administrator, teacher, or the School Resource Officer.

What happens after a report is made?

The threat assessment process follows the following key steps:

Step 1: Notification of a threat

People with concerns should notify the threat assessment team, school administrators or teachers, or law enforcement about the nature of the concerns. All members of the community have a responsibility to each other to share concerns for the safety and well-being of the community, and all of its members.

When a report is made, the threat assessment team will initiate a fact-finding process, which would include:

- The details of the threatening or aberrant behavior;
- Any witnesses to contribute to the fact finding efforts;
- Information regarding the background and circumstances of the person alleged to be engaging in threatening or aberrant behavior;
- Information regarding the targets of the threat;
- Other people in the school who have first-hand experiences with the person of concern (such as a coach or music director, or work colleague); and
- Preservation and documentation of any threatening communication or behaviors.

Step 2: Information gathering

Next, the team gathers more information about the subject of concern. Some potential sources for additional information might include:

- Coaches, other instructors
- Staff
- Friends / Classmates
- Employer
- Parents
- Local law enforcement
- Community services
- Online information / search

Step 3: Analysis of information

Next the team analyzes information gathered through the threat assessment process.

Step 4: Assessing the threat

If the team believes the person poses a threat, then the team will develop and implement a plan to respond to the threat; and so manage and reduce the risk.

Step 5: Make the assessment

Once the team has answered the above questions (recognizing that a team may not be able to obtain information regarding all of the questions) and have documented its

findings, the team then assesses the threat posed by the individual by answering the following:

- *Does the person pose a threat of targeted violence at school?*
- *Is the person's behavior consistent with movement on a pathway toward violence?*
- *Does the person's current situation and setting incline him or her toward or away from targeted violence?*

If the team believes that the person poses a threat, the team will then develop and implement a plan to respond to the threat to manage and reduce the risk.

What about FERPA?

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (or FERPA) should *not* be an impediment to an effective threat assessment, nor to case management. FERPA protects student's educational records only, rather than observations and direct communications.

School administrators, teachers and other staff may share information including educational records with other school officials that have a need to know the information; this includes the members of the threat assessment team.

Where safety concerns exist, schools can share information with others outside the school that can help address safety concerns, such as parents, law enforcement officials, and mental health professionals, that can help address the safety concerns. Additional information regarding FERPA can be found at:

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.

Is Threat Assessment required?

Yes. Florida legislation, passed in 2018 require that each district school board shall adopt policies for the establishment of threat assessment teams at each school whose duties include the coordination of resources and assessment and intervention of with individuals whose behavior may pose a threat to the safety of school staff or students consistent with the model policies developed by the Office of Safe Schools.

Sources

www.dcjs.virginia.gov Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools

Threat Assessment Teams Procedures Manual, SDLC (pending adoption)