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# Making Schools Safer

Ensuring safe learning environments for elementary and secondary school students, educators, administrators, and others is essential. Everyone – whether a member of the school community or even a resident of the local area – has a role in identifying potential threats to a school and sharing that information with those who can take action to assess and manage the risk posed. Although infrequent, a single act of a targeted school attack impacts students, teachers, the local community, and at times the entire nation. Consider what role you can play in the larger efforts to make our schools safer.

## WHY THE U. S. SECRET SERVICE?

After a series of high profile school-based attacks, the U.S. Secret Service partnered with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug-free Schools to study targeted school violence. This study, the *Safe School Initiative*, published in 2002, examined school-based attacks carried out by current students or those who had recently left school. The study created a foundation of knowledge and guidance related to threat assessment – that is identifying, assessing, and managing risks – in K-12 schools. Following the study, the Secret Service again partnered with the Department of Education on an effort that examined why students who had information about a planned attack either withheld or came forward with the information. This second study, published in 2008, identified aspects of a school's climate that either facilitated or hindered information sharing. Since then, the Secret Service, through its National Threat Assessment Center, has continued to provide training to thousands of school administrators, faculty, staff, and law enforcement on developing innovative programs that foster safer school climates, enhance the trust students have in school staff and administrators, effectively identify potential threats, and assess and handle them in a thorough and systematic way.

## WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

There are many aspects to creating positive school climates and enhancing school safety. School administrators manage reports of all types of concerning behavior, ranging from vandalism to bullying, fights to drugs, suicidal behaviors and violence. With limited resources, schools must be creative in how they address these issues.

## WHAT ARE SOME CONSIDERATIONS?

It is impossible to prevent all incidents, but creating a **Comprehensive Prevention Plan** and reviewing procedures to identify gaps can reduce the likelihood that a violent attack may occur. There are several facets to a prevention plan:

**Foster a Climate of Respect and Trust** – Reinforce, at all levels of the school community, positive behaviors, respectful interactions, and pro-social relationships. Ensure teachers, staff, and administrators take fair and consistent action when they learn of a situation that might require intervention and/or discipline. Teach and encourage students to use conflict resolution, peer mediation, active listening, and other non-violent ways to solve problems. Develop anti-bullying programs and educate students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators on what steps to take if they know bullying is occurring.

**Build Relationships** – Trusting relationships between adults and students are the product of quality connections, respectful communications, and frequent interactions. Schools in which students feel connected to each other and to adults promote a safe educational environment and encourage communication between students and teachers. Start building relationships between the students and the school before the first day of class. Ensure each student has a trusting relationship with an adult, whether it is a teacher, coach, member of the custodial staff, or a school nurse.

**Promote Communication** – Schools should foster a climate where students feel comfortable sharing information they have regarding a potentially threatening situation with a responsible adult. Students may be aware of concerning behavior among their peers, or the presence of individuals who do not belong in the school. Mechanisms for reporting vary across districts, from those systems that encourage reporting of the information to any adult at the school, to more formal systems that may have anonymous online reporting systems. Each district should develop a model that works for the schools within their community and ensure that there is a central reporting mechanism for students and others to report their concerns.

**Identify Concerning Behaviors** – Ensure that students, parents, teachers, and staff are familiar with how to report behaviors and/or communications they learn about that raise concern. Such behaviors and communications include, among others, expressions of hopelessness, drug use, suicidal gestures or statements, depression, threats of violence, unusual interest in weapons or incidents of mass violence, and problems or stressful situations, including bullying, that negatively impact the student's coping and well-being inside and outside of the school environment.

**Maintain a Threat Assessment Team** – Having designated team members who meet regularly, are familiar with students and the community, and are trained in threat assessment is essential. Districts may develop a team based at individual schools, develop a district wide team managed by central office, include community partners with threat assessment expertise, or contract threat assessment services out to a community partner.

**Reinforce Clear Policies and Procedures** – Policies should clearly identify threat assessment team roles and responsibilities, define the threshold of concern for initiating a threat assessment, describe the types of information that will be gathered, and the actions that will be followed from initiation to conclusion of the threat assessment inquiry or investigation. The threshold for intervention should be low to ensure potential threats are assessed.

**Provide Resources to Manage Concerning Students** – Successful management of a threatening situation requires substantial time and effort. Resources and strategies should be able to control or contain the situation or student in order to prevent an attack, protect and offer assistance to students and/or staff who may be possible targets, and provide support and guidance through a variety of resources and systems that help the student of concern solve his or her problems and reduce emotional pain. If a student is facing possible expulsion or suspension as a consequence of certain actions, the school should consider ways in which these can be safely enacted and identify resources that may assist the student during this time. Schools should use all resources available to them, including services provided by the larger community, such as mental health evaluation and treatment, and law enforcement investigation and assistance.

**Promote Information Sharing Between the School and Community Stakeholders** – Students engage in activities outside of the school community, such as intramural sports, service organizations, after-school programs, and part-time jobs. Emphasize the importance of having those adults who interact with the students outside of the school community to share information about a student if they become concerned.

**Liaison with Law Enforcement** – Foster relationships with local law enforcement personnel. Local law enforcement or school resource officers can serve as a member of the threat assessment team and can assist with gathering and sharing information. In some districts, collaboration may need to occur across multiple jurisdictions, such as local police departments, sheriff's offices, and state police barracks. Where school resource officers are not present, encourage law enforcement personnel to have a presence in the school, such as having lunch in the cafeteria or completing administrative work in the school library, a patrol car in the school parking lot, or even an empty office.

**Require Consistent Training Among Stakeholders** – Teachers, administrators, other staff, and community stakeholders should be trained on how to properly respond when they receive information about a threatening or concerning situation. A relationship among school officials, law enforcement, and others should be established prior to an incident. Reinforce these relationships through ongoing scenario-based training to ensure parties understand their roles and responsibilities, how information will be shared, and what steps will be taken.

## WHERE CAN YOU FIND MORE INFORMATION?

The Secret Service, in partnership with the Department of Education, published three reports on threat assessment and preventing targeted violence in schools:

- *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States;*
- *Threat Assessment in School: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates;* and
- *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack.*

THESE REPORTS, AS WELL AS OTHERS, ARE AVAILABLE ON THE NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER WEBSITE:

<https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/>.