

North Branford School District Threat Assessment Program

Carter Welch

The North Branford Public Schools, like many around the nation, has engaged in a re-evaluation process of its policies and procedures for recognizing and intervening when a student presents as a threat. As the district coordinator for safe school climate (a required position by Connecticut statute) I was charged with leading this effort. My educational experience factored heavily into how I viewed this process and how we as a district sifted through the process. As a former high school assistant principal and dean of students, my leadership and day-to-day interactions sometimes involved dealing with students who presented as unsafe to themselves or others. Although we dealt with these incidents in a serious and supportive manner, we lacked a formalized procedure or consistent documentation effort to deal with these challenges.

Additionally, I often wondered what kinds of factors or incidents had occurred previously with particular students throughout their K-12 experience that would have assisted us in dealing with them more effectively. In my current role as an elementary principal, I view my role as pivotal in creating “age appropriate” recognition, documentation, and responses to potential threats, and that our threat assessment efforts at the elementary level would travel with the student and assist throughout a K-12 experience when and if additional threat scenarios might arise during the middle or high school years.

Another part of my experience that weighed significantly in the process of creating a community-specific threat assessment protocol system for the district were those notorious words I had often heard at all educational levels by parents, teachers, students, and others...i.e. “she is off”, or “he gives me the creeps”, or “there is just something unsettling about that student”, or “I would not be surprised if he did something someday”. I reflected heavily on the

following questions: what do we do for those students? what evidence can we collect or what evaluation can we provide? and ultimately what do we do to comfort those who make those statements? These experiences and questions would frame my leadership role in driving the process to create a protocol that was based on local needs, was consistent, useful, and age appropriate at the K-12 levels.

The Starting Point

The North Branford Public Schools are committed to assuring the safety of all school community members. To meet this end, we began investigating the potential of a K-12 procedure to assess threats as an important and missing piece of our comprehensive and broad based system already in place to create a safe climate at all schools in the district. The measures described in our school based threat assessment protocols are constructed from research-based practices developed at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education (Cornell & Sheras, 2006), guidance provided jointly by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski & Reddy, 2002), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation report on school shootings (O'Toole, 2000), as well as more recently from Connecticut's Sandy Hook Advisory Commission Report (April, 2014).

The Process

1) Form a representative committee

We took effort to include a small yet cohesive and representative group to form this protocol. The group consisted of school psychologists, social workers, building principals, central office personnel, teachers, parents, and students. The group set a vision of creating a user-

friendly protocol that was clear, easily enacted, and comprehensive in its approach to a threat.

2) Review existing research and policies

We reviewed the research mentioned above from the University of Virginia, from US government agencies, state agencies (mainly Connecticut but also Colorado and New Jersey), and local task forces.

3) Create a draft protocol

Through much work, discussion, collaboration, review, reflection, and refinement came a draft protocol that reflected our local needs and our goals/vision that we set forth.

4) Foster K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 adaptations to draft protocol

The draft protocol was then given to building principals to share and tweak with their school leadership teams, but the fiber and spirit of the protocol was to be protected. This step resulted in very little change for the building levels (adaptations were made for age appropriate responses and communication efforts).

5) Submit draft for review

The draft protocol was then shared through administrative council and the Board of Education subcommittee.

A Sample Protocol: Jerome Harrison Elementary School Threat Assessment Protocol

Jerome Harrison Elementary School is committed to assuring the safety of all school community members. This threat assessment protocol is one piece of a broad based system in place to preserve a safe climate at our school. As such this protocol prescribes direction, specific steps, and actions to be followed if a threat is perceived.

The protocol described here is founded upon collaboration and communication to prevent violence by recognizing any risk factors and warning signs for a given situation. Every member of the school community must know how to communicate with school authorities and members of the assessment team when they notice risk factors or warning signs and or report a perceived threat.

Understanding and assessing the context of the situation when a reported threat was made must be a priority for the assessment team. A thorough understanding of the full context of the perceived threat including pertinent history of the student making the threat, relevant background information, and current circumstances will allow the assessment team to be sure that no significant factors were overlooked during the assessment process.

The assessment will be based on facts and reliable information. The assessment team will verify all information in a timely fashion. Profiling of students or drawing conclusions based on vague attributes will be avoided. Information will be gathered from multiple teachers, school staff members, family members, community health care providers and other pertinent sources beyond the school walls when possible. Information will be shared as needed, without violating student privacy rights, to be sure that all facts are integrated in a way that provides a thorough understanding of the perceived threat.

The information mentioned above is critically important, but the Jerome Harrison Elementary Threat Assessment Protocol and Assessment Team also place great emphasis on “developmentally appropriate and age appropriate factors” involved at the K-2 level when investigating and responding to a perceived threat. A student who *makes* a threat does not always *pose* a threat. This protocol will allow the assessment team to determine what action

needs to be taken as a result of a perceived threat. All perceived threats and reported concerns require a thorough response.

STEPS FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT

1. Convene the Threat Assessment/Safe School Climate Team

The principal or school psychologist who receives a report of a perceived threat will convene the team immediately.

2. Conduct Interviews and Gather Information

The school administrator and or school psychologist begin the interview/investigation process according to the safe school climate forms.

3. Decide If Threat Is Transient Or Substantive

Transient threat:

- A statement made as a figure of speech or jokingly with no intention of inflicting harm. If the target of the threat is present, he or she does not feel that danger is present.
- A statement made when emotions are heightened or in order to intimidate, which is quickly retracted or soon followed up with an apology.
- An age appropriate misuse of words, which was not intended to cause harm

Substantive threat:

- A statement that expresses intent to harm someone that extends beyond a discrete episode of heightened emotion.
- The student making the threat does not retract the statement, or offer a genuine apology.

4. Respond To A Transient Threat

- a.** The response is dependent on individual student involved and the particular context of the threat and is always documented according to safe school climate forms.

Parent communication is made and possible disciplinary action and or counseling and conflict resolution training may be enacted.

b. The parent of the student targeted by a transient threat is also contacted. This is done to reassure the parent that you investigated a situation and found that there is no danger for the targeted student, and it is an opportunity to determine if the parent of the targeted student has any concerns about the student relationship; follow up counseling may be enacted.

5. Respond To A Substantive Threat

- a. Immediately take action to protect intended victims, communicate with school security and police as needed.
- b. Keep the student who made the threat under direct supervision at all times.
- c. Consider whether a lockdown is needed to locate the student and/or provide protection to the school community, and enact associated steps if needed.
- d. Determine disciplinary actions
- e. Notify and meet with parent/guardian of the student who made the threat, may include police and or mental health involvement.

**** During all responses to a threat, according to safe school climate procedures a specific and individualized plan will be created for the perpetrator and victim of the threat.**

Communication Response

Following investigation and response of a threat appropriate (a balance of confidentiality, transparency, and safety) communication is made to staff, parents, students, and the community as directed by the building principal in consultation with Central Office.

Current Status

Staff Training

All teachers and building staff were trained in the use of the protocol and given some basic information about threats. The next phase of the training session was developed to be discussion based around case scenarios that might result in the threat assessment protocol being enacted. Staff worked in small groups to create a response and then groups shared out in a whole group discussion. To conclude the training staff members had the opportunity for a question and answer session. Each staff training session was led the by the district school climate coordinator (me), the building based school climate coordinator, a school psychologist, and the principal.

Community Sharing

An important step in our process was to also hold a community forum, where parents and members of the community could learn about the protocol and how it integrated with safe school climate efforts. This session essentially followed the staff-training model. An introduction and background was provided, there was an opportunity to explore case scenarios, and there was a question and answer session. Although not as strongly attended as we desired, it was still an effort to build shared understanding and collaboration around school safety and response to safety issues.

Building Leadership

Currently each school has created their own threat assessment team and they enact the protocol and successive steps as they see fit according to information they receive. As a district safe school climate coordinator, I hold several meetings during the year with each school's principal and building safe school climate coordinator and a portion of these meetings will be devoted to discussing scenarios involving the threat assessment protocol.

Reflection

As we continue to navigate the ever-changing landscape of school safety and as we continue to work young people affected by changing societal and family stressors the need for a mental health approach to assessing threats is an essential component to a safe school climate. In order to effectively meet this end a clear, consistent, and readily understood protocol is necessary. We need to ensure we respond to concerns, investigate thoroughly, assess the situation, clearly document our efforts, and enact a reaction that is appropriate to ensure safety for all.

When it comes to physical injuries and first aid schools and employees know the A, B, C's, document their efforts through clear incident reports, and enact appropriate responses...we need to replicate this clarity and consistency with mental health scenarios, and I believe the threat assessment protocol is that answer.

The information presented to you here is by no means an exhaustive case study, but rather a short and hopefully practical example of how one local district and school came to realize what they needed and how they made it come together in a way that was proactive and supportive of existing positive school climate measures.

For more information, please contact Carter Welch, Ed.D. at cwelch@northbranfordschools.org

References

Cornell, D., & Sheras, P. (2006). *Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Cornell, D., Sheras, P. Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., et al., (2004).

Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 527–546.

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education

O’Toole, M. E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, VA: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Sandy Hook Advisory Committee.

<http://www.governor.ct.gov/malloy/cwp/view.asp?a=3997&q=516496>

Williams, F., & Cornell, D. (2006). Student willingness to seek help for threats of violence. *Journal of School Violence*, 5, 35–49.

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R. A., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education.