Six Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

Threat assessment is a central component in preventing targeted school violence. The threat assessment process involves *identifying, assessing, and managing* individuals who might pose a risk of violence to an identified or identifiable target. Implementation of a threat assessment process is informed by six underlying principles.

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or "traits."
- An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.
- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student has made a threat.

Principle 1: Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and often times discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Students and former students who committed targeted attacks at schools almost always thought about their attacks in advance, and did not "just snap."
- Students who carry out school attacks may consider possible targets; talk with others about their ideas and intentions; and record their thinking in diaries and journals or on a Web site. They may seek out weapons to use in the attack, and they may practice with these weapons in preparation for the attack. The actions of these attackers may be deliberate and occur over days and weeks, months or years.

Principle 2: Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the person, the situation, the setting, and the target.
- Understanding and preventing acts of targeted violence require a focus on these four component parts and their interaction: *the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.*

The potential attacker: To determine the risk of targeted violence, a threat assessor must gather information about the potential attacker. In a threat assessment inquiry or investigation, a major question is: How has this student dealt with situations that have led him or her to see life as unbearably stressful? Individuals who in times of great stress have considered or acted upon ideas of suicide or violence toward others, or both, should be considered persons of increased concern.

The situation: Investigators should examine circumstances and significant events in the life of the individual, especially recent events that have been overwhelmingly stressful. For students who engaged in school-based attacks, those events included having been bullied and humiliated, especially in public; loss of significant relationships; and perceived failures or loss of status. Almost all school shooters experienced some major situational stress at some point before their attack.

The setting: The third factor to consider is the specific setting at the time that the student came to authorities' attention as possibly posing a threat of targeted school violence. Do fellow students, friends, or others say–directly or indirectly–that violence is not a solution to problems? Do these people suggest ways to get help and assistance? In a school, are there respectful

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connections among students and adults, networks of trusting relationships,
that facilitates non-violent problem-solving? Or is the idea of violence proposed,
supported, accepted, or ignored by those who know the potential attacker?
In many school shootings, other young persons knew about the shooter's
interest in mounting an attack. In some cases, clear warnings were dismissed
or ignored. In others, friends and fellow students of the shooter encouraged
or helped the attacker in his pursuit of violence. Messages about the
acceptability of violence that are communicated directly or subtly to a potential
attacker by students and/or adults in his or her environment may facilitate, or
alternatively help to prevent, an attack.

The target: When assessing the risk of an attack at school, investigators and
others with protective responsibilities also must pay attention to the
individual's choice of a potential target. The attacker may target a particular
individual or group of individuals over some perceived injury or loss. In some
cases, attackers chose a specific target, such as a particular student or teacher.
In other instances, the target was more general: the school, "jocks," or "kids in
the cafeteria."

**Principle 3: An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful
threat assessment.**
• An investigative mindset is central to successful application of the threat assessment
process. Threat assessment requires thoughtful probing; viewing information with
healthy skepticism; and paying attention to key points about pre-attack behaviors.
Authorities who carry out threat assessments must strive to be both accurate and fair.
Moreover, threat assessors should question the information in front of them continuously. Ideally, there
should be credible verification of all essential "facts."
Information about a potential attacker's interests, statements, and actions should be corroborated, wherever
possible. The investigative mindset and perspective also rely on
common sense. Threat assessors working to understand a given situation should step back periodically from
the individual details of an inquiry or investigation and ask
whether information gathered makes sense and supports any hypothesis developed concerning the risk
posed by the subject of the threat assessment inquiry.

Principle 4: Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or "traits."
• A major principle of threat assessment is that each investigation stands on its own.
Inferences and conclusions about risk should be guided by an analysis of facts and
behaviors specific to the person of concern and the given situation. Any student with
the motive, intent, and ability potentially is capable of mounting a targeted attack at
school. Judgments about a student's risk of violence should be based upon analysis
of behaviorally relevant facts, not on "traits" or "characteristics" of a given individual
or of a class of individuals. In the climate of fear that followed recent attacks, students in high schools
across the country who appeared angry and wore trench coats were marked as possible school attackers.
They were so labeled because of appearance and demeanor. Blanket characterizations, or student "profiles,"
do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments of the threat posed by a particular student.12 Even
worse, the use of profiles can shift attention away from more reliable facts and evidence about a
student's behavior and communications.

**Principle 5: An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment
investigations.**
• In a threat assessment, bits of information might be viewed as pieces of a puzzle.
Each bit may appear inconsequential or only slightly worrisome by itself. But, when
the pieces are put together–as oftentimes has occurred in "after the fact" analyses of
school attacks–the behaviors and communications of a student may coalesce into a
discernible pattern that indicates a threat of violence. In many school attacks,
information existed within the school and community that might have alerted

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authorities to the risk of attack posed by a particular student. Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school and the surrounding community are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing students who are on a path toward carrying out a school attack. An integrated systems approach recognizes the necessity of cooperation and partnerships between schools and systems outside of the school. These may include law enforcement, social services and mental health providers, the courts, community agencies, families, worksites, religious organizations, and others.

Principle 6: The central question of a threat assessment is whether a student a threat, not whether the student a threat.
• Although some individuals who threaten harm may pose a real threat of targeted violence, many do not. The Safe School Initiative found that fewer than 20 percent of school shooters communicated a direct or conditional threat to their target before the attack. By contrast, individuals who are found to pose threats of violence frequently do not make threats to their targets. The study found that in more than 80 percent of the cases, school shooters did not threaten their targets directly, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the attack. These findings underscore the importance of making judgments in threat assessment investigations based upon a student's behaviors and communications, rather than upon whether or not that student threatened his or her target. Authorities conducting threat assessment investigations must distinguish between making a threat, e.g., telling a potential target that he or she may or will be harmed, and posing a threat, e.g., engaging in behavior that indicates furthering a plan or building capacity for a violent act. Nevertheless, threats of violence should not be dismissed out of hand. Students may make threats with a variety of intents and for a wide range of reasons, e.g., to get attention; to express anger or frustration; to frighten or coerce their peers; as a part of joking or "playing around;" or, in some cases, to communicate intent to attack. Consequently, every threat should receive prompt attention. Although voicing a likelihood of a school attack, it likewise would be a mistake to assume that individuals who make threats in every instance are unlikely to follow through on those communications.

The Investigation
Three kinds of general information about a student should be gathered: *identifiers, background information, and information about the student's current life situation and circumstances…*

A. Identifying information:
• name;
• physical description;
• date of birth; and
• identification numbers (e.g., Social Security number, student ID, etc.).

B. Background information:
• residences;
• family/home situation;
• academic performance;
• social networks;
• history of relationships and conflicts;
• history of harassing others or of being harassed by others;
• history of violence toward self and others;
• history of having been a victim of violence or bullying;
• known attitudes toward violence;
• criminal behavior;
• mental health/substance abuse history;
• access to and use of weapons; and
• history of grievances and grudges.

C. Current life information:
• present stability of living and home situations;
• nature and quality of current relationships and personal support;

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• recent losses or losses of status (shame, humiliation, recent breakup or loss of significant relationship);
• current grievances or grudges;
• perceptions of being treated unfairly;
• known difficulty coping with a stressful event;
• any "downward" progression in social, academic, behavioral, or psychological functioning; recent hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair, including suicidal thoughts, gestures, actions, or attempts; and
• pending crises or change in circumstances.

Of particular note is whether the student has any trusting relationships with adults who are emotionally available to him or her, or whether the student is known to be consistently respectful to any adult. If there is an adult who is "connected" to the student, that adult may have useful information about the student's thinking and behavior. In addition, such an adult may be able to help the student if he or she appears to be on a path toward mounting a targeted school attack.

Information about "attack-related" behaviors…
Examination of the thinking and behaviors of school shooters suggests that most attacks are preceded by discernible behaviors, as the student plans or prepares for the attack. These behaviors are referred to as attack-related behaviors.
Behaviors that should raise concern about potential violence include:
• ideas or plans about injuring him/herself or attacking a school or persons at school;
• communications or writings that suggest that the student has an unusual or worrisome interest in school attacks;
• comments that express or imply the student is considering mounting an attack at school;
• recent weapon-seeking behavior, especially if weapon-seeking is linked to ideas about attack or expressions about interest in attack;
• communications or writings suggesting the student condones or is considering violence to redress a grievance or solve a problem; and
• rehearsals of attacks or ambushes.

Motives…
Motives for actual school attacks have included:
• revenge for a perceived injury or grievance;
• yearning for attention, recognition, or notoriety;
• a wish to solve a problem otherwise seen as unbearable; and
• a desire to die or be killed.
Knowledge of the motives of a student of concern may help the threat assessment team in evaluating the risk of targeted violence. Understanding the circumstances that may have prompted a student to consider attacking others may permit authorities to direct the student away from violence.

Target Selection…
Most school shooters identified their targets to friends and fellow students before advancing the attack. Almost half of school shooters had more than one target. Threat assessors should consider whether and how a potential attacker's interest in a target may shift to another target over time. Information about a student's targets may provide clues to the student's motives, planning, and attack-related behaviors. Information about the student's motives also may inform the question of whether there are additional targets.
What are sources of information for the inquiry?
    1.   School Information

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Collateral School Interviews…
Students and adults who know the student who is the subject of the threat
assessment inquiry should be asked about communications or other behaviors that
may indicate the student of concern's ideas or intent. The focus of these interviews
should be factual:
• What was said? To whom?
• What was written? To whom?
• What was done?
• When and where did this occur?
• Who else observed this behavior?
• Did the student say why he or she acted as they did?

Bystanders, observers, and other people who were there when the student engaged
in threatening behaviors or made threatening statements should be queried about
whether any of these behaviors or statements concerned or worried them. These
individuals should be asked about changes in the student's attitudes and behaviors.
Likewise, they should be asked if they have become increasingly concerned about the student's behavior or
state of mind.

Parent/Guardian Interview…
The parents or guardians of the student of concern usually should be interviewed.

Interviews with the Student of Concern…
Interviews with a student of concern oftentimes are critical in a threat assessment
inquiry. School administrators and law enforcement officials and their respective
legal counsels should follow existing policies, or develop policies regarding interviews
with students of concern. Issues that should be considered include:
• If and when to notify parents/guardians of an interview;
• Whether or when to invite parents/guardians to be present during an
interview;
• Whether and how to use information from an interview for criminal justice
proceedings; and
• Whether and when legal representation should be allowed, offered, or
Provided.

Potential Target Interview…
Individuals who have been identified as potential targets of the student of concern
also should be interviewed. The threat assessment team should inform the subject of
the interview that the primary purpose of that interview is to gather information
about a possible situation of concern.

Evaluation of information gathered from research and interviews conducted during a
threat assessment inquiry should be guided by the following 11 key questions:

1. What are the student's motive(s) and goals?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
3. Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in any of the following?
4. Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors?
5. Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?
6. Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation and/or despair?
7. Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
8. Does the student see violence as an acceptable–or desirable–or the only–way to solve problems?
9. Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
10. Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?
11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

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If the team concludes that
a. there is insufficient information for the threat assessment team to be reasonably certain that the student does not pose a threat; or
b. the student appears to be on a path to attack; then
c. the team should recommend that the matter be referred to the appropriate law enforcement agency for a threat assessment investigation.

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