EduRisk™
By United Educators

Checklist

A Checklist for K-12 Schools Implementing a Student Threat Assessment Process

A threat assessment process can help schools identify and address student behavior that might pose a threat of violence. In July 2018, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) released an operational guide for preventing targeted school violence. This guide builds on the landmark 1999 Safe School Initiative by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service, which examined "the thinking, planning, and other pre-attack behaviors engaged in by attackers" responsible for many school shootings. The new NTAC guide establishes minimum guidelines for a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan and threat assessments on campus. The guide emphasizes the need for a threat assessment process with formal structures of reporting, information-gathering, and risk management, because there is no set profile of a student attacker.

This tool transforms the NTAC recommendations into a checklist that school administrators can use either to establish a new threat assessment process in their schools or districts or to evaluate the effectiveness of an existing process. If the administrator's school or district has completed one of the following actions, then that action should be checked. Upon completing the checklist, the administrator should review all unchecked actions and decide whether further action is required to establish or enhance the school's threat assessment process.

❶ Create a Safe School Climate

The threat assessment process is most meaningful when implemented as part of a school's larger strategy to create a climate that promotes safety, respect, and emotional support for students. The following actions are components of a safe school environment and provide a foundation for a successful threat assessment process.

Actions Needed

☐ Assess the school's emotional climate to identify areas for improvement and to establish a baseline against which the effectiveness of future actions can be evaluated.

☐ Conduct trainings to involve all members of the school community—students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents—in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect. Tailor the training to the specific audience type.

☐ Create an environment where students feel connected to the school, their classmates, and their teachers.

☐ Encourage students to create a warm environment by reaching out to lonely or isolated students and to come forward if they have concerns about a peer's behavior.

☐ To sustain a safe school climate, regularly assess and refine the mechanisms used.

☐ Emphasize the importance of listening by all members of the school community.

☐ Implement an anti-bullying program to prevent and intervene in student bullying.

☐ Develop a trusting relationship between each student and at least one adult at school.

☐ Create a formal policy that authorizes school officials to conduct a threat assessment process, addressing the:

  ▫ Purpose and scope of the policy

  ▫ Role of educators, the threat assessment team, and local law enforcement

  ▫ Authority of identified school officials to decide when a threat assessment inquiry should be pursued

  ▫ Description of the behaviors or communications that would trigger a threat assessment inquiry, and those that may not lead to violence but still require intervention

  ▫ A threshold for intervention that is relatively low

  ▫ Description of the types of information that may be gathered during a threat assessment inquiry

  ▫ Designation of the individuals who will serve on the threat assessment team and are responsible for gathering and analyzing information

  ▫ Steps and procedures followed from initiation to conclusion of the threat assessment inquiry

❷ Form a Threat Assessment Team

A school's ability to assess and respond to potentially violent behavior depends on a range of expertise and perspectives. A team composed of people from different departments can take advantage of their multiple disciplines and varied experiences with the troubled student.

☐ Create a multidisciplinary team, including representatives such as:

  ▫ Respected members of the school faculty and administration

  ▫ A staff member who is well liked and respected by students

  ▫ A trained investigator, such as a school resource officer or other police officer assigned to the school

  ▫ A mental health professional, such as a forensic, clinical, or school psychologist

  ▫ Other respected school professionals, such as a guidance counselor, coach, or instructor

☐ Designate a principal, vice principal, or other senior school administrator to lead the threat assessment team.

☐ Use an outside consultant or in-house expert to train team members in the threat assessment process, their roles and responsibilities, and the conduct of a threat assessment inquiry.

☐ Use an assessment process that follows the steps identified below in "Assess Reported Information."

☐ Delineate team member roles by clarifying who will speak with the student, who will interview classmates and teachers, who will collect relevant documents, etc.

☐ Establish documentation requirements (including forms and templates) to ensure consistent collection of reports and information.

☐ In addition to meeting when threats come to their attention, the team should also meet regularly for discussion and learning.

☐ Require members of the threat assessment team to cultivate and maintain relationships across disciplines, agencies, and community organizations, such as local sports teams, Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, or religious organizations.

❸ Transmit Information to the Team

The team can only respond and manage the behavioral concerns that it knows about. The following actions ensure the timely transmission of key information to team members.

☐ Identify potential reporting sources, such as:

- Students

- Teachers and administrators

- Staff, including janitorial, maintenance, and food service workers

- Contractors and volunteers

- Parents, legal guardians, or close relatives

- Concerned others (online acquaintances, neighbors, or friends)

☐ Develop practical reporting options that are easily accessible to potential reporting sources, and include an anonymous reporting option.

☐ Describe the information that potential reporting sources should transmit to the team, keeping the description brief and simple, and circulate it widely.

Actions Needed

☐ Develop programs and resources to train or educate potential reporting sources about transmitting information to the threat assessment team, using some or all of the following formats:

- ☐ Online training programs

- ☐ Live workshops or presentations

- ☐ Team website or webpage

- ☐ Emails or letters to faculty, staff, students, and parents

- ☐ Articles in the student or local newspaper

- ☐ Public service announcements on the student radio station and television station

- ☐ Signs posted throughout the school

- ☐ Handouts or leaflets

☐ Train and educate potential reporting sources on available options they can use to transmit information to the team.

☐ Make sure potential reporters know that situations or behaviors that present an immediate threat of harm should be reported to police.

❹ Assess Reported Information

The core responsibility of the school's threat assessment team is to review and investigate reported information and assess whether the student of concern poses a threat of violence. The team also can assess whether student behavior that does not pose a threat can be addressed through other resources and services.

☐ Conduct an initial review of reported information and determine whether the student's behavior indicates an immediate threat of violence or harm to self or others; promptly refer these most serious reports to the police.

☐ If the school does not have a school resource officer, set a standard for when law enforcement will be asked to get involved with or take over a threat assessment.

☐ Following an initial review, investigate every report by conducting a threat assessment inquiry.

☐ Identify potential sources of information for the inquiry:

- ▫ School information about the student (student's records, teacher interviews, involvement in organizations and clubs, documents from previous contacts with the threat assessment team, and other information easily accessed at the school and from school officials)

- ▫ Student, staff, or other witnesses of the student's threatening or concerning behavior

- ▫ Parents or guardians of the student

- ▫ Student of concern

- ▫ Consider searching the student's locker or desk

- ▫ Potential targets of the student of concern

- ▫ Online searches of relevant websites (Google, Facebook, and other social media or chat sites)

☐ Gather information from the information sources to answer key questions that examine the underlying reasons for the student's behavior, such as:

- ▫ What are the student's motives and goals?

- ▫ Are the student's oral or written communications unusual, concerning, threatening, or violent?

- ▫ What is the impact of emotional and developmental issues?

- ▫ Has the student communicated any ideas or intent to attack?

- ▫ Has the student shown an inappropriate interest in school attacks or attackers, weapons (including a recent acquisition of any weapon), or incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers)?

- ▫ Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors, such as developing an attack idea or plan, making efforts to acquire or practice with weapons, casing or checking out sites for an attack, or rehearsing attacks or ambush?

- ▫ Does the student have access to weapons?

- ▫ Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?

- ▫ Is the student experiencing stressful events, suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, desperation, or despair?

- ▫ Does the student have a positive, trusting relationship with at least one adult at school?

- ▫ Does the student feel emotionally connected to other students?

- ▫ Does the student see violence as the only way or an acceptable or desirable way to solve problems?

- ▫ Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions? Can the team corroborate the statements and explain any inconsistencies?

- ▫ Is the student's behavior appropriate for their age and social and emotional development?

- ▫ Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?

- ▫ What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

Actions Needed

❺ Intervene and Manage

During the final stage of the threat assessment process, the team implements an intervention strategy aimed at reducing a potential threat of violence, or it appropriately addresses its concern with behavior that does not pose a threat.

☐ If the student poses a threat of violence, notify local law enforcement and provide any necessary assistance to reduce the threat.

- ▫ When possible, help reduce the student's stressors or change the student's motive. Identify resources the school can provide to assist the student, including counseling, life skills classes, tutoring, etc.

- ▫ If suspension or expulsion is necessary, remember that removal from school does not remove the threat. Develop strategies to stay connected to the student to continue to monitor their behavior.

- ▫ Work with law enforcement or the student's family to remove access to weapons.

- ▫ Follow up and continue to monitor the case until a threat of violence no longer exists or the concern is addressed.

☐ If the student does not pose a threat but may otherwise benefit from other resources and services, identify those resources and services and help the student access them.

☐ If the student does not pose a threat and does not require additional support, conclude the inquiry.

☐ With each report, document the team's decisions and actions.

EduRisk™ provides education-specific risk management resources to colleges and schools and is a benefit of membership with United Educators (UE). As a member-owned company, UE is committed to helping educational institutions by offering stable pricing, targeted insurance coverage, extensive risk management resources, and exceptional claims handling.

To learn more, please visit www.UE.org.

The material appearing in this publication is presented for informational purposes and should not be considered legal advice or used as such.