School Threat Assessment as a Fair and Equitable School Safety Response

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
School of Education and Human Development
University of Virginia
dcornell@virginia.edu

Panel Presentation for
School Safety at a Crossroads: Can Schools’ Responses to the Latest “Safety Crisis” Protect Students without Promoting Inequality?
American Sociological Association Annual Meeting
Philadelphia PA 8-20-23

Topics

1. Concept of threat assessment
2. Virginia controlled studies
3. Florida statewide evaluation

Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in CSTAG.
How often do our schools conduct threat assessments?

When a student seems angry, everyone engages in some form of threat assessment.

*The question is whether staff rely on their intuition or use a systematic process.*
In the absence of a formal threat assessment process, many schools rely on zero tolerance, automatically removing a student from school, regardless of the seriousness or context of the behavior.

Removing a student from school does not increase safety.

We want to supervise, teach, and support a student in school.
Threat assessment is an alternative to zero tolerance

- Zero tolerance uses punitive discipline for all students regardless of the circumstances or the seriousness of their behavior.
- Threat assessment considers the context and content of the behavior. The student’s intentions matter.

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)

1. Identification: friends, family members, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress/threatening violence.

2. Evaluation: Threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.

3. Intervention: The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.
School-Based Threat Assessment

1. Compared to adults, students
   - frequently make threats;
   - often engage in fights;
2. Over-reactions to student misbehavior have serious negative consequences.
3. Schools have a duty to educate all students.
Threat Assessment
Steers Between 2 Errors

**Overreaction**
Excessive punishment for a threat that is not serious

**Underreaction**
Failing to prevent a serious threat.

Questions about Fairness and Equity

- There is nationwide disproportionality in school discipline for students of color and students with disabilities.
- There are publicized cases where students received excessively punitive responses for minor misbehavior that was regarded as a threat.
Fairness and Equity Concerns

- Threat assessment must be a fair and equitable process for all students.
- We want to avoid unfairly excessive punishment or criminalization for minor misbehavior.
- We want equitable treatment of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and regardless of disability status.

Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines

- Developed 2001 at University of Virginia
- School-based teams gather information
- Follow decision-tree to determine whether threat is transient or substantive
- Take protective action if substantive
- Attempt to resolve the problem underlying the threat

Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in CSTAG.
### Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggestive of intent to harm?

- **No** Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.
- **Yes** Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.

### Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.
Attempt to resolve conflict or threat. Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be resolved so that there is no intent to harm?

- **No** Case resolved as transient. Add services as needed.
- **Yes** Case resolved as transient. Add services as needed.

### Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.
For all substantive threats:
- a. Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims.
- b. Warn intended victim and parents.
- c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.
- d. Discipline student, when time is appropriate.

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas Very serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas

Very Serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

### Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.
In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:
- e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
- f. Law enforcement investigation.
- g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan or “child find” procedures if appropriate.

### Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.
Document the plan.
Maintain contact with the student.
Revise plan as needed.
Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

No
Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.

Yes
Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.
Attempt to resolve conflict or threat.
Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be resolved so that there is no intent to harm?

No
Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.
For all substantive threats:
  a. Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims.
  b. Warn intended victim and parents.
  c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.
  d. Discipline student, when time is appropriate.

Serious
Case resolved as serious substantive threat. Add services as needed.

Very Serious
Very Serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.
In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:
  e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
  f. Law enforcement investigation.
  g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan or “child find” procedures if appropriate.

Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.
Document the plan.
Maintain contact with the student.
Revise plan as needed.
**Step 1. Evaluate the threat.**

Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

- **No** Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.
- **Yes** Case resolved as transient. Add services as needed.

**Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.**

Attempt to resolve conflict or threat. Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be resolved so that there is no intent to harm?

- **No** Case resolved as serious substantive threat. Add services as needed.
- **Yes** Case resolved as transient. Add services as needed.

**Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.**

For all substantive threats:

a. Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims.

b. Warn intended victim and parents.

c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.

d. Discipline student, when time is appropriate.

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up versus Very Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up with a weapon.

**Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.**

In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:

- Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
- Law enforcement investigation.
- Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan or “child find” procedures if appropriate.

**Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.**

- Document the plan.
- Maintain contact with the student.
- Revise plan as needed.

---

**Classification of 22,929 Threat Cases (%)**

- **No threat**: 11%
- **Transient**: 71%
- **Serious substantive**: 13%
- **Very serious substantive**: 5%

*Florida statewide sample of 3,400 schools (Maeng et al., 2023)*
Research on Threat Assessment

1. Field-test
   What happens when you try the model?

2. Controlled studies
   Cross-sectional, retrospective study:
   How do schools using the model compare to other schools?
   Pre-post study:
   How do schools change after adopting the model?
   Randomized controlled trial:
   What happens to students in schools randomly chosen to use the model?

3. Large-scale implementation
   What happens when the whole state adopts the model?


Safety Outcomes

2. 99% no serious injuries.
3. No shootings or fatalities to date.
4. Less bullying and peer aggression.
5. Students and teachers report more positive school climate.

Disciplinary Outcomes Using Threat Assessment

1. Most students remain in school.
2. Reductions in out-of-school suspensions.
3. Little or no racial/ethnic disparity in suspension.
Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned to CSTAG training
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

School Psychology Review, 2012

Randomized Controlled Trial

Students in threat assessment schools...
- Received more counseling (logistic regression odds ratio = 3.98)
- More parent involvement (OR = 2.57)
- Fewer long-term suspensions (OR = 0.35)
- Fewer alternative placements (OR = 0.13)
- No differences for Black v White students

School Psychology Review, 2012
Following the 2018 Parkland shooting, Florida mandated threat assessment in its 4,000 public schools. Schools received CSTAG training and submitted case data to FL DOE.

Statewide Implementation of School Threat Assessment in Florida is funded by the U.S. Dept of Justice (2020-RF-CX-002) and conducted in collaboration with the Office of Safe Schools of the Florida Department of Education. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations of this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Florida Department of Education or the U.S. Department of Justice. Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in the CSTAG model.

- 60 of 67 Florida districts
- 3,400 schools
- 23,000 threat cases
- 2021-22 school year
Preliminary results from Florida technical report for 2021-2022 school year.

Disciplinary and Legal Outcomes by Race/ Ethnicity

White (n = 8,237)
Black (n = 8,237)
Hispanic (n = 5,170)

Percent of Students

Suspended
Out-of-School
Change in Placement
Expelled
Arrested
Court Charges
Incarceration

0 5 10 15 20 25 30

25.9 24.8 13.9 1.2 2 0.7 1.2 2.9 0.2 0.2 0.1

Florida 2021-2022 school year
There were small or no differences in disciplinary and legal outcomes for students receiving a threat assessment compared by race/ethnicity or disability status. These findings contrast with large differences found for the general population of students who receive disciplinary consequences in U.S. schools.
Fairness and Equity

- Teams must monitor their student outcomes for fairness and equity.
- Districts must investigate and take prompt action if there is evidence of unfairness or inequity.

What factors contribute to fairness and equity in student discipline and law enforcement actions?
- Training program
- Emphasis on student needs
- Structured protocol and criteria
- Multidisciplinary team
Conclusions

Threat assessment is a promising approach to school safety that can help schools respond to concerns about student violence in a safe, fair, and equitable manner.