The Complex Role of the School Nurse in Threat Assessments

A PRESENTATION TO THE TEXAS SCHOOL NURSES ORGANIZATION
17TH ANNUAL SCHOOL NURSE CONFERENCE

DENISE KABLAITIS, MSN, RN, PFLUGERVILLE ISD
CHIEF PATRICK PETHERBRIDGE, PFLUGERVILLE ISD POLICE DEPARTMENT
An Integral Part of the Threat Assessment Team

In the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) Position Statement “School Violence – The Role of the School Nurse”, it states in part that school nurses “advance and encourage safe school environments by promoting the prevention and reduction of school violence … School nurses collaborate with school personnel, healthcare providers, parents, and community members to identify and implement evidence based programs promoting violence prevention”.
The percentage of high school students who experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased significantly from 2007 (28.5%) through 2017 (31.5%).
PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO
DID NOT GO TO SCHOOL AT LEAST ONCE IN THE PAST MONTH BECAUSE
OF SAFETY CONCERNS, UNITED STATES, YRBS, 2007–2017

10-Year Trend
Description

The percentage of students who missed school because of safety concerns did not change significantly from 2007 through 2017.
The percentage of students who were threatened or injured with a weapon at school decreased significantly from 2007 (7.8%) through 2017 (6.0%).
Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive.

It is important that threat assessment inquiries involve efforts to gather information from anyone who may have contact with the student in question.
Identifying children and adolescents who are at risk for violent behavior, broadly conceived, is not particularly difficult. Events that occur so frequently are, statistically, not as difficult to predict.

Students at risk for targeted violence may or may not possess many of the traditional risk factors associated with general violence recidivism and delinquency in youth.
What is Threat Assessment?

**Fact-Based** information means that the information you have received in order to provide your threat assessment is based on actual true events or experiences by verifiable sources.

**Identify** the person or situation whose behavior has raised some concern about potential violence.

**Inquire/Ask Questions** and gather additional relevant information about the person and the situation.

**Assess** the person and situation based on the totality of the information that is reasonably available, to determine where the person or situation poses a threat of violence or harm to others and/or self.

**Manage** the threat by implementing an intervention, supervision, and/or monitoring plan to prevent harm where possible and to reduce or mitigate impact of the situation.
What is Threat Assessment?

Fact-Based

Identify

A fact-based, investigative approach to determining how likely a person is to carry out a threat of violence. (Safe School Initiative Study, 2002)

Inquire

A means to identify, assess, and manage individuals who are at risk for violence against themselves or others

Assess

A way to identify someone who has the potential for violence in many forms - self-harm, assault, risk taking behaviors, suicide, substance abuse, and other aggressive or dangerous behaviors.

Manage

A simple checklist of warning signs or red flags used to remove a student from school.

A means to label a student as a troublemaker and enact consequences.

A means to find “the next school shooter”.

Table 2.1
How is a Threat Assessment Administered?

Threatening behavior can come in a variety of forms. School nurse’s are trained to recognize many early indicators that could be warning signs of future violence. Some of these behaviors could include:

- Bullying
- Verbal Outbursts
- Physical or Sexual Assault
- Frequent Visits to the Nurse’s Office
- Signs of Physical Abuse or Neglect
- Outcries from the Student or Peers
How is a Threat Assessment Administered?

There is no “one size fits all” profile or single “type” of perpetrator of targeted violence.

The guiding principle underlying the threat assessment approach is that there is a distinction between making a threat (expressing, to the target or others, an intent to harm a target) and posing a threat (engaging in behaviors that further a plan to harm a target). Many people who make threats do not pose a serious risk of harm to a target. Conversely, many who pose a serious risk of harm will not issue direct threats prior to an attack.
How is a Threat Assessment Administered?

As these warning signs are noticed, the school nurse would assist the team to follow the Threat Assessment protocol at their campus. These actions must first determine the primary goal of a threat assessment – does the student pose a threat of violence to themselves or others? Is the threat being communicated simply for attention, is it an outcry in an effort to report abuse, or is the threat a real, corroborated incident?

The threat assessment should be based purely on facts, examining the exact behavior that is in question. The team must be accurate, fair, and diligent in obtaining all of the facts. Just because someone appears to fit a certain societal profile would not be sufficient cause to start a threat assessment.
How is a Threat Assessment Administered?

The threat assessment approach is a set of operational activities that combine the use of an investigative process and information-gathering strategies with target-violence relevant questions.

Level of concern - no threat should be ignored, allows for early intervention.
Step 1 – Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team

These individuals will direct, manage and document the threat assessment process.

The Team will receive reports about concerning students and situations, gather additional information, assess the risk posed to the school community, and develop intervention and management strategies to mitigate any risk of harm.

Teams should include personnel from a variety of disciplines within the school community, including teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, school resource officers, mental health professionals, nurses and school administrators.
Step 1 – Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team

The Team needs to have a specifically designated leader. This position is usually occupied by a senior administrator within the school.

Team members should meet whenever a concerning student or situation has been brought to their attention, but they should also meet on a regular basis to engage in discussions, role-playing scenarios, and other team-building and learning activities.
Nurse’s Role in Threat Assessment

- Medication Changes
- Behavior Changes
- Emotional Concerns
- Visit Reason Changes
- Visit Frequency Changes
- Concerns expressed while in the Health Office
Step 2 – Define Prohibited and Concerning Behaviors

Schools need to establish policies defining prohibited behaviors that are unacceptable and therefore warrant immediate intervention.

These include:

- threatening or engaging in violence,
- bringing a weapon to school,
- bullying or harassing others,
- other concerning or criminal behaviors.
Step 2 – Define Prohibited and Concerning Behaviors

If these behaviors are observed or reported to the Team, schools can offer resources and supports in the form of mentoring and counseling, mental health care, tutoring, or social and family services.

During the assessment process, Teams may identify other concerning statements and actions made by the student that may not already be addressed in their policies. Gathering information about these behaviors will help the Team assess whether the student is at risk for attacking the school or its students and identify strategies to mitigate that risk.
Step 3 - Create a central reporting mechanism

Students may elicit concern from those around them in a variety of ways. They may make threatening or concerning statements in person, online, or in text messages; they may engage in observable risky behavior; or they may turn in assignments with statements or content that is unusual or bizarre. When this occurs, those around the student need a method of reporting their concerns to the Team.
Step 3 - Create a central reporting mechanism

Students, teachers, staff, school resource officers, and parents should be provided training and guidance on recognizing behaviors of concern, their roles and responsibilities in reporting the behavior, and how to report the information.
Step 3 - Create a central reporting mechanism

Regardless of what method schools choose to receive these reports, there should be an option for passing information anonymously, as students are more likely to report concerning or threatening information when they can do so without fear of retribution for coming forward.
Step 4 – Determine the Threshold for Law Enforcement intervention

Reports regarding student behaviors involving weapons, threats of violence, physical violence, or concerns about an individual’s safety should immediately be reported to local law enforcement. This is one reason why including a school resource officer or local law enforcement officer on the Team is beneficial.

If a school resource officer is not available to serve on the Team, schools should set a clear threshold for times and situations when law enforcement will be asked to support or take over an assessment.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Teams need to establish clearly defined processes and procedures to guide their assessments. When followed, the procedures should allow the Team to form an accurate picture of the student’s thinking, behavior, and circumstances to inform the Team’s assessment and identify appropriate interventions.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Maintain documentation to keep track of when reports come in; the information that is gathered; when, where, and how it was obtained; who was interviewed; the behaviors and circumstances of the student of concern; and the intervention strategies taken.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

An effective approach for gathering information to assess a student of concern is to identify the sources that may have information on the student’s actions and circumstances. This involves identifying the persons with whom the student has a relationship or frequently interacts and the organizations or platforms that may be familiar with the student’s behaviors. Students exist in more than one system and they come in contact with people beyond their classmates and teachers at school.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Examine online social media pages, conduct interviews, review class assignments, and consider searching the student’s locker or desk.

Team members should also review academic, disciplinary, law enforcement, and other formal records that may be related to the student.

Also determine if the student received any intervention or supports and whether those were beneficial or successful.

The Team may be able to draw on information from previous incidents and interventions to address the current situation for the student.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Build rapport that can facilitate information-gathering efforts.

When Teams have established this rapport, parents or guardians may be more likely to share their own concerns, and the student may be more forthcoming about frustrations, needs, goals, or plans.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Evaluate the student’s concerning behaviors and communications in the context of his/her age and social and emotional development.

To ensure that these students are being accurately assessed, collect information from diverse sources, including the reporting party, the student of concern, classmates, teammates, teachers, and friends.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

U.S. Secret Service research identified the following themes to explore when conducting a threat assessment investigation:

• The student’s motives and goals

• Concerning, unusual, or threatening communications

• Inappropriate interest in weapons, school shooters, mass attacks, or other types of violence

• Access to weapons

• Stressful events, such as setbacks, challenges, or losses
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures - Themes

- Impact of emotional and developmental issues
- Evidence of desperation, hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts and gestures
- Whether the student views violence as an option to solve problems
- Whether others are concerned about the student’s statements or behaviors
- Capacity to carry out an attack
- Evidence of planning for an attack
- Consistency between the student’s statements and actions
- Protective factors such as positive or prosocial influences and events
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Teams should organize their information gathering around several themes or areas pertaining to the student’s actions, circumstances, and any other relevant threat assessment factors.

Using the themes to identify where the student might be struggling will help the Team identify the most appropriate resources.

As soon as an area for intervention is identified, suitable management strategies should be enacted.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Motives

Students may have a variety of motives that place them at risk for engaging in harmful behavior, whether to themselves or others.

The Team should also assess how far the student may be willing to go to achieve these goals, and what or who may be a potential target.

Understanding motives further allows the Team to develop management strategies that can direct the student away from violent choices.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

-Communications

Look for concerning, unusual, bizarre, threatening, or violent communications the student made.

They may allude to violent intentions or warn others to stay away from school at a certain time.

They may reveal information relevant to the other investigative themes by making reference to feelings of hopelessness or suicide, a fascination with violence, interest in weapons, or other inappropriate interests.
Step 5 - Establish assessment procedures

Inappropriate Interests

Gather information about whether the student has shown an inappropriate or heightened interest in concerning topics such as school attacks or attackers, mass attacks, or other types of violence.

The context of the student’s interests is an important factor to consider.
Step 6 – Develop Risk Management Options

Once the Team has completed a thorough assessment of the student, it can evaluate whether the student is at risk for self-harm or harming someone else at school.

Teams can then develop risk management strategies that reduce the student’s risk for engaging in violence and make positive outcomes for the student more likely.

Management plans should remain in place until the Team is no longer concerned about the student or the risk for violence.
Step 7 – Create and Promote Safe School Climates

Teachers and staff in safe school environments support diversity, encourage communication between faculty and students, intervene in conflicts, and work to prevent teasing and bullying.

Students in safe school climates feel empowered to share concerns with adults, without feeling ashamed or facing the stigma of being labeled a “snitch.”
Prepare for the Worst

Despite having a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan in place, and despite a school and Team’s best efforts at prevention, incidents of targeted school violence may still occur.

It is critical to develop and implement emergency response plans and procedures and provide training on them to all stakeholders.
Resources

**United States Secret Service** Provides an Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence


**Texas School Safety Center** The TxSSC is tasked in [Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code](https://www.dhs.gov/publication/enhancing-school-safety-using-threat-assessment-model) and the Governor’s Homeland Security Strategic Plan with key school safety initiatives and mandates.

[https://txssc.txstate.edu/](https://txssc.txstate.edu/)

**The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC)** Provides links to best practices in threat assessment and the prevention of targeted violence, including resources on conducting threat assessments in K-12 schools and building positive school climates.

[https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/](https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/)
Resources

**National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)** Provides information and links to research on conducting threat assessments in K-12 schools.


**The National Behavioral Intervention Team Association** Provides education, resources, and supports to campus behavioral intervention team personnel and those who work to provide caring interventions of at-risk individuals

[https://nabita.org](https://nabita.org)
QUESTIONS??
Thank You!

Denise Kablaitis, MSN, RN
Executive Director of Health, Safety, Crisis and Emergency Management
Denise.Kablaitis@pfisd.net
512-594-1980

Chief Patrick Petherbridge
Chief of Pflugerville ISD Police
Patrick.Petherbridge@pfisd.net
512-594-1990