Threat Screening Guidelines

Safety Assessment Team
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**Rationale**

When a threat of violence occurs at school, administrators should take reasonable action to maintain safety. The following guidelines are offered for investigating student threats. Procedural consistency and documentation provide a foundation for best practice in the area of violence prevention.

The following are best practice procedures adapted from *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The Guidelines were developed and field tested based on findings from two long-term independent studies conducted by the FBI, and the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education. They were designed to prepare school-based teams to identify, evaluate, and effectively respond to student threats to harm others.

**I. Report and Identify a Threat**

A threat is an expression of an intention to harm someone. This expression may be spoken, written, or gestured. Threats can be expressed directly or indirectly to others, and threats may be explicitly stated or implied. In the case of weapon possession, a threat should be presumed and investigated. These guidelines do not address threats to damage property, threats made by non-students, fights with no threat, or verbiage such as slurs, insults, or verbal abuse that do not constitute a threat. When in doubt regarding a student's behavior, treat the expression as a threat until the threat screening proves otherwise.

In order to maintain a safe and orderly school environment, all school personnel and students have the responsibility to report student threats of violence to school administration. A school administrator at the school leads the threat screening process in evaluating the seriousness of the threat and responding in a manner that ensures the safety of all students and staff. Other personnel should include the school officer, and may include the counselor, school social worker or psychologist, and others as designated by the principal.

All documentation collected during the threat screening process should be maintained as part of the student's discipline record in accordance with existing policy. According to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, private notes collected as part of the threat screening process may be maintained separate from the student's educational record provided they are kept in sole possession of the maker and are not accessible or revealed to any other person except a temporary substitute for the maker of the record.

**II. Evaluate and Classify a Threat**

Since all threats are a violation of discipline policy, the threat screening guidelines should be followed through normal discipline inquiry. After a threat is reported, the school administrator promptly interviews the student who made the threat, any witnesses who have knowledge of the threat, and the student(s) or staff who has been threatened. The goal is to determine whether the threat is either *transient* or *substantive/credible* based on the circumstances and context in which the threat was made.

The following interview questions may be used to begin the threat screening, and should be modified, as appropriate/necessary, to obtain an account of the threat and to begin to determine the student’s intent.

**Student Interview to Address the Question of Planning and Intent:**
- Do you know why I wanted to talk with you?
- What happened when you were [place of incident]?
• What exactly did you say and do? (write down exact words)
• What was meant when you said (or did) that?
• How did you think he/she feels about what you said (or did)?
• What was the reason you said (or did) that? (note prior history of conflict)
• What are you going to do now that you have made this threat?

Witness/Victim Interview to Gather Witness/Victim Perspective:
• What exactly happened when you were [place of incident]?
• What exactly did [student] say or do? (write down exact words)
• What do you think he/she meant when saying that?
• How do you feel about what he/she said (or did)? (gauge level of fear)
• Why did he/she say or do that? (note prior history of conflict)

A threat where there is not evidence of planning or sustained intent to harm is classified as a transient threat. Transient threats are either non-genuine expressions or threats made “in the heat of the moment” such that, given time to talk and cool down, there is no ongoing intent. The majority of threats made by students are transient in nature. If the threat is not clearly transient, the principal/assistant principal consults with identified personnel.

A substantive threat is one in which there is sustained intent to harm beyond the immediate incident. Substantive threats, in most cases, involve forethought and planning. If there is uncertainty about the nature of a threat, the school administrator should treat the threat as substantive until its status is further evaluated. To be classified as substantive, the threat typically has one or more of the following characteristics, and there is no clear and definitive evidence to the contrary.

• There are specific, plausible details.
• Threat has been repeated over time or the student has told multiple people (other students, teachers) of the threat.
• The threat has been reported to others as a plan or the student has invited other students to see the threat carried out.
• The threat involves accomplices or accomplices have been sought out by the student.
• There is physical evidence of intent (lethal weapon, written plans, lists of victims, drawings, or other literature).

All threats judged as substantive are, by definition, serious and require protective action to reduce the risk of violence and ensure student safety. The level of protective action that must be taken depends largely on what the student has threatened to do (hit, beat up, hurt) vs. (kill, rape, or otherwise inflict very serious injury). When a student is in possession of a potentially lethal weapon a very serious substantive threat is presumed. Security and Law Enforcement personnel are responsible for conducting interviews in weapons cases.

When distinguishing between transient and credible threats, the school administrator should also consider the age of the child, the credibility of the information obtained from the inquiry, and the capacity of the child to carry it out.

Safety vs. Discipline
In responding to any threat, the immediate concern is safety. Discipline is concerned with providing appropriate consequences for behavior and should be addressed independently. Both transient and substantive threats are subject to the full range of disciplinary consequences. In deciding on discipline, the principal should consider the impact the threat has had on school climate in addition to the code of conduct.

III. Respond to a Threat
**Transient Threat**

Transient threats should end in retraction, reconciliation or explanation that indicates that the threat is over. This is likely to require intervention on the part of staff. Protective action is not necessary. If the transient threat involves a conflict between students, even though the threat may be transient, a referral for conflict resolution, mediation and/or counseling may be appropriate to resolve the problem. If a transient threat involves a student and a teacher or other school personnel, administrative intervention should lead to an apology and/or reconciliation.

All transient threats are subject to disciplinary action based on school board policy. After determining the seriousness of the threat and the context and meaning of the student's behavior, the principal/assistant principal determines disciplinary consequences. Severe disciplinary consequences are appropriate as a response to some transient threats if the behavior is very disruptive or a serious violation of school board policy (e.g., false bomb threat).

**Substantive Threat**

A substantive threat typically requires a legal duty to warn and take protective action to prevent violence against the potential victim(s) and to address the conflict or problem that led to the threat. School administrators should take the following immediate precautions:

- When a student threatens to hit, beat up or hurt another student or school personnel the school administrator:
  - Provides direct supervision so the student cannot carry out the threat while at school or on the bus, cautions the student who made the threat about the consequences of carrying out the threat, and contacts the student's parents to assume responsibility for supervision.
  -Consults with Security Services and the officer in the school (if present) to assist in monitoring and supervising the student as well as investigating the need for law enforcement intervention.
  -Disciplines the student per the code of conduct.
  -When the student returns, utilize the S-Team to develop a Safety Plan and intervene as appropriate.

- When a student threatens to kill, rape, inflict very serious injury, use a weapon, or has a weapon in their possession, the student may be taken into custody. The school administrator:
  - Provides direct supervision of the student and immediately notifies Security/SRO
  -Notifies the intended victim and his/her parents, explains the actions being taken to ensure student safety, and updates them as appropriate
  -Refers the student to the Safety Assessment Team for mental health evaluation
  -Holds the disciplinary decision under advisement pending the results of the threat assessment
  -When the student returns, utilize the S-Team to implement the safety plan as outlined in the threat assessment report.

**Note:** Students who plan to harm others almost always leak information to other students/staff. All school personnel should take rumors seriously and follow up on them. Students are the first to know what is happening among their classmates. If there is open communication between students and staff, students are more likely to report threats.