



School safety

8 Questions to ask your schools and community

The following information is intended to educate community members about their vital part in preventing tragedy and how to work with their local school to ensure safety.



8 Questions

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Threat assessment includes building a diverse team, an established reporting system, and a means to disrupt and monitor threats

Start the discussion

School safety

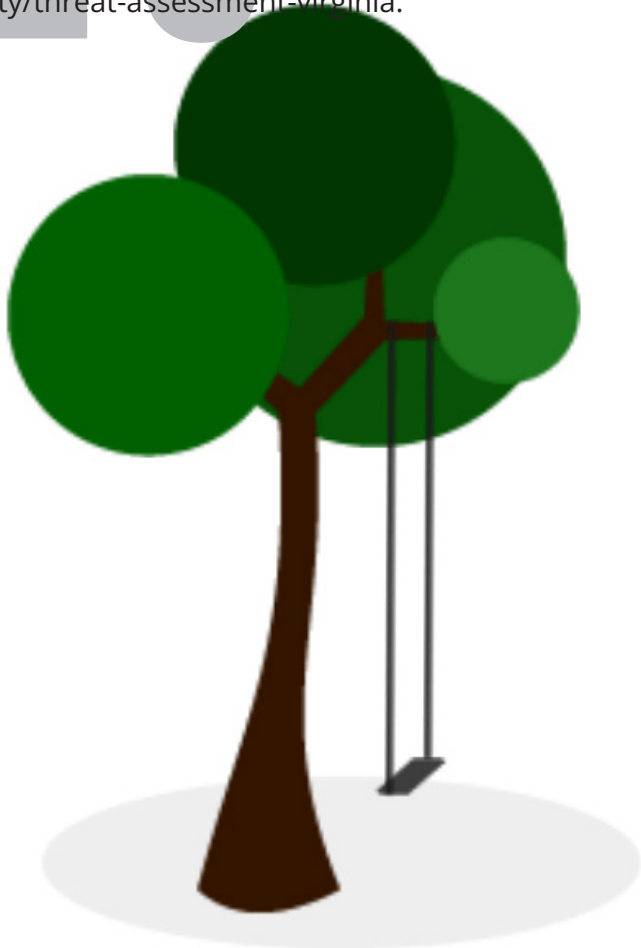
The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) is a U.S. Secret Service program that just released a five-year analysis of recent mass attacks. Mass attacks occur when a person carries out planned violence and injures or kills three or more individuals. NTAC's latest report complements the agency's research on school attackers. Across 25 years of study, NTAC has repeatedly found that attackers do not simply "snap" and show concerning behavior beforehand. NTAC has repeatedly found that mass attacks like school shootings are preventable. The following information is intended to educate community members about their vital part in preventing tragedy and how to work with their local school to ensure safety.

Concerned parents, educators, and community stakeholders are encouraged to ask their school about the following matters. This information is provided to help prevent future attacks, not to sow dissent, cast blame, or harass. School personnel is already managing considerable challenges, and everyone is responsible for maximizing child safety. The following points can serve as a roadmap for starting a helpful discussion on stopping school violence.

Do we have a process to manage threats?

The most appropriate place to start is by determining how your school addresses potential threats.

Over the past twenty years, many schools have initiated various systems due to increased risk. Consequently, there are multiple approaches, but the better ones adopt a threat assessment model. Broadly speaking, a threat assessment model includes building a diverse team (e.g., police, teachers, administrators, mental health professionals, community liaisons, etc.), an established reporting system, and a means to disrupt and monitor threats. Virginia has helped lead the way in developing a responsive program. More information about Virginia's approach can be found at <https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/virginia-center-school-and-campus-safety/threat-assessment-virginia>.

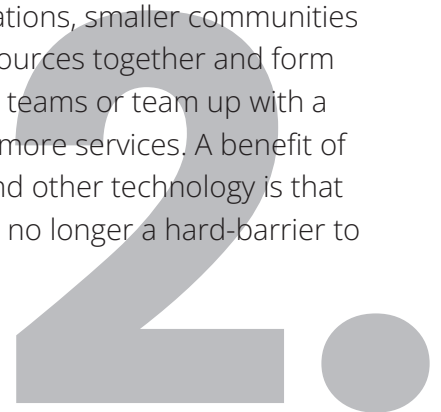


Do we have a response team?

Best practice includes creating a multi-disciplinary team. Ideally, the team is composed of individuals from different backgrounds.

A well-rounded team could include a school administrator, local law enforcement agent, school resource officer, teacher, mental health professional, and community representative. Given that school threats are complex, it is only reasonable that it would take a group of people with diverse views and problem-solving skills to manage such issues. For instance, a school administrator can provide input on what interventions school policy permits, whereas police can determine if any laws were broken. A mental health professional can provide insight into possible psychological issues plaguing a student and identify therapeutic resources to better the situation.

It may be difficult for some communities with limited resources to amass the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for threat management. In such situations, smaller communities may pool their resources together and form multi-jurisdictional teams or team up with a larger school with more services. A benefit of virtual meetings and other technology is that one's geography is no longer a hard-barrier to services.



3.

Do we have a reporting system?

One key finding across school attacker investigations is that people saw concerning behavior in the would-be attacker beforehand. Again, attackers do not simply snap. This finding highlights the key role that community members play in preventing attacks. Consequently, citizens must have a way of reporting

concerns and getting needed information to the key parties. Some jurisdictions offer a telephone or electronic reporting system that passes relevant details along to the assessment team. Schools can explore whether to list a specific email address on their website for reporting.

What kind of information is needed to make a report?

Parents, adults, and students must understand what information to report. Generally, early warning systems should use a low threshold. That means if one has any concern about a possible threat, it is likely best to report it and allow others to determine the likelihood of the issue. Some may argue that using a “low bar” for reporting will create unnecessary calls and the possibility of misuse. My response is, “Yes, and that is fine.” A knowledgeable, thoughtful team can root out those reports that are frivolous or can be resolved in other ways. Possible signs triggering a report can include a student threatening other students or faculty. Such a threat does not need to be explicitly made to the would-be victim but could be overheard while the student is talking to a peer. Students talking about wanting to get even, collecting weapons, or speaking hopelessly about their situation could trigger reporting. Some of the most common issues reported include suicide,

bullying, drugs, cutting (i.e., self-harm), and depression (NTAC, 2018). An example of an anonymous, 24/7 reporting system is Safe2Tell, launched in Colorado in 2004 to provide a safe reporting place. Readers can find out more about the organization at <https://safe2tell.org/>. During the 2018-2019 school year, Safe2Tell received nearly 20,000 reports, many of which were related to student suicide, drug use, and bullying (NTAC, 2019).

In examining averted school attacks, or those attacks thwarted, nearly all attacks were detected beforehand (NTAC, 2021). Attackers shared their plans with co-conspirators, friends, fellow students, and others (NTAC, 2021). This finding re-emphasizes the importance of the community reporting possible threats.

4.

5.

Will my name be recorded if I make a report?

This is a tricky question and is best resolved by the parties directly involved.

There is a strong argument for making a reporting system anonymous. Individuals may be reluctant to report concerning behavior if they fear negative consequences. Alternatively, team members may want to interview reporters to gain other vital information. Given this issue, it might be beneficial to offer both reporting services: one where reports can be made anonymously and another where individuals can be interviewed further if needed.

6.

Where is reported information kept?

A reasonable question for stakeholders is where collected data are stored and who has access. Historically, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects information about a student's mental health. A school should consult with a legal representative knowledgeable about such matters to ensure their policies are lawful. Also, the best practice is to keep such information separate from a student's broader academic record.

2032 shootings

The U.S. has had 2,032 school shootings since 1970 and these numbers are increasing. Alarming, 948 school shootings have taken place since the tragedy at Sandy Hook

300,000

Since the historic attack at Columbine High School in 1999, nearly 300,000 students have been on campus during a school shooting

Failure to report

In 4 out of 5 school shootings, at least one other person had knowledge of the attacker's plan but failed to report it.

93% planned

In a comprehensive school shooting study, the Secret Service and Department of Education found that 93% of school shooters planned the attack in advance.



What can be done to address threats other than calling the police?

While police intervention is critical when violence and weapons are involved, there is little, if anything, law enforcement can do before someone breaks the law.

A key NTAC (2021) finding is that schools should intervene before a student's behavior rises to criminality. This creates a challenge as a student may behave in a concerning but not illegal way. In some situations, others may see a student spiraling out of control and clearly headed toward a negative outcome.

Consequently, it is bad decision-making to wait for the student to break the law to interject. In situations like this, I think of the adage about it being easier to stop a train traveling at five mph as opposed to 60 mph. Similarly, it is always easier to intervene earlier rather than later. If we think of school attacks as a ramping-up process with the attack being the endpoint, it is likely easiest to interrupt the chain early on when a student feels isolated, not when she is planning attack details.



8.

How are cases tracked?

It is important to understand that cases do not stop with the first intervention.

Threat assessment is dynamic and responds to a situation's ever-changing nature. A school cannot simply suspend a student and consider the matter resolved. Schools need more in their intervention toolbox than suspension. Just because a student is barred from school grounds doesn't mean he will stay away. Similarly, a case does not close with the student being referred to counseling. One needs to ensure the student follows through and attends. A student may be de-escalating and doing well and then suffer an unexpected family event, catapulting his risk again. Ongoing monitoring is necessary to maximize safety for the community as well as the student.

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

National Threat Assessment Center. (2021). Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.
<https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/blog/gun-violence/16-facts-about-gun-violence-and-school-shootings/>

About us

The digital birds and bees takes a look at online platforms and digital well-being to help mental health professionals, parents and kids understand the risks and benefits of sexual education on the internet.

DIGITAL
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