Addressing Violent Behavior at Schools

Violent events at school, especially school shootings, have made school safety a primary concern. Frequent calls are for "hardening" schools and conducting threat assessments. Less attention has been given to enhancing safety by transforming student/learning supports in order to better address factors that promote violence at schools

Hardening Schools and Initiating Threat Assessments

Common sense about enhancing safety at schools says schools should strengthen security and identify students who are potential threats. The problem, however, is that there are many concerns about how best to achieve these objectives.

The Dilemma Surrounding Enhancing Security

Methods for strengthening security at schools include a range of possibilities. These include, for example, restricting access, deploying security officers and metal detectors at the entry, enhancing campus-wide monitoring and camera surveillance, locking classroom doors, sending live video feeds to police who can trigger facility shut downs, installing panic buttons, having frequent intruder response drills, and even allowing administrators and teachers to be armed.

The term "hardening schools" has emerged to encompass the extreme approach of adopting so many of the above practices that the facility looks and feels more like a prison than a public school. Indeed, hardening schools makes some students feel anxious and fearful. And in schools with large Black and brown student bodies, rather than being protected and feeling safe, students believe they may be targeted and criminalized by on-campus security officers.

> While the multi-billion dollar security industry clearly has lobbied for extensive hardening of schools, research has not supported the trend. And education leaders such as the National Education Association's Vice-President Becky Pringle have cautioned "We cannot convert our schools into prisons and treat our students like prisoners." ... "We need to balance the improvement of the physical security of the schools without compromising our principles and our values around learning."

So, while some security practices are deemed essential by a majority of concerned stakeholders (e.g., installing internal locks, limiting the number of entry points), districts and schools will continue to make local decisions. With this in mind, it is widely recommended that parents and students be represented at decision making tables and that decisions reflect a balance between securing the school from violent attackers and addressing factors that lead to students engaging in violent acts.

> Kenneth Trump, a school safety expert, stresses that school hardening comes with a cost beyond what is recorded on a district's bottom line. He cautions: "A skewed focus on target hardening neglects the time and resources needed to spend on professional development training, planning, behavioral and mental health intervention supports for students, and other best practices"

Targeted Threat Assessment

> *There is NO profile of a student who will cause harm. There is no easy formula or profile of risk factors that accurately determines whether a student is going to commit a violent act. The use of profiling increases the likelihood of misidentifying students who are thought to pose a threat.* National Association of School Psychologists

After a school shooting by a student, questions arise about whether there were "predictive clues. And with a view to preventing future violent behavior, there are calls for instituting a schoolwide targeted threat assessment screening program. In reaction, concerns arise about the problems that can arise from such screening.

Advocates for threat assessments differ in how they think about the *main* focus for identifying potentially violent students. There are those who view the purpose strictly in terms of identifying anyone who might be dangerous in order to prevent them from pursuing a violent course of action. Others primarily want to identify such individuals in order to provide essential help and, by effectively helping, reduce the likelihood of their acting out.

Concerns. What needs to be clear at the outset is that (1) there is a lack of evidence supporting the validity of threat assessment and (2) large-scale screening programs can produce many false positives and lead to interventions that have serious negative effects for students and the school's educational mission. Validity aside, concerns about false positives raise difficult questions about what criteria and threshold should be used in deciding there is a real threat. And the assessment itself raises a host of privacy and due process concerns.

What also needs emphasizing here is that too often a major disconnect exists between assessments that identify student problems and access to and availability of appropriate assistance. Parents and teachers regularly raise concerns about youngsters manifesting learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems only to find their school lacks a system for addressing the problems.

The process. Threat assessments can be described as having four facets: *identifying* the potential threat, *assessing and analyzing* the nature of the threat and what needs to be done using several sources, *managing* appropriate interventions, and *following-up* to ensure effective threat resolution.

A first focus for those conducting a targeted threat assessment is immediacy: *How imminent is the threat and how quickly can steps be taken to prevent it?* Immediate threats call for immediate action.

Based on research, the following is a synthesis of suggested items intended to guide information gathering from the student, family members, school staff, friends, other peers, accessible records, and any other relevant sources:

- Who targeted the student and why?
- Who else is worried about the student's potential for harm and why?
- What are the student's motives, intentions, goals, and ideas that suggest a threat?
- Any unusual or threatening communications?
- Inappropriate interest in weapons, school shooters, mass attacks, other types of violence?
- Access to weapons?
- Stressful events, such as setbacks, challenges, or losses (including losses of status)?
- Emotional and developmental issues?
- Evidence of desperation, hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts and gestures?
- Does the student view violence as an option to solve problems?
- Are others concerned about the student's statements or behaviors?
- Any evidence of attack-related behaviors, planning, and cognitive sophistication and organization capacity to carry out an attack?
- Is there consistency between the student's statements and actions?
- Other factors that might increase the likelihood of attack?
- Are there protective factors such as positive or prosocial influences and events that might decrease the likelihood of attack?

Again, we stress there are concerns about which criteria are most relevant and should be given more weight and what threshold should be used in deciding there is a real threat.

An Alternative to Formal Screening: Facilitating Reporting

Moore and Jackson (2022) report that a U.S. Secret Service study in 2021 reported that over 90% of school shooters had expressed their intentions to their peers in K-12 schools. Similarly, another study showed that about half of school shooters had given warnings which were ignored.

   Problems for schools are how to overcome the stigma of "snitching," encourage students and others to report when they learn about such potential violent intentions, and facilitate multiple ways for reporting (e.g., a school safety hotline that can receive phone, email, and text massages, easy and private access to a trusted staff member).

   Also important is ensuring that students, staff, and parents are well-informed about how to report and are provided a follow-up that indicates the report was taken seriously.

Clearly, school violence is unacceptable. A positive school climate starts with safety at school. But hardening schools and instituting a threat assessment program contribute to a school climate that appears more oriented to policing and monitoring than to fostering a sense of a caring community. Strategies are called for that emphasize the intent to help troubled and troubling students.

District's Police, Social Workers Team up on Mental Health

Round Rock Independent School District is one of the first in Texas to pair social workers and police officers in providing mental health support for students. The district's school police officers identify vulnerable students and then refer them to in-house social workers....

Addressing Factors that Promote Violence at School

For schools, student and staff, safety involves much more than hardening the school, assessing threats, and preventing violence. Ultimately, safe schools require instruction that is designed in ways that account for a wide range of individual differences and circumstances and ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Administrators, teachers, and all student support staff must be prepared to promote positive development, prevent problems, and assist with the various learning, behavior, and emotional styles and problems encountered daily.

As is widely known, our Center at UCLA promotes thinking about dealing with problems (such as violent acts) experienced at school within the context of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. The system responds to, minimizes the impact of, and prevents school and personal problems. It consists of a set of school-wide and classroom-based domains of support that address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. The student/learning supports domains spread across an intervention continuum focused on (a) promoting learning and healthy behavior and preventing problems (e.g., enhancing a supportive, caring school environment and assessing whether students feel supported, facilitating social-emotional learning), (b) intervening as soon as problems arise (e.g., bullying, verbal threats, etc.), and (c) ensuring severe and chronic problems are continuously addressed (especially those involving students who are disconnected from peers and adults at school).

For details, see: Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide

About Crisis Response and Prevention

After a crisis such as a school shooting, the first concern is to ensure physical safety and medical first aid; this is followed immediately by attention to psychological considerations. Then, the emphasis is on the school's need to regain stability and a sense of normality so that students and staff can resume learning and teaching. This includes attending to follow-up care as needed and prevention of future violent events.

Districts differ in the specificity with which they spell out procedures for schools to follow during and in the aftermath of a crisis. Based on what their district codifies, schools plan for emergencies. It is rare, however, for districts to have addressed, in sufficient detail, policies and procedures for what schools are to do in the days and weeks that follow a crisis event and what to do to prevent future occurrences when feasible.

Districts also differ in the amount of support they provide in helping schools establish and maintain crisis response mechanisms (e.g., crisis teams) and in training staff, as well as how much district level staffing is available for crisis intervention. Some, usually larger districts, may have regional support crisis teams that provide crisis management, medical and psychological/counseling support services, media relations, and debriefing. Others provide only an immediate response.

Note: Out Center encompasses concerns about violence at school under the student/learning supports' domain of *Crisis Assistance and Prevention*.

Concluding Comments

Ultimately, dealing with violence in schools requires schools, families, and communities working together. In focusing on violence prevention, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stresses making sure from a young age that children feel a strong sense of support from their family, other caretakers, early education staff, and the community at large. The emphasis is on promoting healthy environments and good education programs early in life, strengthening coping skills, creating a communal environment by connecting children with caring adults and activities in the community, and providing immediate special assistance as soon as feasible after a problem arises.

Schools and families also need to balance concerns about young people's well-being with the imposition of constraints (e.g., rules, limits, social and environmental controls). In general, constraints work against feelings of autonomy and self-determination. As such, they produce psychological reactance. Psychological reactance motivates efforts to restore feelings of control over one's life.

Clearly, rules and limits are necessary to student socialization. At the same time, keeping restraints to an essential minimum and making them as positive as feasible is important to reducing undesirable behaviors and promoting academic success, personal well-being, and robust interpersonal connections.

A Few Relevant Sources for Resources

National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)
Provides training and technical assistance to schools, school districts, and educational agencies to support efforts aimed at creating and nurturing safe and supportive learning environments. The national center addresses a wide variety of topics that impact school climate, ranging from bullying and violence prevention to tools for measuring and identifying needs for school climate. For example, NCSSLE produced and disseminates ED's School Climate Survey and the School Climate Improvement Resource Package.

School Safety.gov
Created by the federal government to provide schools and districts with actionable recommendations to create a safe and supportive learning environment where students can thrive and grow.

Readiness & Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center
A federal hub for higher ed and K-12 school safety, security, and emergency management and preparedness information and services (e.g., guidance, free virtual training, interactive tools, resources). They develop and maintain comprehensive, all-hazard, and high-quality campus and school Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs). These plans focus on continually protecting the whole school community before, during, and after possible emergencies.

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

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, building positive school climates, and requesting training from NTAC personnel.

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

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Model
Provides guidelines and resources for schools to conduct threat assessments of students, including links to research on threat assessment.

Stopbullying.gov
Provides information from government agencies on bullying, cyberbullying, risk factors, responses to bullying, and prevention efforts.

National PTA
Provides resources regarding bullying prevention and creating positive school climates.

Youth Violence Project, Bullying Resources
Provides an aggregate of online and in-print resources for parents, teachers, and students to intervene, prevent, and respond to bullying.

Resource Guide For Improving School Climate And Discipline
Resource guide developed by the U.S. Department of Education for schools to create nurturing, positive, and safe environments to help boost student achievementand success.

Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA
Among the many resources accessible from the Center's website are a menu of over 130 *Quick Finds*. See, for example, the Quick Finds on:
>*Threat Assessment*
>*Bullying*
>*Safe Schools and Violence Prevention*
>*Crisis Response and Prevention*

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