



Portland Public Schools

Student Threat Assessment System

Key Themes to Guide Threat Assessment Investigations

Threat assessment 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. Addressing each theme is necessary for a complete assessment and may uncover other avenues of inquiry to help determine whether the student is at risk for engaging in violence. Using the themes to identify where the student might be struggling will help the Team identify the most appropriate resources. Keep in mind, there is no need to wait until the Team has completed all interviews or addressed every theme before taking action. As soon as an area for intervention is identified, suitable management strategies should be enacted.

The student's motives and goals: Students may have a variety of motives that place them at risk for engaging in harmful behavior, whether to themselves or others. If you can discover the student's motivation for engaging in the concerning behavior that brought him/her to the attention of the Team, then you can understand more about the student's goals. 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 motive further allows the Team to develop management strategies that can direct the student away from violent choices.



inappropriate or heightened interest in concerning topics such as school attacks or attackers, mass attacks, or other types of violence. These interests might appear in the student's communications, the books the student reads, the movies the student watches, or the activities the student enjoys. The context of the student's interests is an important factor to consider. For example, a student's interest in weapons may not be concerning if the student is a hunter or is on the school's rifle team, with no evidence of an inappropriate or unhealthy fixation on weapons. In other situations, the context surrounding a student's interest in weapons could be of concern. For example, if a student is fixated on past school shooters or discusses what firearm would be best to use in a mass attack.

Concerning, unusual, or threatening communications: Look for concerning, unusual, bizarre, threatening, or violent communications the student made. The student's communications may reveal grievances held about certain issues or a possible intended target. 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. These statements might be made in person to classmates, teammates, or friends; in writing on assignments or tests; and/or via social media, text messages, or photo or video-sharing sites.

Access to weapons: In addition to determining whether the student has any inappropriate interests or fascination with weapons, the Team should assess whether the student has access to weapons. Because many school attackers used firearms acquired from their homes, consider whether the family keeps weapons at home or if there is a relative or friend who has weapons. Sometimes parents who keep weapons at home incorrectly assume that their children are unaware of where they are stored or how to access them. If there are weapons at home, the Team should determine if they are stored appropriately and if the student knows how to use them or has done so in the past. The Team should also remember that firearms are not the only weapons to be concerned about. Even though many school attackers have used firearms in carrying out their attacks, explosives, incendiary devices, bladed weapons, or combinations of these weapons have been used in past attacks.



Inappropriate interest in weapons, school shooters, mass attacks, or other types of violence: Gather information about whether the student has shown an

Stressful events, such as setbacks, challenges, or losses: All students face stressors such as setbacks, losses, and other challenges as part of their lives. While many students are resilient and can overcome these situations, for some, these stressors may become overwhelming and ultimately influence their decision to carry out an attack at school. Gather information on stressors the student is experiencing, how the student is coping with them, and whether there are supportive friends or family who can help the student overcome them. Assess whether the student experienced stressors in the past that are still having an effect, such as a move to a new school, and whether there might be additional setbacks or losses in the near future, like a relationship that might be ending. Stressors can occur in all areas of a student's life, including at school with coursework, friendships, romantic relationships, or teammates; or outside of school with parents, siblings, or at jobs. Many students can experience bullying, a stressor which can take place in person at school or online at home. Teams should intervene and prevent bullying and cyberbullying of a student who has been brought to their attention. More broadly, administrators should work to address any concerns regarding bullying school-wide and ensure their school has a safe climate for all students.

Impact of emotional and developmental issues: Anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, and other mental health issues are important factors to consider when conducting an assessment. Keep in mind that students with emotional issues or developmental disorders might behave in a way that is maladaptive, but might not be concerning or threatening because the behavior is a product of their diagnosis. Behaviors exhibited by a student with a diagnosed disorder need to be evaluated in the context of that diagnosis and the student's known baseline of behavior. If the student is experiencing feelings related to a diagnosable mental illness, such as depression, then the Team needs to consider the effect of these feelings on their behaviors when assessing the student's risk of engaging in harm to self or others.

Evidence of desperation, hopelessness, or suicidal thoughts and gestures: Assess whether the student feels hopeless, desperate, or out of options. Determine if the student has had thoughts about or engaged in behaviors that would indicate the

student's desperation. The Team should determine whether the student has felt this way before, how the student managed those feelings then, and whether those same resources for coping are available to the student now. Consider whether the student has tried addressing the problems in a positive way, but was unable to resolve them, thereby leading to a sense of hopelessness about their situation.

Whether the student views violence as an option to solve problems: Some students, who are feeling hopeless and out of options, may think violence is the only way to solve a problem or settle a grievance. The Team should look to see whether the student thinks violence is acceptable or necessary, if the student has used violence in the past to address problems, and whether the student has thought of alternative ways to address the grievances. The Team should also assess whether peers, or others, support and encourage the student to use violence as a means to an end. If possible, connect the student with more positive, prosocial role models who discourage violence and identify more acceptable ways to solve problems.

Whether others are concerned about the student's statements or behaviors: In previous incidents, many students made statements or engaged in behaviors prior to their attacks that elicited concern from others in their lives. Assess whether parents, friends, classmates, teachers, or others who know the student are worried about the student and whether they have taken any actions in response to their concerns. Gather information on the specific behaviors that caused worry or fear. These could include behaviors that may have elicited concerns about the safety of the student or others, such as unusual, bizarre or threatening statements; intimidating or aggressive acts; indications of planning for an attack; suicidal ideations or gestures; or a fixation on a specific target. Other behaviors that elicit concern may not necessarily be indicative of violence, but do require that the Team assess the behavior and provide appropriate supports. Examples of these behaviors include alcohol or drug use; behavior changes related to academic performance, social habits, mood, or physical appearance; conflicts with others; and withdrawal or isolation.



Capacity to carry out an attack: Determine whether the student's thinking and behavior is organized enough to plan and execute an attack and whether the student has the resources to carry it out. Planning does not need to be elaborate and could be as simple as taking a weapon from home and inflicting harm on classmates at school. Other student attackers may develop more complex and lengthier plans. At the very least, carrying out an attack requires that the student has access to a weapon and the ability to get that weapon to school undetected.

Evidence of planning for an attack: Targeted attacks at school are rarely sudden or impulsive acts of violence. The Team should assess whether the student has made specific plans to harm the school. The student might create lists of individuals or groups targeted for violence, or research tactics and materials needed to carry out the attack. The student may conduct surveillance, draw maps of the planned location, and test security responses at school. He/she may write out detailed steps and rehearse some aspects of a plan, such as getting to the school, the timing of the attack, or whether to



attempt escape, be captured, or commit suicide. The student may also acquire, manufacture, or practice with a weapon.

Consistency between the student's statements and actions: The Team should corroborate the student's statements to determine that they are consistent with the student's actions and behaviors and with what other people say about the student. When inconsistencies are identified, the Team should then try to determine why that is the case. For example, the student might say that he/she is handling a romantic break-up well, but posts on social media indicate the student is struggling to move on, and friends report that the student is more upset or angry about the break-up than reported. Determine

whether the inconsistency is because the student is deliberately hiding something or if the inconsistency stems from another underlying issue. For example, a depressed student may claim that they are isolated, even if they regularly go out with a large group of students. If the inconsistency is deliberate, it is important to determine why the student feels the need to conceal his/her actions. The concealment may be as simple as a fear of facing punishment for some other inappropriate behavior, or it may be related to hidden plans for a violent act.

Protective factors such as positive or prosocial influences and events: A thorough threat assessment requires understanding the full picture of a student's behaviors and environment, which also includes accounting for the positive and prosocial influences on the student's life. The Team should identify factors that may restore hope to a student who feels defeated, desperate, or in a situation that is impossible to overcome. This includes determining whether the student has a positive, trusting relationship with an adult at school. This could be a teacher, coach, guidance counselor, nurse, resource officer, or janitor. A trusted whom the student can confide and who will judgment can help direct a student toward and options to overcome setbacks. Learn who are at school and if the student feels connected to other students. A student may developing friendships that they can rely on for situational or personal factors might help to engaging in negative or harmful behaviors. student's life, such as having a new romantic becoming a member of a team or club, might discourage any plan to engage in violence. The Team could also use activities or groups the student wants to take part in as motivation for the student to engage in positive and constructive behaviors, such as attending class, completing assignments, and adhering to a conduct or behavior code.



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