Assessment of threats and threatening behavior in our schools:
Introduction of the Virginia Threat Assessment Program

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Although research demonstrates that severe school violence is rare, there is evidence that threats of violence are on the rise, and managing these threats poses a problem in our schools (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski & Jimerson, 2010). Many schools use a "zero tolerance" threshold for intervening upon threats, and the typical course of action is suspension. Certainly, these suspensions are necessary consequences used to control inappropriate behavior, but suspended students are more likely to be suspended again (ref), and suspensions have been associated with numerous unintended adverse consequences (Cornell, et al. 2012). Unfortunately, school officials are placed in a situation where they must err on the side of safety, and apply drastic consequences to all situations. The likely result is that events which do not represent real danger are met with the same consequence (e.g., suspension) as potentially dangerous threats. Following this "one size fits all" model of assessment and consequences also expends enormous amounts of school resources and time. Given these adverse effects of suspension, accurate assessment of every threat seems like an important goal.

The Virginia Threat Assessment (Cornell and Sheras, 2006) an empirically-based program which has developed guidelines to help school officials utilize a uniform, step-by-step manual to assess threats and threatening behavior which might occur in their school. There is a great deal of information about the effectiveness of the Virginia Threat Assessment model, and in fact, earlier this year it was recognized by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=263).

The Virginia Threat Assessment model is an approach to violence prevention that emphasizes early attention to problems such as bullying, teasing, and other forms of student conflict before they escalate into violent behavior. School staff members are encouraged to adopt a flexible, problem-solving approach, as distinguished from a more punitive, zero tolerance approach to student misbehavior. As a result of this training, the model is intended to generate broader changes in the nature of staff-student interactions around disciplinary matters and to encourage a more positive school climate in which students feel treated with fairness and respect. Consistent with this goal, a pre-post survey study of 351 school staff members who completed the Virginia workshop found that participants became less anxious about the possibility of a school homicide, more willing to use threat assessment methods to help students resolve conflicts, and less inclined to use a zero tolerance approach (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008). Similar effects were found for principals, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and law enforcement officers.

The Virginia guidelines follow a seven-step decision-tree. In brief, the first three steps constitute a triage process in which the team leader (a school administrator such as the principal or assistant principal) investigates a reported threat and determines whether the threat can be readily resolved as a transient threat that is not a serious threat. Examples of transient threats are jokes or statements made in anger that are expressions of feeling or figures of speech rather than expressions of a genuine intent to harm someone.

Any threat that cannot be clearly identified and resolved as transient is treated as a substantive threat. Substantive threats always require protective action to prevent the threat from being carried out. The remaining four steps guide the team through more extensive assessment and response based on the seriousness of the threat. In the most serious cases, the team conducts a safety evaluation that includes both a law enforcement investigation and a mental health assessment of the student. The culmination of the threat assessment is the development of a safety plan that is designed to address the problem or conflict underlying the threat and

prevent the act of violence from taking place. For both transient and substantive threats, there is an emphasis on helping students to resolve conflicts and minimizing the use of zero-tolerance suspensions as a disciplinary response.

Each school establishes a multidisciplinary team based on its existing staff of school administrators, mental health, and law enforcement professionals (Schools may adapt team composition to fit their staffing, draw upon law enforcement officers from other schools or community). Trained school systems currently exist in Virginia, New York, California, Colorado, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Vermont, South Dakota as well as in Canada and Germany. Training involves purchase of a manual ($50.00 each; preferably two per participating school) and a day-long workshop ($4000.00) for team members from as many schools as we like (usually between 30 and 150 people).

The Virginia Threat Assessment program has research support from two field tests, 3 controlled trials and one state implementation study. Results show that school staff report increased confidence in their ability to respond to threats, students are less likely to carry out threats, reductions in bullying infractions, reductions in long-term suspensions, increased utilization of school counseling, increased parental involvement. Also, students report greater willingness to seek help for threats of violence, and more positive views of school personnel.

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