Assessing the Threat of Violence in our Public Schools

Is enough being done?

Summary

In the wake of some horrific incidents at schools, efforts have been made at the federal and state levels to reduce such events. The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury investigated the readiness of our ten public school districts, the county's alternative education sites, and their respective law enforcement agencies to respond effectively to threats of targeted school violence.

While there are many positive programs in place, more can and should be done. Threat assessment plans, response teams, communication plans, and training are not consistent across all campuses. Confusion about what to do or how to interact with law enforcement during a threat incident still exists at some schools. Campus law enforcement, known as School Resource Officers, are extremely valuable in preventing or mitigating threats, but are only available in a few districts.

Background

At the end of the 2015-16 school year, a Santa Cruz County school district experienced an incident that tested the threat assessment part of its comprehensive school safety plan. The fear and confusion this incident raised was heightened by a lack of coordination between the school and local law enforcement, as well as a failure of timely and comprehensive communication to the school community. This situation led the Grand Jury to question whether the lack of coordination was isolated to this one district, or was something widespread throughout the county's multiple school and law enforcement systems. This was the basis for an investigation into threat assessment in our schools countywide.

A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or to act violently against someone or something. A threat can be spoken, written, or symbolic gestures or actions. Threat assessment rests on two critical principles:

- All threats and all threateners are not equal.
- Most threateners are unlikely to carry out their threat. However, all threats must be taken seriously and evaluated.

Threat assessment in schools is ultimately not concerned with whether a person or persons have made a threat, but whether they pose a threat, and includes efforts to prevent the threat from being carried out.

Scope

To better understand threat assessment issues, the Grand Jury referenced numerous reports and publications, including:

- California Education Code[1]
- *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action*[2]
- *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*[3]
- *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*[4]
- *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*[5]
- *The Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment*[6]
- Santa Cruz County Office of Education's *Emergency Response Management Plan*[7]

Schools

Through interviews and questionnaires, we examined the preparedness of the county's school districts in assessing threats of targeted school violence. We sought information regarding how many districts had a threat assessment plan and of those which did, how detailed it was and to what degree law enforcement was involved. We developed the questionnaires from material gleaned through researching the publications mentioned above.

Law enforcement

Using the same process, we looked at the readiness of the county's law enforcement agencies to work in concert with the school districts in assessing threats. We evaluated how many agencies had School Resource Officers (SROs) and to what degree the agencies knew of and were involved in threat assessment at the schools in their jurisdictions. SROs are law enforcement officers that have received specialized training for working in an educational environment.

The final phase of our work was to propose a way to ensure that any school district in the county can effectively deal with assessing a threat with the law enforcement support they need.

Investigation

State law requires all public schools districts and county offices of education to develop a comprehensive school safety plan.

> *It is the intent of the Legislature that all California public schools, in kindergarten, and grades 1 to 12, inclusive, operated by school districts, in cooperation with local law enforcement agencies, community leaders, parents, pupils, teachers, administrators, and other persons who may be interested in the prevention of campus crime and violence, develop a comprehensive school safety plan that addresses the safety concerns identified through a systematic planning process.*
> California Education Code §32280

Sections 32280−32289 of the California Education Code mandated that these comprehensive school safety plans (CSSPs) be adopted by school districts throughout the state by March 1, 2000.[1] [8] Many schools had long-standing emergency plans for things such as natural disasters, involving coordination with other agencies such as fire and law enforcement, that were stand-alone policies or procedures. These pre-existing plans needed to be consolidated and incorporated into the CSSP in order to comply. More recent issues such as cyberbullying and threat assessment may not have been part of a school's pre-existing plan, and the California Department of Education offered the publication *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action* to help school districts put it all together.[3] Notably missing from the original law and the guide was any direct mention of threat assessment.[1]

Though other agencies are mentioned in the law,[1] it is clear that any collaboration and coordination with them is the responsibility of the school districts. With over 1,000 school districts in California,[9] there is no assurance of consistency in the use of the planning guide or of the coordination with other agencies.

Communication: a key component of a comprehensive school safety plan

First and foremost, a school district should have a means of sharing information with its community.[7] Employing multiple avenues such as social media, email, and a phone tree contact system is ideal. The school community should be well informed as to the existence of the communication methods and how they will be used. Once established, they should be used consistently.[7] In the incident last summer, failure to use these communication tools heightened fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration.

Secondly, the existence of the school district's Comprehensive School Safety Plan should be made clear to the parents and guardians of all students prior to their attendance at school. Either a copy of the plan or means of accessing one should be provided. For student and faculty safety some details of the plan may remain confidential, accessible only to key district employees and command personnel of the emergency response agencies called out in the plan. Along with the knowledge of the plan itself, parents and guardians should know under what circumstances the district will make contact with them, and by what means this will take place.

Reluctance to exchange information between school districts and law enforcement or other agencies because of concerns of violating the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) has hampered assessments.[10] Under provisions of FERPA, in most circumstances a school may not disclose identifying information about a student without the prior written consent of the student's parent or guardian or, in the case of students who are 18 or older, the consent of the student. While this does not apply to law enforcement, not everyone involved may be aware of that fact. An agreement between schools and other agencies involved with the assessment of school threats may be created for the exchange of critical information while still protecting students' rights. A template of such an agreement is included in *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action*.[2]

The last important element is the development of comfort and trust between students and adults. Data collected in the *Safe School Initiative*, a study of incidents of targeted school violence that occurred in 37 communities between 1974 and 2000, showed that in many schools there is a pervasive sense among students and some adults that telling grownups that another student is in pain or may pose a threat violates an unwritten, but powerful, "code of silence."[11] This study found that most school shooters shared their potentially lethal plans with other students, but those students who knew of planned attacks rarely told adults.

A culture of "see something, say something" needs to be fostered. Students must be able to feel they can come to an adult with issues regarding their safety without fear of being stigmatized as a snitch or alienated from the rest of the students by violating a friend's trust.[12] Having a uniformed School Resource Officer on campus has an added benefit in that comfort in relating with law enforcement can be established as well.

Threat assessment and investigation

Though not specifically identified as such within state guidelines, threat assessment is an integral component in strategies for preventing potential violence on school campuses. Despite the efficacy of responding to threats before they escalate, school districts receive little guidance in developing and implementing effective interventions. The guide the legislature intended school districts to use, *Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action*,[2] echoes the language of the law with regard to the need for prevention of violence in schools but doesn't specifically identify threat assessment.

The guide does, however, list as a resource *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*,[4] from the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) and U.S. Department of Education (ED). This resource clearly focuses on threats of targeted school violence, and was generated from the *Safe School Initiative*.[3]

An FBI report, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*,[5] focuses on assessing threats of targeted school violence. This document summarizes the discussion and conclusions from a 1999 symposium hosted by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in Leesburg, Virginia. Unfortunately this well-prepared FBI document is not widely disseminated and school districts must find this through their independent research when making their comprehensive school safety plans.

Using both of these documents as a resource provides a comprehensive picture of threats.[4] [5] Both cover all aspects of a threat, but the USSS and ED paper puts more focus on the psychology and motivation of why a threat is made while the FBI paper explores more deeply how and what to investigate when assessing a threat. Following these two documents in thoroughly assessing a threat will give a school district and its community the assurance that everything possible has been done to keep students and faculty safe.

In 2006, the Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia developed and field-tested a comprehensive set of threat assessment guidelines known as the the "Virginia Model."[6] This model takes the recommendations from the two federal sources, addresses them from the perspective of a school administrator, and creates a step-by-step flowchart to investigate threats of targeted school violence. Santa Cruz County Office of Education's *Emergency Response Management Plan*, in chapter 4, section 4.40,[7] lists steps recommended in dealing with a threat outlined in the USSS and ED paper.[4]

All resources used for this investigation recommend the creation of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team comprised of administrators, teachers, and representatives from the legal profession, mental health care, and law enforcement.[13] [14] They recommend that all teams be formed in advance, become familiar with their threat assessment plans, attend training when available, and have alternates ready to step in.

The ideal threat assessment plan should incorporate key elements from all of these resources, some of which are obtained only through concerted effort on the part of the

school district. Once complete, the plan should detail the step by step process in conducting an investigation, both on the part of the school district and of law enforcement.

When a student makes a verbal or written threat at school that involves the use of a weapon, the school district has the authority to search for weapons or other evidence on the student's person, belongings, locker, and on school property. They may also conduct interviews of the student or students while they are on school district property. A thorough investigation beyond school district boundaries can only be carried out by law enforcement.

The student's residence and other off campus areas may also need to be searched to determine their access to weapons. Other clues, described in the resource materials as *leakage*, may also be pursued in evaluating a student's intention to carry out the threat.[15] [16] This part of the investigation is clearly outside the authority of the district and can only be done by law enforcement.

Not all threats require this degree of investigation, but when warranted, these steps need to be taken before determining that a threat does or does not exist. The failure to do so was a critical piece lacking last summer, and underscores the need for the school district and law enforcement to know the plan and to coordinate their efforts when putting the plan into action.

Preparedness of our schools and law enforcement

Our survey found wide variation in the preparation and resources available in the county's school districts. While all of the districts had comprehensive school safety plans, they did not all include specific threat assessment plans and those plans largely were not created in collaboration with law enforcement. The teams varied as well, both in terms of their makeup and whether they were standing teams or not. Three districts are so small that they are unable to form a multidisciplinary team. Only two threat assessment teams had SROs as members.

All teams were trained in the 2015-16 school year, but not all have received additional training, nor is it consistently provided. Two districts took the initiative to organize training in the spring of 2017, which was attended by personnel from seven districts and the county's alternative education sites.

We asked the five county law enforcement agencies (the Sheriff's Office and the police departments of Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, and Watsonville) if they had personnel trained as SROs. We inquired about how many, their roles and responsibilities, their involvement in threat assessment, knowledge of specific threat assessment plans, and membership on a threat assessment team. All but one agency had SROs or personnel assigned to assist schools or were trained in assessing threats of targeted school violence. We also inquired about specific training in threat assessment as opposed to standard criminal investigation.

In every case law enforcement personnel who work regularly with the schools, or who oversee response to calls for service from schools, had knowledge of their schools'

threat assessment plans. They realized the importance of not simply investigating whether a crime has been committed but also of inquiring about the likelihood of a threat of targeted school violence. In every case, law enforcement would pursue leakage and request search warrants if necessary.

Boundary Spanning

In order to identify, assess, and manage individuals who might pose threats of targeted school violence, a threat assessment effort must build relationships among individuals and organizations both within the school and external to the school.[17] Ideally, a threat assessment plan would be created by a school district with the input of law enforcement and would consist of policies and procedures for cooperation and collaboration. In performing a threat assessment without the benefit of this planned integration, the agencies involved tend to carry out their functions independently, leaving the door open for poor information exchange and overlaps or gaps in the continuity of the process.

The most effective relationships exist between individuals, not institutions. Individuals who build and maintain these relationships across disciplines and agencies are called *boundary spanners*.[18] They serve as a formal link or liaison between various systems and departments, and meet regularly. Boundary spanners must have credibility, respect, and strong interpersonal skills. In addition, they should understand the needs and operation of all involved groups. This understanding helps in integrating ongoing interagency relationships, in developing written protocols, and in facilitating the resolution of conflicts.

Findings

F1. In a threat situation, timely and specific communication from the school to the community can reduce fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration.

F2. Confusion over the disclosure of protected information regarding juveniles has been a barrier to the timely exchange of vital information between school districts and law enforcement, although FERPA permits disclosure of juvenile student information to law enforcement without parental consent.

F3. Threat assessment is a necessary part of the comprehensive school safety plan, but very little direct guidance has been provided to school districts in how to go about doing it.

F4. Investigating a threat may involve actions that can only be done by law enforcement, necessitating coordination and collaboration in formulating and implementing a threat assessment plan.

F5. Seven of the ten districts have a specific threat assessment plan; those districts without a plan are less able to respond effectively to threats. All of these reported that local law enforcement was aware of their plan.

F6. Only one school district had a threat assessment plan that was created with the help of law enforcement, leaving all other districts at a disadvantage in addressing threats.

F7. Three of the four districts with a single school lack the personnel to adequately assemble a threat assessment team.

F8. All threat assessment teams had training in the 2015-16 school year, but not all districts attended a professional threat assessment training held in the spring of 2017.

F9. Countywide, only two of 11 SROs were included as members of a threat assessment team.

F10. Not all local law enforcement agencies have personnel trained in assessing threats of school violence, leaving them less able to assist schools.

Recommendations

R1. The County Superintendent of Schools should advocate school districts inform parents and guardians on how and when they will be contacted in the event of a threat. (F1)

R2. The County Office of Education (COE) and the County Sheriff's Office (CSO) should advocate that the threat assessment plan for each school district has a written agreement with law enforcement in which restricted information may be exchanged during the investigation of a threat. (F2)

R3. The COE and the CSO should collaborate to develop a plan in which all school districts are prepared and capable of assessing a threat of targeted school violence. (F3, F5–F7)

R4. The County Sheriff and the County Superintendent of Schools should act as *boundary spanners* to facilitate collaboration between the school districts and law enforcement in assessing threats. (F4)

R5. The CSO and Chiefs of Police should ensure a law enforcement representative, preferably a School Resource Officer, be made available to school districts drafting or revising a threat assessment plan. (F6, F8)

R6. The County Superintendent of Schools should advocate each school district receives periodic training in assessing threats of targeted school violence. (F8)

R7. The COE should advocate each school district either has or has access to a multidisciplinary threat assessment team, including a representative from law enforcement. (F7, F9)

R8. The County Sheriff and the Chiefs of Police should ensure their respective law enforcement agencies attend periodic training in assessing threats of targeted school violence. (F10)

Required Responses

Respondent	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within/ Respond By
County Superintendent of Schools	F1–F9	R1–R4, R6, R7	60 Days August 14, 2017
County Sheriff	F2, F4–F6, F9, F10	R2–R5, R8	60 Days August 14, 2017
Capitola Chief of Police	F5, F10	R5, R8	60 Days August 14, 2017
Santa Cruz Chief of Police	F5, F10	R5, R8	60 Days August 14, 2017
Scotts Valley Chief of Police	F5, F10	R5, R8	60 Days August 14, 2017
Watsonville Chief of Police	F5, F10	R5, R8	60 Days August 14, 2017

Definitions

- **Boundary Spanner:** An individual who takes on the role or responsibility of serving as a connection between the different constituencies in multi-agency or multi-jurisdictional settings.

- **CSSP:** Comprehensive School Safety Plan defined in California Education Code Article 5, §§32280–32289.

- **Leakage:** When a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act. These clues can take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums. They may be spoken or conveyed in stories, diary entries, essays, poems, letters, songs, drawings, doodles, tattoos, or videos.[19]

- **NCAVC:** National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime.

- **School Resource Officer (SRO):** A law enforcement officer with specialized training, deployed in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.

- **Targeted School Violence:** Any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at their school with lethal means (e.g., a gun or knife); and, (ii) where the student attacker purposefully chose their school as the location of the attack.[20] The target may be a specific individual, such as a particular classmate or teacher, or a group or category of individuals. The target may even be the school itself.[21]

- **The Virginia Model:** A systematic procedure for threat assessment and intervention developed from the findings of The Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. The model is designed to be used by educators, mental health professionals and law enforcement agencies.

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Site Visits

No site visits were made.

Websites

California Legislative Information
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes.xhtml

University of Virginia http://curry.virginia.edu/

Santa Cruz County Office of Education http://santacruzcoe.org/