PARTNERING TO ENSURE SCHOOL SAFETY

Violence in schools is an alarming reality today. Countless news stories have detailed the incidents, profiled the offenders, and dissected law enforcement’s response. Educators, law enforcement, and mental health professionals realize that a one-size-fits-all approach to threat assessment is not effective because not all threats are the same. Relevant officials must collaborate to appropriately assess and address threats in a coordinated fashion. Police and school officials across the country have implemented strategies and programs that help reduce violence and promote and enhance the safety of students and school employees. This brief describes programs that focus on primary and secondary school—law enforcement partnerships that ensure school safety.

Why is this issue important to law enforcement?

In the aftermath of recent school and college shootings, the public focused quickly on what law enforcement did or did not do to prevent or respond to the incident. As protectors of public safety, law enforcement is expected to be proactive in identifying threats, preventing violence, and preparing and responding to crises. By collaborating with school officials, mental health professionals, parents, students, and community stakeholders, law enforcement can help schools provide an environment where teachers can teach and students can learn.

What are some promising practices for addressing this issue?

Two approaches that include the collaboration of law enforcement, schools, and the community at-large have proven helpful to identifying threats to the school environment and in preventing potential crimes on school grounds. Rapid City and Pennington County, South Dakota, have joined together to implement the STAR protocol in
What are some promising practices for addressing this issue? (cont’d.)

their jurisdictions. The School Threat Assessment Response (STAR) protocol is a comprehensive plan designed to provide police and school officials with an organized, well-informed way of responding to threats and resolving critical incidents. The Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment System (STAT) protocol employed in Salem, Oregon, is a regional multi-agency approach designed to help school officials and partner agencies assess students at-risk for both targeted and reactive violence.

Both protocols draw on the resources of a variety of youth-serving agencies to operate program activities. Representatives from law enforcement, juvenile justice stakeholders, mental health, the courts, and school officials already engaged in activities intended to provide for a safe school environment staff and carry out protocols. Program representatives have documented successful anecdotal outcomes.

How can law enforcement apply this practice?

The strategies applied in Rapid City and Willamette Valley can be applied in other jurisdictions regardless of size and geography. Law enforcement executives can lead or partner by taking the following steps:

1. Decide if you want to commit and support the creation of threat or risk management assessment systems.
2. Decide what you hope to accomplish by implementing such a program or strategy.
3. Determine whom best to partner with to accomplish your goals. Employ the use of Memorandums of Agreement or Understanding (MOAs/MOUs), orient, and train staff to appropriately implement and apply protocols.
4. Assess what resources are available to carry out program activities or search for necessary funding for start-up or sustainable costs.
5. Define success by agreeing on what results will signal success, determining how success will be measured, collecting data, and refining the process.

This brief begins with an overview of the issue, describes an effective response, and concludes with an examination of the strategies used in the featured programs.

Crime in Our Schools

The school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (1999), and those that preceded them at schools in Paducah, Kentucky (1997), Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998), and Tacoma, Washington (1999) were
a catalyst for many law enforcement and education officials across the country. The Columbine attacks, broadcast on television in real time and watched by millions, brought a sense of urgency to many police and school officials, and they turned their attention to an issue that had been largely taken for granted in the United States: school safety.

According to the *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2007* report, during the 2005–06 school year “78 percent of schools experienced one or more violent incidents of crime and 17 percent experienced one or more serious violent incidents.”¹ School shootings represent just one threat; the prevalence of gangs, fighting, bullying, weapons, and alcohol and drug use among youth are additional threats. In fact, this same report revealed that “46 percent experienced one or more thefts, and 68 percent experienced another type of crime.” In 2005, 24 percent of students reported that there were gangs at their schools, about 28 percent of students reported having been bullied at school, and 25 percent of students in grades 9–12 reported that drugs were made available to them on school property. Although school violence is a cause of concern, “the percentage of public schools experiencing incidents of crime was lower in 2005–06 than in 2003–04.”²

The statistical likelihood of a major violent incident at a school may be small, but complacency can make violence likelier. School and police officials must work diligently to enhance and maintain the safety of their schools, ensuring that a student’s learning environment is as normal as possible every single day. Before the string of widely-publicized school shootings in the 1990s, schools were largely unprepared to deal with such crises. Recent data reveal that schools have implemented procedures that have made schools safer than before. Research on school crime rates reveal that students observed the use of security cameras, school staff in the hallways, and the presence of security guards and/or assigned police officers at their schools.³ “Thirty-eight percent of public schools reported at least one violent incident to police, 13 percent reported at least one serious violent incident to police, 28 percent reported at least one theft to police,


Crime in Our Schools (cont’d.)

and 51 percent reported one of the other specified crimes to police."4 Moreover, the impact of school shootings in the 1990s set in motion a variety of law enforcement-involved strategies, programs, and initiatives that may have contributed to the reduction in school-associated violence. Increasing law enforcement’s role through partnerships appears to be paying positive dividends.

An Effective Response: School Safety Plans

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “schools should be safe havens for teaching and learning, free of crime and violence. Any instance of crime or violence at school not only affects the individuals involved but also may disrupt the educational process and affect bystanders, the school itself, and the surrounding community.” A safe school environment fosters academic success, a desire to learn, respect, and better interaction between school officials and students. School safety plans or protocols can enhance safety and prevent school violence. Most states mandate that schools develop and implement these plans, and schools across the United States use them to varying degrees. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions adopt boilerplate plans originally developed to address critical incidents and many others develop school safety plans and then put them on a shelf.

A school safety plan must be more than a document that is prepared and distributed. It has to be a dynamic guide that codifies the priorities, processes, and goals of a jurisdiction and ensures the safety of children in schools. An effective school safety plan:

- Is comprehensive and addresses any number of factors that may affect safety in a particular school.
- Encompasses a crisis and emergency response strategy that a police department or other public safety agency implements in the event of a critical incident.
- Includes elements that target all aspects of school safety from assessment and prevention to crisis recovery.

Ideally, the plan should address and describe the following components:

- **School Safety Team**: The team is composed of stakeholders who lead the development, implementation, and maintenance of a school safety plan. Team members are the driving force behind effective school safety plans because they are responsible for keeping the process alive and the people engaged.

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An Effective Response: School Safety Plans (cont’d.)

- **School Safety Assessment**: The first step in every safe school plan is to understand the school, its strengths, and the potential weaknesses or risks that need to be addressed. A crucial part of the school safety assessment is identifying and prioritizing school safety concerns.

- **Prevention and Intervention Strategies**: These strategies address concerns identified in the school safety assessment. The assessment and the strategies must be examined at least yearly to ensure that they reflect current concerns. The overall school atmosphere may be among the items in this part of the plan (such as creating a caring environment, establishing support systems, and teaching problem-solving skills).

- **Action Steps to Reduce the Probability of a Crisis**: These steps can include ways to make the school more secure (e.g., requiring school identification cards, installing bus monitoring systems), conducting school evacuation drills, implementing programs to prevent such activities as bullying or drug and alcohol use, and teaching employees to recognize and respond to warning signs and threats.

- **Crisis Preparation**: This strategy describes crisis team management and response procedures, incident command systems, and the crisis response plan.

- **Crisis Response**: Instructions for identifying and responding to a crisis, activating an incident command system, and managing incident response are provided.

A crucial part of this process is evaluation. It is imperative that school safety plans are evaluated regularly and modified accordingly to help ensure their effectiveness.

**Law Enforcement’s Role: Two Examples**

This Promising Practice Brief highlights law enforcement-involved protocols that demonstrate leading practices in addressing school safety. Each jurisdiction has collected information on the impact of their approach, which anecdotally has shown effectiveness in reducing threats of or acts of violence in or around schools.

**School Threat Assessment Response (STAR)**

Rapid City, South Dakota, is a community of approximately 67,000 and is served by a police department of approximately 108 sworn officers. Rapid City is host to one of the first school liaison programs in the country that serves as an effective link between law enforcement, schools, and parents. There are nine high schools, nine middle schools, and 26 elementary schools in Rapid City and Pennington County.
The Rapid City Police Department implemented the School Threat Assessment Response (STAR) protocol to identify credible threats of violence and address those threats and the individuals making the threats before the threats were carried out. The protocol is applicable to any school-sponsored event or function, whether the event or function is on school property or not.

The STAR protocol was established in 1998 in response to incidents of school violence that had occurred nationwide during the previous year. Law enforcement leaders, prosecutors, and court and school officials met to determine ways to address threats of violence in schools before they escalated to actual violence. This meeting resulted in a written agreement signed by agency leaders to implement a coordinated approach for:

- Receiving the threat from any team member contact point.
- Assessing the credibility of the threat.
- Choosing an option for addressing the threat.
- Activating the chosen response.
- Evaluating the response to the threat to determine the effectiveness of the protocol.

STAR team members include school liaison officers from the Rapid City Police Department, deputies from the Pennington County Sheriff’s Office, designated prosecutors from the Pennington County State’s Attorney’s Office, and any school administrator from the Rapid City Area School District. STAR team officers and deputies are responsible for first response and threat assessment. They receive annual orientation for new liaison officers and training on their role and responsibilities in the protocol. Likewise, school officials have made the protocol part of their orientation sessions for staff prior to the beginning of each school year. The program is not dependent on funding separate from existing resources available from the involved agencies.

STAR team members have implemented a process for measuring their response to threats of violence in schools before violence occurs. The protocol calls for periodic assessments of the incidents investigated to determine whether the protocol works effectively and has achieved the desired results. Upon completion of the assessment by team members, designated school liaison officers complete a report detailing the response and action taken. Team members enter this information in an Excel database that helps team members track threats or acts of violence, the team’s disposition of those threats or acts of violence, and any persons who have threatened or committed acts of violence. Based on the data, team members make adjustments to the protocol before, during, and after each school year.
**School Threat Assessment Response (cont’d.)**

Program leaders define success as a lack of serious violent offenses in school as measured by the number of occurrences of violence that were prevented using the STAR protocol. STAR team members categorize threats by:

1. Method of delivery (either verbal or written).
2. Status of the victim (student, teacher, counselor).
4. Whether a weapon was used.
5. Whether an injury was sustained.
6. Action taken by STAR team members.

Options include in-school sanctions, warnings, release to parents, and arrest and placement in juvenile diversion or psychiatric evaluation, among other options.

Since the protocol was implemented at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year, the STAR team has responded to more than 100 bomb threats, nearly 100 threats to bring weapons to schools, and more than 500 direct threats to do harm to teachers or students. Overall, the STAR team estimates that it “successfully addressed” approximately 88 percent of the threats.

**Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment System (STAT)**

Salem, Oregon, situated 47 miles south of Portland, is a community of approximately 152,239 residents in the middle of a large agricultural region called Mid-Willamette River Valley. As the third largest city and capital of the state of Oregon, Salem is also the lead economic development agency for Marion and Polk Counties. The Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment System (STAT) is a regional, multi-agency assessment system designed to assess students at risk for targeted and reactive violence. The objectives of the threat assessment system are to:

- Assess threats of potentially harmful or lethal behavior and determine the level of concern and action required.

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Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment System (cont’d.)

- Organize resources and strategies to manage situations involving students that pose threats to other students and/or school staff.

- Maintain a sense of psychological safety among students, teachers, and parents.7

STAT draws on the resources of a variety of youth-serving agencies in the region. STAT teams are comprised of law enforcement school resource officers (SROs), school administrators, mental health counselors, school officials, court representatives, other juvenile justice stakeholders and parents/guardians. Partnering with schools, police and sheriffs agencies benefit schools by employing their law enforcement experience to:

- Identify whether a crime has been committed.

- Determine whether a student can be arrested or detained.

- Access criminal histories and other legal information.

- Determine if the scope of the investigation can and needs to be broadened (e.g., interviewing students, family members, community members; making home visits; obtaining search warrants).8

Similar to the STAR protocol, the STAT team has a protocol for responding to threats of and/or violence in schools. Their approach combines knowledge gained through experience, survey data, and preventative and supportive strategies that are designed to keep schools as safe as possible. STAT protocols also comply with state legislation that imposes two new requirements 1) that school administrators notify parents of students who are threatened, and 2) that school administrators consider seeking mental health evaluations for students who threaten or menace others at school.

The STAT process is categorized by assessment levels. Acts of violence or implied threats of violence trigger the implementation of a Level 1 screening procedure and may end in a Level 2 assessment, if necessary. The Level 1 screening is a site-based protocol administered by a multi-disciplinary team. The Level 2 assessment is a community based protocol administered by a multi-agency team. Law enforcement’s specific role in STAT depends on the level of assessment, but generally involves school resource officers working with other team members to conduct investigations of and make decisions about the outcome of the incident.


The Level 1 screening process includes a site team comprised of school administrators and counselors, law enforcement liaison officers (where available), teachers familiar with the students involved and parents/guardians (optional). Level 1 screening is conducted by the site team on the same day the incident occurs to address concerns, document the review of potential danger or any safety issues, and to make a supervision plan. Safety or supervision planning for this level includes monitoring, behavior modification, intervention, increased supervision, and referral.

If the incident warrants a more extensive response, a Level 2 assessment is conducted by the Level 2 Consultation/Investigation Team. This team includes the law enforcement threat assessment specialist, a school psychologist or other threat assessment-trained educator, a mental health official, and other appropriate social service case workers. According to program representatives, Level 2 screening is differentiated from a Level 1 assessment in that it requires that members of the off-site team come to the school, conduct a risk assessment, and provide the on-site school team with recommendations about safety planning and next steps. The off-site team brings more community resources and includes a mental health evaluation and possible placement.

Contrary to zero tolerance approaches that call for immediate expulsion of violent and threatening students, program administrators believe that keeping children in school where their behavior can be monitored and the problems addressed, is an effective risk management strategy. Other benefits of the STAT system include:

- Collaboration, shared ownership, and responsibility among a variety of agencies.
- Increased physical safety of the schools and the psychological safety of those who inhabit the school.
- Application of intervention and supervision strategies appropriate for the situation.
- Reduction in liability through multi-agency shared responsibility.

Likewise, STAT also presents the following challenges:

- Organization, ownership, and authorization of the system. Deciding who will manage, supervise, and take ownership of the effort can be challenging. Each agency brings their own level of authority, policies, and procedures for responding to violent situations.
Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment System (cont’d.)

- Resource justification for the system design, training, information dissemination, and maintenance. Determining who and how resources are generated and applied to the administrative and operational aspects of the system can be problematic if not appropriately addressed.

- Commitment by agencies and their representatives. Securing commitments to participate in system application and follow-through on the commitment requires both formal or informal agreement, and the assignment of contact people from each partner agency.

Program administrators report that nearly “80% of the students assessed remain in school or return after a brief period of suspension” rather than long-term expulsion. School administrators and counselors surveyed by the University of Oregon indicate that “STAT procedures increased efficient coordination with law enforcement and mental health.” Moreover, the process helped to identify potentially dangerous students; provided information necessary for support, discipline, and placement decisions; and had an overall positive effect on school safety.9

Summary

Providing students with a safe and secure school environment that is conducive to learning is of critical importance. Partnerships can stimulate collaboration in other public safety areas, create comprehensive networking opportunities, and uncover added resources. Both the STAR and STAT protocols serve as examples of collaborative efforts to enhance school safety. STAR program leaders believe this preventative approach has been beneficial in that key individuals are involved and relevant options and sanctions are offered to ensure a safe school environment. Using this protocol, they have developed intelligence on students who have made threats or exhibited threatening behavior. The protocol also allows program leaders to track repeat offenders or high-risk students who transfer from school to school. While the STAT protocol focuses on keeping students in school while managing the issues, they similarly emphasize the need to engage members of the youth-serving community. Managing threats internally serves dual purposes of monitoring and addressing future risks while reducing truancy and low graduation rates. This approach has proven highly efficient in improving school-law enforcement coordination that has resulted in a positive impact on overall school safety.

Below are specific steps local law enforcement can take to ensure school safety:

1. **Team up.** Form a multi-disciplinary team that includes, at a minimum, law enforcement officers, school administrators, and mental health officials. Put someone in charge of coordinating team meetings, activities, responses, and reporting.

Summary (cont’d.)

2. **Develop and implement a school safety plan.** Develop specific procedures or a standardized approach to threat management and response.

3. **Collect data.** Develop a database with information you have collected on the types and frequency of threats that occur in or around schools. Collect and retain as much information possible about students in your schools (including home environment, peers, and possible stressors) and the school environment. This will help with effective planning and resource allocation.

4. **Train.** Provide or arrange for training on prevention, intervention, and recovery for all relevant team members.

5. **Evaluate your plan.** Assess the protocol after each application and periodically to ensure that it is up-to-date.

For more information on STAR contact:

Karl Jegeris  
Juvenile Sergeant  
Rapid City Police Department  
300 Kansas City Street  
Rapid City, SD 57701  
(605) 394-4134  
karl.jegeris@rcgov.org  
http://www.rcgov.org/police/

For more information on STAT, contact:

Rhonda Stueve  
Salem Keizer School District Security Department  
P. O. Box 12024  
Salem, OR 97309  
Phone: 503-375-7858  
E-mail: stueve_rhonda@salkeiz.k12.or.us  
OR  
John VanDreal - Vandreal_john@salkeiz.k12.or.us

Resources


- National School Safety Center (NSSC) conducts research related to school safety, school climate, and violence, http://www.schoolsafety.us/.

Resources (cont. d)


The IACP’s Juvenile Justice Law Enforcement Training and Technical Assistance Program provides training and technical assistance to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies to increase law enforcement’s capacity to minimize juvenile victimization, delinquency, and crime. For more information, contact Stevyn Fogg, Project Manager, at:

Juvenile Justice Training and Technical Assistance Project
International Association of Chiefs of Police
515 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: 1-800-THE-IACP (843-4227) Ext. 831
E-mail: juvenilejustice@theiacp.org
Web: www.theiacp.org

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