



NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**SAFEGUARDING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY:
A STANDARDIZED APPROACH TO STATEWIDE
BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS**

by

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September 2022

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE September 2022	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE SAFEGUARDING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: A STANDARDIZED APPROACH TO STATEWIDE BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) James McDavitt IV				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) This thesis reviews a series of past school-setting incidents, assesses data on the characteristics and management of those situations, and documents existing practices and mandates with government agency protocols and recommendations to evaluate early signs of threat through behavioral threat assessment and management. Specifically, it presents case studies examining policies and actions facilitated to address violent episodes in the following schools: STEM School Highlands Ranch in Douglas County, Colorado; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas; and Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado. This thesis analyzes these schools' policies and protocols, flaws, and weaknesses revealed in the aftermath of the incidents; surveys state legislation before and after the attacks; and details violence prevention initiatives at the federal level. This thesis finds that threat assessment programs can help identify students who pose a threat to the school's environment and help schools better prepare appropriate interventions before attacks are carried out. The components of effective threat assessment programs include creating consistent training, communicating protocols and policies, utilizing the same language across districts, and engaging in broad community outreach.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS school safety, school security, behavioral threat assessment program, targeted school violence, prevention strategies, standardization			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 153	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

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A STANDARDIZED APPROACH TO STATEWIDE BEHAVIORAL
THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(HOMELAND SECURITY AND DEFENSE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

This thesis reviews a series of past school-setting incidents, assesses data on the characteristics and management of those situations, and documents existing practices and mandates with government agency protocols and recommendations to evaluate early signs of threat through behavioral threat assessment and management. Specifically, it presents case studies examining policies and actions facilitated to address violent episodes in the following schools: STEM School Highlands Ranch in Douglas County, Colorado; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas; and Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado. This thesis analyzes these schools' policies and protocols, flaws, and weaknesses revealed in the aftermath of the incidents; surveys state legislation before and after the attacks; and details violence prevention initiatives at the federal level. This thesis finds that threat assessment programs can help identify students who pose a threat to the school's environment and help schools better prepare appropriate interventions before attacks are carried out. The components of effective threat assessment programs include creating consistent training, communicating protocols and policies, utilizing the same language across districts, and engaging in broad community outreach.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AHS	Arapahoe High School
BCPS	Broward County Public Schools
BTA	behavioral threat assessment
BTAM	behavioral threat assessment and management
C3	Center for Prevention Programs and Partners
CSSRC	Colorado School Safety Resource Center
CSTAG	Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines
CVE	countering violent extremism
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
ED	Department of Education
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ICS	Incident Command System
LPS	Littleton Public Schools
MCSS	Maryland Center for School Safety
MSDHS	Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School
MTP	Master Training Program
NCSL	National Conference of State Legislatures
NEMA	Nebraska Emergency Management Agency
NIMS	National Incident Management System
NJSARS	New Jersey Suspicious Activity Reporting System
NTAC	National Threat Assessment Center
NTER	National Threat Evaluation and Reporting
SRO	school resource officer
TA	threat assessment
TAPS	Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety (Act)
TAT	threat assessment team
TVTP	Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention
TxSSC	Texas School Safety Center
USSS	U.S. Secret Service

VCSCS
STOP

Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety
Student, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (School Violence Act)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The urgent need to address the school violence problem in the United States cannot be overstated. According to researchers of school violence and school shootings, such violence has increased in recent years. Paolini notes that school shootings rose drastically from the 1980s to the 2010s, from 23 to 245 incidents a year.¹ Riedman and O’Neill, who founded the Center for Homeland Defense and Security’s K–12 School Shooting Database, found that in 2018, 119 shooting incidents occurred at K–12 schools in the United States, reaching the highest number in a single year, nearly doubling the previous high of 59 incidents in 2006.² School shooting incidents continued with 119 in 2019, 114 in 2020, and 251 in 2021. As the trend of numbers in these incidents continues to rise, schools, with support from government agencies, must adopt and implement more effective preventive strategies, which potentially include a set of standardized practices to curb this growing trend of violence in school settings.

Although school violence has markedly increased in recent years, prevention strategies to stop and mitigate school attacks first became a priority in the late 1990s after the Thurston High School shooting in Springfield, Oregon. In 1998, Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley promoted the need nationally to implement violence prevention plans.³ Reno and Riley stated that these efforts would provide a “vital foundation” for the safety of American youth and schools.⁴ This campaign marked a shift from planning for responses to school attacks—which was no longer sufficient—to the more proactive, consistent approach of implementing measures for understanding and identifying potential threats within schools. Several experts have noted

¹ Allison Paolini, “School Shootings and Student Mental Health: Role of the School Counselors in Mitigating Violence,” *VISTAS Online* (2015), <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/school-shootings-and-student-mental-health.p>.

² “Incidents by Year 1970–2022,” K–12 School Shooting Database, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>.

³ Mary Ellen O’Toole, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (Quantico: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED446352>.

⁴ O’Toole.

that school-based behavioral threat assessment better equips school officials to identify, assess, and apply appropriate responses to address risks.⁵ This thesis explores behavioral threat assessment and management programs for schools. As the U.S. Secret Service note, threat assessment processes allow school officials to “identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence by a potential attacker” before a violent incident occurs.⁶ Additionally, this thesis examines the processes of behavioral threat assessment in K–12 schools and identifies whether standardized approaches and practices can be effectively implemented for school-based programs and teams.

Several K–12 schools across the country have adopted various programs, including school-based behavioral threat assessment, to enhance and broaden school security and implement measures for a safe learning environment for their students. Although not all states currently have these requirements, several states have begun to mandate such programs at the district or school level. Although these school-based behavioral threat assessment programs and processes exist at various levels, it is unclear whether they are effective at preventing future school shooting incidents.

This thesis presents four case studies of previous incidents involving shootings at the following schools: STEM School Highlands Ranch in Colorado, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, Santa Fe High School in Texas, and Arapahoe High School in Colorado. These case studies examine the events leading up to each shooting, with the goal of revealing shortfalls and identifying common flaws within the existing behavioral threat assessment program—if it had already been implemented at the time of the incident. Additionally, these incidents illuminate several common themes, including the inherent lack of leadership and authority, noncompliant or nonexistent policies and procedures, limited staff competency or training offerings or support, and information silos. All these weaknesses could be addressed with a prescribed standardized approach, guided and supported by state and federal governments.

⁵ O’Toole.

⁶ Bryan Vossekuil et al., *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Washington, DC: Secret Service and Department of Education, 2004), 10, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>.

This thesis also documents actions and tailored efforts toward behavioral threat assessment across the United States—for the four case study states and the other 46—examining established mandates, standards, and requirements for behavioral threat assessment programs in K–12 schools. This thorough review involved both open-source research and survey responses. The research found that 16 states mandate some level of threat assessment, 6 have pending legislation, and 44 offer some level of K–12 threat assessment services through guidance, training, or technical assistance.

The last element of the review involves available resources at the federal level, including published government reports and pending legislation, to identify pertinent components, as identified in a review of previous school shooting incidents, for application in state behavioral threat assessment programs. These resources include government reports published by the U.S. Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as pending federal legislation, such as the Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety Act. Support from the federal government through legislation and agency backing, such as that of the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Secret Service, provide a foundation and mechanism to build and enhance local prevention capabilities to make communities and schools safer. Furthermore, federal grant funding streams allow school districts and communities to bolster school security and prevent acts of violence.

Based on the analysis and assessment of this information, this thesis offers a set of recommendations as a path forward in creating a common standard for effective K–12 behavioral threat assessment programs in New Jersey and other states. These recommendations involve implementation processes, leadership and oversight, training, community awareness, reporting technology, and information-sharing and partnerships to advance school safety measures and minimize the incidence of violence by employing an effective threat assessment program. Although this thesis maintains that behavioral threat assessment processes and standardized approaches allow for a more effective outcome regarding school violence prevention, the implementation, authority, leadership, training, and ongoing support of programs play a vital role in their success. Additionally, data collection and related findings of these behavioral threat assessment programs need improvement to advance this school-based violence prevention research.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to share my deepest appreciation to everyone who made this thesis possible. Most importantly, to my family—my wife, Meaghan, and three children, Jimmy, Shea, and Charlotte (Charlie)—thank you for always making me smile. Meag, words cannot begin to describe the overwhelming support and motivation you provided during the entire CHDS program and this thesis. I am so lucky to have you. To Mom, Dad, Pat, Al, Giddo, and Mum, thanks for helping out with the family while I was away!

To my 1901/1902 cohort family, I am so glad to have gone through this journey with you! I learned so much from all of you, and I know your agencies, organizations, and communities are in good hands with you steering the ship.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my leadership at the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. I am so grateful to have been supported by Director Jared Maples, Deputy Director Eric Tysarczyk, and Chiefs Alison Tarnopol and Maureen Lancaster. I want to thank my colleague and great friend Scott Gibson, who has always been there to listen to me vent and spitball innovative ideas to make New Jersey a safer place.

A very special thanks goes to Ray Bisogno (1405/1406). I would never have applied to the CHDS program if not for you. Thank you for being a great mentor, and an even better friend. To Tom O'Reilly, who gave me my first opportunity in this field at the Nationwide SAR Initiative, I would not be here without that experience. Rest easy, boss.

Last, and certainly not least, I thank my thesis advisors and my writing team. Thank you, Jasmine Mally and Noel Yucuis, for your patience and guidance during my entire writing process. And to my thesis committee—Bob Simeral, Dr. Nadav Morag, and Dr. Erik Dahl—thank you for never giving up on me and for continuing to push me to the finish line.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The safety of children is important in school settings, yet unfortunately, incidents of school violence pose a serious threat to educational communities. To ensure the safety and security of the nation's school populations and communities as threats evolve, more effective preventive threat measures are required. Many schools are focusing on prevention and protection rather than solely planning for the response to incidents. With an emphasis on violence prevention, a national or statewide standardized process, such as a school-based behavioral threat assessment program, could enhance existing school safety and security efforts. Today, K–12 schools across the country are adopting various programs and safety measures to enhance and broaden school security.

To improve the local ability to advance school prevention and protection measures and manage threats, Congress passed the STOP School Violence Act in 2018. Over the past two years, the Department of Justice (DOJ) awarded more than \$150 million to states, school districts, and communities to bolster school security and prevent violence. After the February 14, 2017, shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, there was a significant increase in marketing of available security equipment and services claiming to have viable, effective solutions.¹ With the introduction of school safety funding and the growing demand for increased safety efforts in education systems, many companies and well-intentioned organizations have claimed school security expertise and promoted security solutions, training products, and consultation services for individual communities or schools. This deluge of purported solutions has influenced the adoption of inconsistent and unvalidated processes by schools, thus complicating systematized community integration. Curtis S. Lavarello, executive director of the School Safety Advocacy Council, highlights the problem with this trend, “Right now, there’s going to be a lot of appropriations dollars being sent to school districts without a lot of

¹ Tiffany Hsu, “Threat of Shootings Turns School Security into a Growth Industry,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/business/school-security-industry-surges-after-shootings.html>.

oversight.”² This influx of programs and practices without overarching systemic support or coordination presents challenges and introduces complexities for threat management, including duplicated and conflicting efforts, untested or unverified models, and increased confusion around roles and responsibilities—all of which compromise stakeholder integration and effective implementation.

Educational systems have scurried to implement behavioral threat assessment programs to build precautionary safety practices that can identify risks and prevent or minimize violence on campuses before it happens. State-level mandates for threat assessment programs, though currently limited in number, are steadily increasing, and where structured programs do exist, they range widely in their models, methods, and results. Although a multitude of schools have introduced behavioral threat assessment programs, they are meaningless if not effectively implemented, as evidenced in the shootings at Arapahoe High School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which are examined further in this thesis. Several states, including Virginia, Florida, Maryland, and Texas, have statewide statutes requiring schools and school districts to implement a standardized behavioral threat assessment process. However, some states, including New Jersey, have established no uniform threat assessment guidelines or processes. Furthermore, few, if any, analyses have measured the impact of those statutes or determined whether standardizing school behavioral threat assessments and management programs would be more effective. This thesis explores these statutes, or requirements, in composition and effect with a focus on identifying principles and practices that might inform other states’ efforts—ultimately facilitating more effective safety and security measures in school environments and making the nation’s schools, children, and communities safer.

² Hsu.

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the most effective standardized approach that New Jersey and other states without existing policies or programs should use to inform the implementation of a behavioral threat assessment program in K–12 schools?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines research on program standardization in the homeland security, emergency management, and school safety fields, identifying both advantages and disadvantages. It presents study findings on program standardization, efforts to prevent and manage threats, implementation of physical protective measures for K–12 school facilities and campuses to protect against attacks, and response requirements and activities to prepare staff and students for managing potential violent incidents at their schools. These areas all provide a better understanding of the overall benefits and disadvantages of standardization and effectiveness of existing school safety and security programs.

1. Program Standardization

This section reviews literature on existing federal homeland security programs with implemented standardized processes. According to Wright, Sturdy, and Wylie, standardization reduces variety and creates order while improving performance efficiency because it outlines specific tasks and expectations and formalizes common processes.³ Through standardization, all members involved in a process can work in partnership and understands their specific role, leading to a more integrated approach to the mission. While existing research on the standardization of K–12 behavioral threat assessment programs is somewhat limited and, when published, offers only cursory information, some literature does share the potential advantages and disadvantages of such programs.

³ Christopher Wright, Andrew Sturdy, and Nick Wylie, “Management Innovation through Standardization: Consultants as Standardizers of Organizational Practice,” *Research Policy* 41, no. 3 (April 2012): 652–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2011.12.004>.

Van Dreal proposes the benefits and challenges of implementing a statewide uniform behavioral threat assessment program in his study. He points out that while many school communities have developed a variety of systems and strategies for reducing the risk of violence in schools, the lack of uniformity and variance in application possibly leads to missed opportunities in averting a potential tragedy or helping a student in crisis.⁴ He highlights the following benefits for states that implement a statewide program: continuity between teams or districts; the use of common language; consistency of approach, intervention, and strategies; shared ownership and responsibility; the elimination of informational silos; increased and consistent oversight; and compliance with accepted standards of application.⁵ Nevertheless, Van Dreal points to some challenges in implementing a statewide or regional program. He notes that the size of the jurisdiction and school district may influence the effectiveness of a standardized program due to the level of resources needed to follow those standards or requirements.⁶ For example, a smaller or poverty-stricken district may not have the same funding, personnel, or other resources as a larger district or community with more economic strength.⁷ Michael J. Donaghey concurs in his Naval Postgraduate School thesis: “Without national security standards, economic inequality will become the predominant variable permitting affluent school districts to offer students a safer learning environment and faculty members a more secure workplace.”⁸ Van Dreal also notes that an unfunded mandate will likely meet resistance, lack momentum, and subsequently, be ineffective. His work underscores that the adoption of a consistent process, recognized regionally or at the state level, provides a sense of shared ownership and allows schools and school districts to leverage additional resources, expertise, and support from those entities.⁹

⁴ John Van Dreal, *Assessing Student Threats: Implementing the Salem-Keizer System*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

⁵ Van Dreal.

⁶ Van Dreal.

⁷ Van Dreal.

⁸ Michael J. Donaghey, “Protecting Our Future: Developing a National School Security Standard” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), 46, <https://www.hSDL.org/?view&did=750163>.

⁹ Van Dreal, *Assessing Student Threats*.

Reeves and Brock share best practices in establishing behavioral threat assessment programs in schools. They point out the advantages of standardization from a legal perspective.¹⁰ The authors suggest that neglecting to create a standardized, consistent process might lead to discrimination lawsuits.¹¹ Moreover, although the courts recognize that schools cannot prevent all acts of violence, they must employ a good-faith effort in maintaining order and protecting the students.¹² Reeves and Brock note that one of the most important factors in a successful behavioral threat assessment program is that all staff members receive adequate and ongoing training in the identification, reporting, assessment, intervention, and management of safety threats.¹³

Government reports have documented the federal government's support and endorsement of standardization in school safety efforts. Following the deadly incident at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) partnered with the Department of Education (ED) to identify the risk of school violence and promote more rigorous, systematic preventive practices for states and local jurisdictions. Under the Presidential Protection Act of 2000, Congress formally authorized the USSS National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) to assist state and local agencies and educational institutions with developing programs that promote the standardization of threat assessment processes.¹⁴ Over the past 20 years, NTAC has continued to study acts of targeted school violence and promote a collaborative approach for communities in prevention efforts. NTAC's most recent report on targeted school violence declares,

¹⁰ Melissa A. Louvar Reeves and Stephen E. Brock, "School Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management," *Contemporary School Psychology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 148–62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s40688-017-0158-6>.

¹¹ Reeves and Brock.

¹² Reeves and Brock.

¹³ Reeves and Brock.

¹⁴ Bureau of Justice Assistance, *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2009), https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/IACP_School_Violence.pdf.

“Keeping schools safe requires a team effort and the combined resources of the federal, state, and local governments; school boards; law enforcement; and the public.”¹⁵

Through this unified approach, each team member can identify and document one’s role to ensure standardization across all threat assessment cases. Regarding a national standard for school security, Donaghey states, “The standardization of school security will provide the requisite framework for increased synergy between educators and the first responder community.”¹⁶ Donaghey asserts that a collaborative and consistent application is needed to ensure the safety of students and school staff.¹⁷

Federal programs have succeeded at standardizing processes and measures on a national level, specifically in the homeland security field. The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s National Incident Management System (NIMS) became one of the first federal programs to standardize approaches and responses for incident management.¹⁸ The NIMS framework provides multiple stakeholders, from various disciplines and jurisdictions, with common terminology and consistent processes to ensure necessary capabilities are delivered successfully during response operations.¹⁹ The framework defines operational systems that guide several agencies to collaborate before, during, and after an incident. Its integrated approach promotes a uniform set of processes, protocols, and procedures so that all personnel are trained and understand their roles and responsibilities.²⁰ As Jerome D. Hagen explains in his thesis, NIMS can positively affect collaboration: “Homeland security challenges require [law enforcement agencies] to

¹⁵ U.S. Secret Service, *Protecting America’s Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service, 2019), 3, https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf.

¹⁶ Donaghey, “Protecting Our Future,” 61.

¹⁷ Donaghey.

¹⁸ William C. Nicholson, “Seeking Consensus on Homeland Security Standards: Adopting the National Response Plan and the National Incident Management System,” *Widener Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2006): 491–559.

¹⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Incident Management System*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2017), https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf.

²⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency.

increase interagency participation and cooperation to even greater levels.”²¹ He notes that jurisdictions with multiple agencies involved in incident management should adopt NIMS and the Incident Command System (ICS) because they “[increase] teamwork and [improve] their response capability.”²² K–12 schools and institutions of higher learning that receive federal grant funding related to preparedness should be familiar with these standards because they are required to support the implementation of NIMS.²³

By implementing NIMS and ICS, schools can formalize multidisciplinary integration, partnerships, procedures, and practices, which strengthen incident management. In his Naval Postgraduate School master’s thesis, Gjelsten calls NIMS an “excellent organizational framework” for schools; it allows for a better, more consistent understanding and application of standardized emergency preparedness processes.²⁴ He notes in his research that a Virginia school district’s emergency plans were inconsistent with the NIMS and ICS terminology followed by local public safety officials during incident response, which could lead to miscommunications and conflicts.²⁵ However, he maintains that the district’s goal was to integrate NIMS and ICS more completely into those plans and train staff more often on those processes.²⁶ In an article for *Engineering Management*, Anderson, Compton, and Mason outline the advantages of NIMS and ICS, stating that this effort unifies “the response community as never before.”²⁷ The authors

²¹ Jerome D. Hagen, “Interagency Collaboration Challenges among Homeland Security Disciplines in Urban Areas” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2006), 31, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235192512_Interagency_Collaboration_Challenges_Among_Homeland_Security_Disciplines_in_Urban_Areas.

²² Hagen, 106.

²³ “NIMS Implementation Activities for Schools and Institutions of Higher Education,” Department of Education, accessed September 9, 2022, https://rems.ed.gov/docs/NIMS_ComprehensiveGuidanceActivities_2009-2010.pdf.

²⁴ Craig A. Gjelsten, “Homeland Security Planning for Urban Area Schools” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), 52, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA479890.pdf>.

²⁵ Gjelsten.

²⁶ Gjelsten.

²⁷ Anice I. Anderson, Dennis Compton, and Tom Mason, “Managing in a Dangerous World—The National Incident Management System,” *Engineering Management Journal* 16, no. 4 (December 2004): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10429247.2004.11415260>.

suggest that the design of NIMS and ICS could be a useful model for other programs that require coordination of multiple organizations.²⁸ They indicate that this is especially relevant for complex scenarios involving integration of effort among multiple agencies, where miscommunication, delays, or confusion could lead to a serious incident or response failure.²⁹

At the same time, some practitioners note that the success of the program depends greatly on factors related to implementation. Lindell, Perry, and Prater outline the benefits of standardization of incident management systems, which include common training across jurisdictions; reliable, consistent structures that consider important functions; and the understanding of each member's roles.³⁰ However, they also suggest that NIMS implementation also faces challenges. Similarly, Lester and Krejci identified that NIMS looks appealing in policy, training, and exercises but has displayed failures in previous major hazard events.³¹ They note that the failures are likely due to issues with leadership and decision-making.³² The authors conclude that for NIMS to be truly successful, "full and active collaboration on the goals and strategies for success" is required.³³ Lester and Krejci also suggest that a collective and unified approach is necessary; otherwise, roadblocks or potential failures may ensue. Moreover, if government leaders continue to maintain the status quo—in other words, do not adopt a collaborative approach—the next major disaster could be devastating for the American people.³⁴

²⁸ Anderson, Compton, and Mason.

²⁹ Anderson, Compton, and Mason.

³⁰ Michael K. Lindell, Ronald W. Perry, and Carla Prater, "Organizing Response to Disasters with the Incident Command System/Incident Management System (ICS/IMS)," *International Workshop on Emergency Response and Rescue* (2005), 4, https://www.irsp-caq.org/pluginfile.php/835/mod_resource/content/0/Organizing_response_to_disasters_with_th.pdf.

³¹ William Lester and Daniel Krejci, "Business 'Not' as Usual: The National Incident Management System, Federalism, and Leadership," *Public Administration Review* 67, no. s1 (2007): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00817.x>.

³² Lester and Krejci, 86.

³³ Lester and Krejci, 91.

³⁴ Lester and Krejci, 92.

2. Efforts to Prevent and Manage School Threats

Practitioners seem to agree that the early identification and management of potential violent threats should be the primary focus of stakeholders involved in maintaining safe educational environments—in addition to traditional response tactics that rely on law enforcement intervention. This concept is not new as it was brought up during the USSS Safe School Initiative nearly 20 years ago—and again more recently by Senator Brian Babin with the introduction of the Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety (TAPS) Act of 2019. With the kickoff of the USSS Safe Schools Initiative, Vossekuil et al. stated, “Schools may make the best use of their resources by focusing on prevention, and not by relying exclusively on law enforcement to respond to and resolve school-based attacks.”³⁵ In 2019, when introducing legislation on school-based threat assessment, Senator Babin stated that state and local entities must begin “focusing efforts on prevention rather than simply reaction, because once the first shot is fired, it is too late.”³⁶ In their article promoting school behavioral threat assessments and management, Reeves and Brock echo this sentiment: “One act of school violence is one too many. . . . It is necessary for schools to develop and implement protocols and procedures to prevent and mitigate school violence.”³⁷ Over the last 20 years, many states, law enforcement agencies, and schools have shifted their focus toward applying preventive approaches to ensure the safety and security of their communities.

After the shootings at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, in 1998 and Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, the federal government began to prioritize school violence prevention. In 1998, President Clinton charged the ED and DOJ with producing the *Annual Report on School Safety*, analyzing school violence data, and highlighting actionable solutions that would require a collaborative effort from school

³⁵ Bryan Vossekuil et al., *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Washington, DC: Secret Service and Department of Education, 2004), 10, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>.

³⁶ “Babin Reintroduces TAPS Act to Protect Communities and Schools from Violence,” Official website of U.S. Congressman Brian Babin, January 31, 2019, <https://babin.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2376>.

³⁷ Reeves and Brock, “School Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management,” 1.

communities.³⁸ The report called for “implementing zero-tolerance policies, increasing school security, and implementing formal school violence prevention or reduction programs.”³⁹ It also suggested that improving school safety requires a variety of strategies, policies, and programs.⁴⁰ In a letter published within a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report the following year, Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley called for all schools to implement a “comprehensive violence prevention plan. . . . A systematic approach to threat assessment.”⁴¹ The FBI’s report encouraged agencies to work together to identify efficient and consistent processes that decreased violent activity within their schools and communities, suggesting that a threat assessment program was one of the ways to achieve this objective.⁴²

The USSS and ED led the Safe School Initiative in the early 2000s with the goal of providing school administrators, educators, school safety personnel, and law enforcement professionals with possible solutions to prevent future incidents.⁴³ The USSS and ED examined 37 incidents of targeted violence in schools to determine “whether pre-attack behaviors of perpetrators could be identified to prevent future attacks.”⁴⁴ This report found that most incidents of targeted school violence by current students were conceived and planned in advance.⁴⁵ The concept of leakage—communicating a threat or the intent of attack to someone before the incident—is common in targeted school violence incidents. As O’Toole notes, “Leakage is considered to be one of the most important clues that may

³⁸ Department of Education and Department of Justice, *Annual Report on School Safety 1998* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice and Department of Education, 1998), <https://www2.ed.gov/PDFDocs/schoolsafety.pdf>.

³⁹ Department of Education and Department of Justice, 6.

⁴⁰ Department of Education and Department of Justice.

⁴¹ Mary Ellen O’Toole, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (Quantico: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999), 5, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED446352>.

⁴² O’Toole.

⁴³ Vossekuil et al., *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*.

⁴⁴ William S. Pollack, William Modzeleski, and Georgeann Rooney, *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 2008), 3, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED511645>.

⁴⁵ Vossekuil et al., *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*.

precede an adolescent's violent act.”⁴⁶ Vossekuil et al. found that in “81 percent of school attacks, one person knew of the impending attack.”⁴⁷ Therefore, in many cases, fellow students, school staff, family members, law enforcement, and other community members were aware of the potential threat based on observable behaviors.⁴⁸ This finding underscores the importance of community integration and multi-agency partnerships that involve reporting concerning behaviors, sharing information, and taking the appropriate steps of intervention to mitigate or diminish the risk of violent behavior. It highlights a key recommendation in the Safe School Initiative study: implementing “threat assessment as a promising strategy for preventing school violence.”⁴⁹

Federal, state, and some local agencies have begun to support schools with resources that focus on managing threats and preventing acts of violence in school communities. In a 2017 study of safety measures for schools using a school-based threat assessment, Woitaszewski et al. note that although only six states have statutes, standards, or procedures related to school-based threat assessments, at least 39 states offer “quality web-based threat assessment resources.”⁵⁰ Most states across the nation have started to encourage their schools to reference these evidence-based tools and resources.⁵¹ This process has proven valuable in helping identify and evaluate concerning behaviors of students and enabling intervention before an incident occurs.⁵² In recent years, there has been a shift toward providing more resources and funding that focus on implementing preventive strategies and physical protective measures, such as the STOP School Violence

⁴⁶ O'Toole, *The School Shooter*, 16.

⁴⁷ Vossekuil et al., *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*.

⁴⁸ Vossekuil et al.

⁴⁹ Robert A. Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education, 2004), 4, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Scott Woitaszewski et al., “Rules, Requirements, and Resources for School-Based Threat Assessment: A Fifty State Analysis,” *Contemporary School Psychology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 132, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s40688-017-0161-y>.

⁵¹ Woitaszewski et al.

⁵² Molly Amman et al., *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks* (Quantico: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>.

Act.⁵³ More recently, the U.S. Senate introduced the TAPS Act of 2019, which focuses on prevention efforts rather than mere reactions to incidents.⁵⁴ This legislation allows states and local communities to leverage federal resources, training, and support to implement a consistent multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment and management program.⁵⁵ The members who sponsored the bill expressed that a more proactive, consistent approach to implementing measures was necessary to identify potential threats in schools.⁵⁶ Experts agree that schools with established threat assessment policies and procedures better equip school administrators and staff to identify and assess threats and apply appropriate management or intervention strategies to address specific risks.⁵⁷

3. Physical Protective Measures in K–12 Schools

The design of school facilities with a focus on physical security and protective measures is not a new concept. In 1998, following the shooting at West Paducah High School in Kentucky, the ED and DOJ released their *Annual Report on School Safety*, which highlighted specific school practices in building design and protective measures that could enhance school safety.⁵⁸ The report states, “Schools should be built with security in mind, but existing schools can make changes to their buildings to increase safety.”⁵⁹ Such measures include installing lighting, door and window locks, break-proof glass, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras.⁶⁰ Many schools across the nation have implemented those physical security measures, as noted in the DOJ’s 2017 *Indicators of School Crime and Safety Report*; for instance, 94 percent of public high schools use security cameras and

⁵³ “STOP School Violence Programs,” Bureau of Justice Assistance, accessed September 15, 2019, https://www.bja.gov/Programs/STOP-School-Violence-Program_summary_October%202018.pdf.

⁵⁴ Official website of U.S. Congressman Brian Babin, “Babin Reintroduces TAPS Act.”

⁵⁵ Official website of U.S. Congressman Brian Babin.

⁵⁶ Official website of U.S. Congressman Brian Babin.

⁵⁷ O’Toole, *The School Shooter*.

⁵⁸ Department of Education and Department of Justice, *Annual Report on School Safety 1998*.

⁵⁹ Department of Education and Department of Justice, 15.

⁶⁰ Department of Education and Department of Justice.

have installed control access in the school buildings.⁶¹ According to Tanner-Smith et al., several educational institutions have implemented security features, equipment, and methods; however, their research found no evidence that those visible security measures correlate with a reduction in crime or violence in schools.⁶² In his thesis, Tigran Topadzhikyan shares that although physical security and protection can be important in school safety, attackers still have the ability to penetrate those mechanisms, citing the Sandy Hook shooting as an example.⁶³ He goes on to say that “the prevention component needs to be given thought and consideration.”⁶⁴

Over the last 30 years, school security personnel, school resource officers (SROs), and law enforcement assigned to schools have become more commonplace and even a requirement for protection at schools. In 1988, the ED advocated that school districts hire their own security personnel or enlist law enforcement in their schools.⁶⁵ Experts are divided about whether SROs and other security officials assigned to schools are an effective means of school security. Jennings et al. find that the presence of SROs in schools yields a significantly lower incidence of school violence and builds more positive and trustful relationships with the students.⁶⁶ Ida M. Johnson’s findings reveal that law enforcement or SROs in schools lead to a decline in school violence and drug and gang activities and serve as a visible security deterrent.⁶⁷ However, a report from the Justice

⁶¹ Lauren Musu-Gillette et al., *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017*, NCES 2018–036/NCJ 251413 (Washington, DC: Department of Education and Department of Justice, 2018), 114, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018036>.

⁶² Emily E. Tanner-Smith et al., “Adding Security, but Subtracting Safety? Exploring Schools’ Use of Multiple Visible Security Measures,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 43, no. 1 (March 2018): 102–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9409-3>.

⁶³ Tigran Topadzhikyan, “School Shootings: Law Enforcement and School District Networking” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA620488.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Topadzhikyan.

⁶⁵ Department of Education and Department of Justice, *Annual Report on School Safety 1998*.

⁶⁶ Wesley G. Jennings et al., “Evaluating the Relationship between Law Enforcement and School Security Measures and Violent Crime in Schools,” *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations* 11, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332586.2011.581511>.

⁶⁷ Ida M. Johnson, “School Violence: The Effectiveness of a School Resource Officer Program in a Southern City,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 27, no. 2 (March–April 1999): 173–92, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2352\(98\)00049-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2352(98)00049-X).

Policy Institute argues that there is little evidence that SROs and police presence in schools reduce crime or violence: “No clear correlation between rates of theft and violence and SROs in school” exists.⁶⁸ Additionally, the report shares findings that a security presence in schools has no relationship to school violence but may lead to more disorder.⁶⁹ Donaghey notes that research is undecided about whether SRO programs do in fact foster a safer, more secure school learning environment.⁷⁰

4. K–12 School Response Procedures and Requirements

After the attack at Columbine High School in 1999, many schools and districts began to conduct response exercises and lockdown drills to prepare staff, teachers, students, and first responders for active threat incidents, such as school shootings. The drill and exercise practices have increased over the last 30 years, as seen in studies conducted by the ED’s National Center for Education Statistics and the DOJ’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, which found that during the 2005–2006 school year, 40 percent of public schools reported conducting drills on lockdown procedures. By the 2015–2016 school year, almost 95 percent did.⁷¹ This drastic increase may be a result of states’ proposing and passing legislation that mandates schools to conduct annual drills or exercises.⁷² An Everytown for Gun Safety survey found that drills in school are now legislatively mandated in 40 states.⁷³ According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), states typically draft legislation on emergency response plans and drills following acts of school violence that reach national media attention. The NCSL found that in the aftermath of the Marjory Douglas Stoneman High School shooting in 2018, more than half the states

⁶⁸ Justice Policy Institute, *Education under Arrest: The Case against Police in Schools* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2011), 10, <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/3177>.

⁶⁹ Justice Policy Institute.

⁷⁰ Donaghey, “Protecting Our Future.”

⁷¹ Kacey Lee Nolle et al., *Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2005–06*, NCES 2007–361 (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 2007), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007361.pdf>.

⁷² Benjamin Erwin, “States Seek to Improve School Safety,” *Legis Brief* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/states-seek-to-improve-school-safety.aspx>.

⁷³ Everytown for Gun Safety, *The Impact of School Safety Drills for Active Shootings* (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2021), <https://everytownresearch.org/school-safety-drills/>.

proposed approximately 65 pieces of legislation on school emergency plans, and almost 50 bills in 21 states were proposed mandating that schools conduct security drills, with several of those states passing the resolutions.⁷⁴

Rygg points out that the state legislation mandating drills is somewhat ambiguous—which leads schools and school districts to interpret those requirements differently and not follow the same standard.⁷⁵ Rygg also notes that “this discretion has led to a number of problems with heightened simulations that are often terrifying to the students” and some staff members.⁷⁶ In a 2020 report on the impact of school safety drills, Everytown for Gun Safety, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association shared there is limited research on the effectiveness of drills in schools, yet it has become a \$2.7 billion industry and is having negative impacts on students’ wellbeing.⁷⁷

However, other practitioners in this field, such as Zhe and Nickerson, have found that students who have trained with drill protocols retain knowledge about responding in such events and do not display emotional distress or anxiety.⁷⁸ Additionally, Schildkraut, Nickerson, and Ristoff found in their 2020 study on lockdown drills that the overall perceptions of emergency preparedness improved, and the students, teachers, and staff reported they felt more prepared with the more practice they had.⁷⁹ On the contrary, other critics, such as Cogan et al., argue that little empirical evidence suggests the effectiveness

⁷⁴ Erwin, “States Seek to Improve School Safety.”

⁷⁵ Lauren Rygg, “School Shooting Simulations: At What Point Does Preparation Become More Harmful Than Helpful,” *Children’s Legal Rights Journal* 35, no. 3 (2015): 215, <https://lawecommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol35/iss3/3>.

⁷⁶ Rygg, 215.

⁷⁷ Everytown for Gun Safety, *The Impact of School Safety Drills for Active Shootings*.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth J. Zhe and Amanda B. Nickerson, “Effects of an Intruder Crisis Drill on Children’s Knowledge, Anxiety, and Perceptions of School Safety,” *School Psychology Review* 36, no. 3 (2007): 501–508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2007.12087936>.

⁷⁹ Jaclyn Schildkraut, Amanda B. Nickerson, and Thomas Ristoff, “Locks, Lights, Out of Sight: Assessing Students’ Perceptions of Emergency Preparedness across Multiple Lockdown Drills,” *Journal of School Violence* 19, no. 1 (2020): 93–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2019.1703720>.

of reactive strategies such as drills, so schools should consider shifting to “developing [a] multi-strategy, multidisciplinary approach to violence prevention.”⁸⁰

5. Conclusion

This literature review illustrates areas of strengths and weaknesses in both standardizing and setting programmatic requirements for school safety and security. Though there is some disagreement, and some experts point to certain challenges and limitations, most experts seem to suggest there is a benefit to standardization vis-à-vis the alternative. Additionally, future research may be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of legislative requirements for school violence prevention programs, such as behavioral threat assessment and management programs for educational institutions.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis reviews and examines case studies of previous incidents of school violence, describing and assessing the aspects of each incident and the existing behavioral threat assessment programs, or lack thereof, of those schools, districts, or states to evaluate components, including policies, procedures, training, and related failures. The four incidents of school violence were selected based on the ample information available on the attacks. Each case examines the school’s or district’s threat assessment program, specifically reviewing its processes and identifying the shortfalls within them.

Additionally, the research design involved reviewing states’ current efforts toward behavioral threat assessment and conducting an extensive assessment of established mandates, standards, or requirements for behavioral threat assessment programs in K–12 schools, including those in Virginia, Florida, Maryland, Colorado, and Texas. These states were selected based on their school safety statutes and proactive implementation of school violence prevention programs. The study also involved a review of other states’ current efforts relating to behavioral threat assessments and violence prevention programs in K–

⁸⁰ Robin Cogan et al., “School Nurses Share Their Voices, Trauma, and Solutions by Sounding the Alarm on Gun Violence,” *Current Trauma Reports* 5, no. 4 (2019): 178–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40719-019-00179-1>.

12 schools. The analysis noted state trends of school incidents vis-à-vis the timing of school mandate implementation. Each state program was dissected to highlight similarities, differences, and other variables to highlight necessary components in addressing probable acts of violence in the school environment.

Additionally, a survey was developed using Google forms and disseminated to the National School Safety Alliance—a cohort of representatives from all states across the country.⁸¹ The survey requested information from state representatives involved in the development and coordination of their state threat assessment programs. The intention of the survey was to gather supplementary details on each state threat assessment program—including the benefits and challenges to implementing threat assessment programs in school—and collect essential state-specific details and perspectives on those processes. This analysis explored factors such as policy documents, training requirements for personnel, technical necessities, and program sustainment opportunities.

Last, I reviewed available sources at the federal level, including related published government reports and pending threat assessment legislation to identify pertinent components, as identified in a review of previous school shooting incidents, for application in state behavioral threat assessment programs. These sources included government reports published by the USSS and the FBI as well as pending federal legislation such as the TAPS Act.

Based on the analysis and assessment of this information, the thesis offers a set of recommendations that identify a path forward in creating a common standard for effective behavioral threat assessment programs for K–12 schools in New Jersey and other states.

⁸¹ This research was examined by the NPS Institutional Review Board and determined not to involve human subjects research.

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II. BACKGROUND

This chapter outlines previous incidents of violence within the educational community, specifically K–12 institutions. It shares insights on notable attacks and the continued rise of occurrences that have begun to shift the security landscape for educators, law enforcement, and other public safety practitioners. Notably, although several safety programs have been promoted to enhance safety and security in schools, they have been more reactive and response-oriented after an incident occurs rather than proactive and focused on preventing a violent act from occurring in the first place. Experts in the field have begun to direct resources toward prevention programs, whose focus is to raise awareness and report warning signs of student behaviors. Thus, behavioral threat assessment programs have become a valuable, effective practice within the school safety landscape.

A. HISTORY OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN K–12 SCHOOLS

Violent incidents and attacks in school communities are not a new problem; such incidents have gradually increased in recent years. Though the infamous Columbine High School massacre may have garnered the media’s attention and sparked national interest in calling for change, from 1998 to 1999, the nation saw several acts of violence in other schools. On May 21, 1998, Kip Kinkel, a student at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, killed two students and injured another 22 in the school cafeteria. A day earlier, Kinkel had been arrested for bringing a gun to school. Almost a year later, on May 20, 1999, Thomas Solomon, a student at Heritage High School, began to display some concerning signs, including depression after a romantic breakup, and injured six students. Nevertheless, Columbine captured the nation’s attention because, at the time, it was the deadliest shooting at a K–12 school that the country had ever seen.

Since these incidents, violence in schools has increased significantly. In a study on school shootings and mental health, Allison Paolini highlighted that in the 19th century, there were 49 reported shootings in primary and secondary schools, known now as K–12 schools. Paolini notes that school shootings continued to rise, increasing from 23 to 179

between the 1980s and 1990s and then from 179 to 245 between the 1990s and 2013.⁸² According to Riedman and O’Neill, in 2018, the United States saw 119 shooting incidents at K–12 schools, reaching the highest rate in a single year, nearly doubling the previous high of 59 incidents in 2006.⁸³ Furthermore in 2019, there were 119 documented school shooting incidents, and in 2021, a total of 251.⁸⁴ As this disturbing trend continues to rise, it has become evident that schools, with support from government agencies, must adopt and implement more effective preventive strategies, which could include a set of standardized practices, to curb school violence.

B. PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

The safety of children has always been important in school settings, and educators continually grapple with changing environments and evolving threats to their student population. Simply planning for an adequate response to a horrific incident is no longer a sufficient strategy for K–12 schools. To prevent acts of targeted violence, school districts must adopt more proactive, consistent measures to understand and identify potential threats within schools.

No single incident advanced the awareness or need for school safety and security measures more significantly than the tragic day at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. On April 20, two students walked into their school armed to commit mass murder, shooting and killing 12 of their fellow Columbine students and wounding another 21 before taking their own lives—forever changing perceptions and the practice of school safety.⁸⁵ In 1998, Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard

⁸² Allison Paolini, “School Shootings and Student Mental Health: Role of the School Counselors in Mitigating Violence,” *VISTAS Online* (2015): 4, <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/school-shootings-and-student-mental-health.p>.

⁸³ “Incidents by Year 1970–2022,” K–12 School Shooting Database, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>.

⁸⁴ CHDS School Shooting Safety Compendium.

⁸⁵ William H. Erickson, *The Report of Governor Bill Owens’ Columbine Review Commission* (Denver: Columbine Review Commission, 2001), <https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Columbine%20-%20Governor’s%20Commission%20Report.pdf>.

W. Riley had deemed school violence prevention a priority.⁸⁶ Reno and Riley disseminated a joint letter to administrators, principals, and teachers directed at schools across the nation, calling for all schools to implement comprehensive school violence prevention plans, which would provide a necessary framework for the safety of the youth and schools.⁸⁷

The safety of youth in schools is a shared responsibility. School violence is not an isolated issue for the school staff or law enforcement to address. Based on data from the studied events, when institutional leadership involved the families, friends, and broader community in assessing risks and taking preventive or interventional measures, favorable outcomes were the result. The concept of involving student peers and the broader community in risk identification and potential prevention is well founded; however, it does present education systems with a variety of challenges. For one, children make threats every day in schools, and although most of them may not be viable or tangible, schools must decide how to assess and address them with appropriate measures. These scenarios become even more complicated as a growing number of student populations experience social, emotional, and mental health issues. School administrators are often hesitant to overreact, but neither should they underreact. There is a difference between making a threat and posing a threat.

School-targeted violence is not an event; it is a process that, when fully understood, could prevent an incident from occurring. By understanding and identifying risk factors and assessing the threat potential for targeted violence, appropriate actions can be taken to intervene and manage the potential actor. This underscores the need for schools to have an established comprehensive process by which to vet risks quickly and gain a thorough understanding of and act accordingly on what could become a complex situation. Experts have argued that with an established behavioral threat assessment program, schools are better equipped to identify and differentiate the threat level and apply appropriate responses to address specific risks.⁸⁸ A behavioral threat assessment program implemented in K–12

⁸⁶ O'Toole, *The School Shooter*.

⁸⁷ O'Toole.

⁸⁸ O'Toole.

schools can prevent or reduce the likelihood of targeted violence in those learning environments.

C. BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS IN K–12 SCHOOLS

To fully understand the purpose of threat assessment and management, the concept should first be clearly defined. Vossekuil et al. define a threat assessment as a set of guidelines and techniques to “identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence by a potential attacker,” with the goal of intervening before an attack occurs.⁸⁹ Among experts in the field, Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden describe a threat assessment as “the identification of a potential perpetrator, assessing the risks of violence posed by a given perpetrator at a given time, and management of both the subject and the risks that he or she presents to a given target.”⁹⁰ Still, Randazzo et al. delineate threat assessment “as a set of operational activities that combine the use of an investigative process and information-gathering strategies to inform a set of relevant questions, which are used to determine whether a person or a situation poses a serious risk of targeted violence.”⁹¹ The key concepts in the behavioral threat assessment process focus on identification, gathering information, assessing the information, and developing management strategies for individuals who present an actual risk of violent action toward a specific target. All of these threat assessment descriptions encompass shared intentions and a systematic approach that 1) identify situations and potential subjects of concern, 2) gather information about the subjects and investigate, 3) assess the situation holistically, and 4) manage the situation with possible intervention (see Figure 1).

⁸⁹ Vossekuil et al., *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*, 5.

⁹⁰ Robert A. Fein, Bryan Vossekuil, and Gwen A. Holden, *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1995), 3, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/threat.pdf>.

⁹¹ Marisa Reddy Randazzo et al., “Threat Assessment in Schools: Empirical Support and Comparison with Other Approaches,” in *Handbook of School Violence and School Safety: From Research to Practice*, ed. S. R. Jimerson and M. Furlong (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2006), 152.



Figure 1. Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Model⁹²

Regarding detecting threats, in prior school shootings, 93 percent of the culprits demonstrated alarming behavior before committing the actual attack, suggesting that with appropriate observation tactics with increased levels and systems for sharing information, some intervention could have been facilitated to deter the incident.⁹³ Data show that at least one other person had some level of awareness of the perpetrator’s intent in 81 percent of the shootings, and more than one person had information in 59 percent of the incidents. In these cases, 93 percent who were aware of the risk of an attack were friends, schoolmates, or siblings of the attacker.⁹⁴ These statistics clearly indicate the need for a collection of behavioral and communication indicators, as well as a broad and inclusive approach to threat assessment program design.

The principal focus of threat assessment is preventing targeted threats or targeted violence, a term discussed further in this thesis. Given that objective, experts in the field broadly recommend the threat assessment process as a critical element of an effective prevention approach for school safety. Threat assessment is not a new idea—for years, it

⁹² Adapted from “Threat Evaluation and Reporting Course,” Department of Homeland Security, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/terc-one-pager>.

⁹³ Pollack, Modzeleski, and Rooney, *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence*.

⁹⁴ Pollack, Modzeleski, and Rooney.

has been a practice by law enforcement agencies, notably the USSS, to identify, examine, and intervene with individuals who pose a threat to public officials and others.⁹⁵ Over time, the USSS and FBI have both advanced threat assessment and management, adapting practices for different industries. In the education community, the USSS worked with the ED to identify threat assessment processes to prevent school-based violence more than 20 years ago.⁹⁶ The implementation of behavioral threat assessment programs can be an essential step for schools to provide an opportunity to identify students of concern, evaluate essential factors, and intervene with potential student attackers to help them overcome motivating factors and deter them from the pathway to violence (see Figure 2).

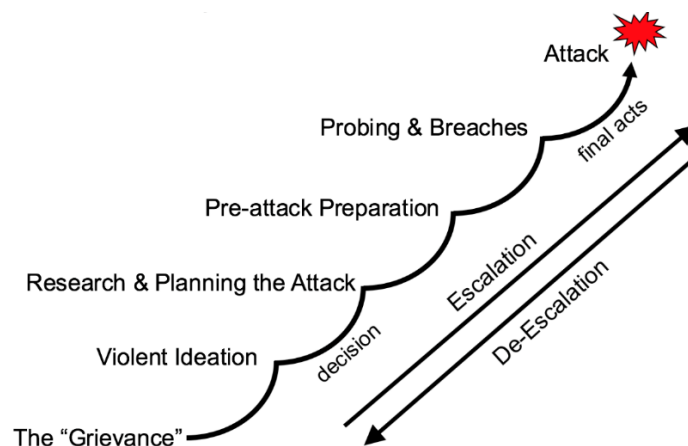


Figure 2. Pathway to Workplace- or Campus-Targeted Violence⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Robert A. Fein and Bryan Vossekuil, *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2000), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/179981.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Fein and Vossekuil.

⁹⁷ Source: “Pathway to Violence,” WAVR-21, accessed July 23, 2022, <https://www.wavr21.com/pathway-to-violence-2/>.

III. CASE STUDIES: REVIEW OF PREVIOUS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

The incidents of targeted school violence in this chapter include shootings at STEM School Highlands Ranch, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School, and Arapahoe High School. Each of these tragic school attacks, which devastated communities across the country, provides valuable lessons. As more states begin to implement behavioral threat assessments, it is essential to review prior cases in which district or school programs or state resources were available to support targeted violence prevention efforts to determine operational flaws and identify lessons going forward. By reviewing these cases, federal, state, and local governments can better align resources to support schools in establishing programs or sustaining their efforts to prevent possible school attacks. These four incidents were selected because of the information and documentation available on the attacks and details on behavioral threat assessment procedures that had been implemented before the attack. The case studies examine explicit gaps and problems in related assessment processes and outcomes. In sum, this analysis aims to find operational issues in each scenario, evaluate the need for standards and process implementation, and identify components for effective behavioral threat assessments in schools.

A. STEM SCHOOL HIGHLANDS RANCH IN DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLORADO

About 20 years after the Columbine High School massacre, just seven miles down the road, STEM School Highlands Ranch and community members would experience a similar tragic event. According to an initial police interview, Devon Erickson received a Snapchat message on May, 6, 2019, from his close friend Alec McKinney, warning him to stay home and not come to school the next day because he was going to get revenge.⁹⁸ Erickson told the police that he had pleaded with McKinney not to do anything impulsive

⁹⁸ Complaint and Demand for Jury Trial, *Castillo v. Highlands Ranch*, No. 2021CV30323 (Douglas Cnty. Ct. Aug. 1, 1985), <https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Castillo-v-Highlands-Ranch.pdf>.

and that he had even considered telling his family members of this potential threat to prevent any devastating action. In the end, Erickson failed to speak up and even demonstrated a willingness to assist McKinney, providing him with access to his parent's firearms and complying with McKinney's request to partake in the attack, which resulted in the death of one student and the injury of eight others on Tuesday afternoon, May 7, at STEM School Highlands Ranch in Douglas County, Colorado. While neither Douglas County, nor the State of Colorado, nor other agencies published an after-action report examining all aspects of this incident, other available documents, such as local news stories, official law enforcement reports, and court records, detailed the incident and shed light on whether it could have been prevented if a consistent, standardized district threat assessment process were in place.

1. Flaws in Threat Assessment

Even before the shooting incident at STEM School Highlands Ranch, the Douglas County School District was familiar with student threats of violence in school environments. In 2015, the district responded to a report that two girls were planning a shooting at Mountain Vista High School.⁹⁹ The Douglas County Sheriff's Office had received an anonymous tip to its central reporting system—a key element in threat assessment programs—which resulted in further investigation.¹⁰⁰ The Sheriff's Office identified several behavioral indicators, such as depression, self-harm, and idealization of the Columbine attackers, in researching the planning of the attack—all of which are common themes outlined by the USSS.¹⁰¹ The evidence gathered ultimately led to the

⁹⁹ Higgins Aff., January 14, 2016, <https://www.scribd.com/document/338861936/Brooke-Higgins-Affidavit>.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Roberts, "Brooke Higgins: Tears and Frustration over Sentence in Columbine-Style Plot," *Westword*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.westword.com/news/brooke-higgins-tears-and-frustration-over-sentence-in-columbine-style-plot-8371600>.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Secret Service, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service, 2018), https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2020-06/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf.

arrest of the two girls for conspiracy to commit murder.¹⁰² Both the district and the school administration shared information regarding the concerning behavior with staff and parents, displaying that collaborative efforts between law enforcement, school officials, and community members can effectively address and prevent a threat.¹⁰³ Warnings of potential shootings had even been conveyed to the high school before the incident. The district and the board had received notifications of potential copy-cat attacks, bomb threats, bullying, and safety concerns from local law enforcement.¹⁰⁴

The STEM School incident, involving Erickson and McKinney, turned out very differently from the documented success in preventing the planned shooting at Mountain Vista High School four years earlier. The Douglas County School District had received several warnings about the school environment and its lack of safety measures in response to school threats.¹⁰⁵ On several occasions, the community had voiced concerns about a potential Columbine- or Arapahoe-style incident at the STEM School months before Erickson and McKinney opened fire on classmates.¹⁰⁶ Many teachers, students, and other community members had raised issue with Erickson's and McKinney's concerning behaviors over a period of time before the attack took place, which might have been identified through a formal threat assessment. While the administration directed school officials to further investigate and determine the legitimacy of these concerns, there is no evidence of a formal report or threat assessment process at the school, nor an alarm raised

¹⁰² Jesse Paul, "Brooke Higgins, Teen Who Pleaded Guilty in Mountain Vista Murder Plot, Apologizes to Community at Sentencing," *Denver Post*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.denverpost.com/2017/02/08/brooke-higgins-mountain-vista-murder-plot-sentencing/>.

¹⁰³ Shanna Fortier, "Keeping Students, Schools Safe: A Look at Safety and Security in Denver Metro Schools," *Castle Rock News-Press*, January 23, 2018, <https://castlerocknewspress.net/stories/keeping-students-schools-safe,257934>.

¹⁰⁴ Complaint and Demand for Jury Trial, *Castillo v. Highlands Ranch*.

¹⁰⁵ Jeremy Jojola, "'Perfect Storm': District Letter Documents Fears of Another 'Columbine' at STEM School," KUSA News 9, May 9, 2019, <https://www.9news.com/article/news/investigations/perfect-storm-district-letter-documents-fears-of-another-columbine-at-stem-school/73-13ddc8c2-90c4-4919-a3c2-f1917cf941b8>.

¹⁰⁶ "Affidavit: Juvenile Suspect Planned Stem School Shooting, Threatened Other Suspect," ABC Denver 7, June 20, 2019, <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/affidavit-juvenile-suspect-planned-stem-school-shooting-threatened-other-suspect>.

to the district.¹⁰⁷ Both the school and district failed to act collectively on warning signs and indications or take appropriate measures to intervene before the incident. Without an established procedure or standard program approach for assessing and managing threats, the district and the STEM School administration missed the would-be shooters' indicators of violence.

In the past, both Erickson and McKinney had joked about school shootings and even went as far as warning other friends to stay away from school on certain days.¹⁰⁸ The FBI calls such forewarning "leakage," as the boys spilled their idea of committing a violent act to someone. Erickson used the screen name "devonkillz" on Snapchat, and while that would not have necessarily designated him a credible threat, it would have proven a critical indicator to warrant a further examination during a threat assessment process.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, as noted in a court motion document, McKinney had a history of being bullied by other students for being transgender.¹¹⁰ The same document describes McKinney's troubled home life, too, as he often witnessed his father physically abuse his mother and, ultimately, saw his father being arrested and deported.¹¹¹ All of these stressors and emotional issues affected his mental health with persistent depression and a history of suicidal thoughts. McKinney claimed to hear voices in his head, even reportedly stating "the voices win" before he left Erickson's house to carry out the shooting.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Jojola, "Perfect Storm."

¹⁰⁸ Jessica Gibbs and Elliott Wenzler, "Prosecutors Attempt to Poke Holes in STEM Suspect's Story: The Older Suspect Says He Was Forced into the Shooting, but Prosecutors Say It Doesn't Add Up," *Parker Chronicle*, September 24, 2019, <https://parkerchronicle.net/stories/prosecutors-attempt-to-poke-holes-in-stem-suspects-story,286657>.

¹⁰⁹ Allison Sylte, "Judge Rules There's Enough Evidence for Older STEM School Shooting Suspect to Stand Trial," KUSA News 9, September 25, 2019, <https://www.9news.com/article/news/crime/stem-school-shooting-preliminary-hearing-day-two/73-0ac8ad1c-2745-4432-9f13-95af884c42d6>.

¹¹⁰ Order Regarding Motion for Reverse Transfer, Colorado v. McKinney, No. 2019CR467 (Douglas Cnty. Ct. December 4, 2019), <https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/People-v-McKinney.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Order Regarding Motion for Reverse Transfer.

¹¹² Complaint and Demand for Jury Trial, *Castillo v. Highlands Ranch*.

Although McKinney had help from mental health professionals, he sometimes refused to take his prescribed medication.¹¹³ Additionally, months before the shooting, a school counselor noted that McKinney has been subject to a Safe2Tell—the state’s anonymous school reporting system—tip regarding suicide and self-harm.¹¹⁴ The STEM School benefited from the anonymous reporting program by following up with this tip, but no specific investigative steps were taken.¹¹⁵ Although some of the tips through this system might not meet the threshold for law enforcement intervention, a proper threat assessment team could have gathered additional information to consider the risk of McKinney’s harming others. Also, according to court testimony, both individuals had researched past school shootings and spoken with friends about ways to obtain a gun. Last, McKinney fixated on the Columbine shooters and idealized Sol Pais—a teenage girl who was infatuated with Columbine—following her blogs and social media accounts and encouraging his friends to follow her as well.¹¹⁶

If a threat assessment process had included a multidisciplinary team charged with gathering further details and information on these two students, including their fixation on previous school shooters, access to weapons, emotional disorders, and other critical stressors, a comprehensive intervention strategy could have been developed to mitigate the potential harm to the school and community at large.

2. Lessons Learned

Following the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, the State of Colorado emphasized school violence prevention measures. As part of those strategies, a number of schools and districts across the state implemented threat assessment protocols, while

¹¹³ Sam Tabachnik, “STEM School Shooting Suspect Alec McKinney’s Case Should Go to Trial, Douglas County Judge Determines,” *Denver Post*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/11/18/stem-shooting-alec-mckinney-preliminary-hearing/>.

¹¹⁴ Complaint and Demand for Jury Trial, *Castillo v. Highlands Ranch*.

¹¹⁵ “Younger STEM School Shooting Suspect Was Subject of Safe2Tell Tip Months before Attack,” KRDO News 13, November 21, 2019, [https://krdo.com/news/2019/11/21/younger-stem-school-shooting-suspect-was-subject-of-safe2tell-tip-months-before-attack/#:~:text=DOUGLAS%20COUNTY%20\(KUSA\)%20%2D%2D%20A,cutting%20himself%2C%20according%20to%20Wright.](https://krdo.com/news/2019/11/21/younger-stem-school-shooting-suspect-was-subject-of-safe2tell-tip-months-before-attack/#:~:text=DOUGLAS%20COUNTY%20(KUSA)%20%2D%2D%20A,cutting%20himself%2C%20according%20to%20Wright.)

¹¹⁶ Tabachnik, “McKinney’s Case Should Go to Trial.”

following guidance and training offered by the Colorado School Safety Center.¹¹⁷ For example, several school districts in Adams County, in coordination with the Adams County Youth Initiative, used the implemented county-wide threat assessment protocol.¹¹⁸ In the aftermath of the STEM School shooting, the superintendent of the Douglas County School District made school safety and security a top priority and began to identify several programs and initiatives that would help fill the gaps identified with the tragedy.¹¹⁹ Under the district's fourth goal for safety and security, the superintendent outlined several elements of a comprehensive approach to school safety.¹²⁰ This approach includes initiatives on school climate, mental health and wellbeing, bystander awareness, and information-sharing efforts, all of which fall within the core concepts of threat assessment—identify, assess, and manage. Additionally, the plan mentions the need to ensure the district-wide threat assessment team assumes leadership and response in managing risks and incidents effectively.

Recognizing the lack of awareness and reporting of Erickson's and McKinney's concerning behaviors, in addition to inadequate follow-up on the tips reported to address the threat, the district began to promote and encourage students to use the state's Safe2Tell application to report any threatening behaviors or activities that might endanger the school community.¹²¹ The district also offered more education, awareness, and training programs for staff, teachers, and families to understand their role in identifying and reporting unusual or risky behaviors.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Brown and Christopher Osher, "Twenty Years after Columbine, Colorado Schools Are Assessing an Astonishing Number of Student Threats," *Colorado Sun*, April 10, 2019, <https://coloradosun.com/2019/04/10/colorado-school-threat-assessments/>.

¹¹⁸ Colorado School Safety Resource Center, *Essentials of School Threat Assessment: Preventing Targeted School Violence* (Denver: Colorado School Safety Resource Center, June 2019), <https://cdps.docs.state.co.us/safeschools/CSSRC%20Documents/TAEssentials5.31.19.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ "Superintendent's Goals (2019–2020)," Douglas County School District, accessed September 9, 2022, https://www.dcsdk12.org/about/leadership/superintendent/superintendent_goals.

¹²⁰ Douglas County School District.

¹²¹ Douglas County School District.

¹²² Douglas County School District.

Although the Douglas County Sheriff's Office historically had a presence and positive relationship within the STEM School system, there was some tension and discord among parties relating to authorized duties and contracts. This dynamic might have contributed to friction and information silos before the shooting. To move away from the information silos, enhance relationships, and further build law enforcement capacity, the SRO program was doubled, expanding the officers' presence and relationship in middle and elementary schools.¹²³ This expansion enabled more law enforcement support for threat assessment teams, making for a more effective multidisciplinary response to potential threats of concern.

As the district continues to monitor and improve the effectiveness of its threat assessment program, it has laid a foundation for a more-disciplined, systematic approach to addressing and managing possible threats. The STEM School's 2019 contract now outlines requirements for staff members, including administration and mental health professionals, to complete training on threat assessments, be fully apprised of current policies, and submit reports as required.¹²⁴ Last, the Douglas County School District established the practice of holding quarterly meetings with committees focused on community and district safety and mental wellbeing. These committees provide a level of oversight of all schools within their jurisdiction, continuously reviewing the effectiveness of current security policies and risk assessment and ensuring processes are followed as required to diminish or mitigate the incidence of schools' being targeted within their community.

B. MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS HIGH SCHOOL IN PARKLAND, FLORIDA

Several years before the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSDHS), Nikolas Cruz had already developed a history of self-destructive behavior and

¹²³ Jessica Gibbs, "How the STEM School Tragedy Changed Douglas County School Policing," *Colorado Politics*, June 2, 2020, https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/how-the-stem-school-tragedy-changed-douglas-county-school-policing/article_e19e2fa2-a4f9-11ea-b9c3-3f6b254a1d28.html.

¹²⁴ Meg Wingerter, "STEM School, Douglas County District Reach Five-Year Agreement, with Conditions," *Denver Post*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/06/29/stem-school-douglas-county-charter/>.

violent tendencies. An examination of his past reveals that he first displayed troubling behavior at an early age, resulting in his being referred to a juvenile diversion program.¹²⁵ He was involved in fights, vandalism, and torturing and killing animals.¹²⁶ Cruz was known as an unstable teen by teachers, staff, fellow students, and community members, and he caught the attention of law enforcement officials. In fact, the Broward County Sheriff's Office had responded to incidents at the Cruz family home 43 times.¹²⁷ Almost two years to the day of the attack, on February 5, 2016, the Broward County Sheriff's Office received an anonymous report that Cruz had posted a picture with guns on Instagram and threatened to shoot up the school. Shortly afterward, in September 2016, a student expressed concern to a staff member at the high school about Cruz's safety because he had shared suicidal thoughts, performed acts of self-harm, and spoke about a gun at home.¹²⁸ The staff member documented the concerns and shared them with the MSDHS administration.¹²⁹ Following these reports of risky behavior, on September 28, 2016, approximately 17 months before the incident, the administration initiated a threat assessment on Cruz, from which the threat assessment team decided that Cruz could not have a backpack at school.

Following Cruz's attack, the State of Florida established the MSDHS Public Safety Commission, under the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, to conduct a formal review of the incident and Cruz's situation, and provide recommendations and solutions for improvement.¹³⁰ Since its inception, the MSDHS Public Safety Commission has prepared two reports that examine the key behavioral indicators displayed by Nikolas Cruz over time, as well as Broward County Public Schools (BCPS)'s and MSDHS's threat assessment requirements and processes in place before and during the shooting incident.

¹²⁵ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, *Initial Report* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2019), <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/MSDHS/CommissionReport.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹²⁷ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹²⁸ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹²⁹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³⁰ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

1. Flaws in Threat Assessment

At the time of the attack, BCPS had already established threat assessment procedures and threat assessment teams for the district. This included awareness and training for staff in recognizing and reporting potential threats of violence at the school, a requirement for participating on the school threat assessment team. The procedures also outlined the three-step threat assessment process for the teams to follow: the initial response, Level 1 screening, and if needed, a Level 2 in-depth assessment.¹³¹ For every threat assessment, the threat assessment team was required to maintain all the forms and documentation as part of the student's record.¹³² Also, the threat assessment team had to comprise an administrator, a teacher, a mental health professional, law enforcement representatives, and other staff, if available.¹³³ Although these requirements were district policy, the threat assessment process was school initiated and managed with limited interaction or oversight from the district.¹³⁴

In response to Cruz's threats and concerning behavior, the MSDHS initiated the threat assessment process. Although the threat assessment team—consisting of two assistant principals, a teacher, a mental health professional, and a law enforcement officer—resembled the multidisciplinary group required by the district and recommended by the USSS and FBI, its members lacked sufficient training in conducting a threat assessment effectively.¹³⁵ Specifically, the assistant principal, who was leading the team and the assessment process, had never received basic training on the procedures and had no prior experience in conducting a threat assessment.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³² School Board of Broward County, Florida, *Threat Assessment Procedures Manual* (Fort Lauderdale: School Board of Broward County, Florida, 2017), http://www.bcps-mentalhealth.com/downloads/Threat_Assessment_Manual_Update_2017.pdf.

¹³³ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, *Initial Report*.

¹³⁴ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³⁵ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³⁶ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

On September 28, 2016, during the Level 1 threat assessment of Cruz, the team met and form a customized plan for Cruz’s school activities, which included prohibiting him from having a backpack at school. Although the BCPS procedure detailed that teams should allow time for effective information-gathering, Cruz’s Level 1 threat assessment was reportedly closed on the same day the team convened.¹³⁷ Additionally, the threat assessment team was responsible for assigning clear responsibilities for implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the effectiveness of the agreed-upon plan.

Shortly after the Level 1 assessment was closed, the assistant principal, with limited experience in conducting threat assessments, decided independently to conduct a Level 2 assessment; however, the commission found no one to could corroborate that a Level 2 assessment was initiated.¹³⁸ Additionally, the lack of awareness of the Level 2 assessment and the uncompleted individual management plan caused apparent confusion about the team’s next steps, so Cruz remained in school.¹³⁹ The school’s principal also had limited knowledge of the threat posed by Cruz—or any others for that matter. He reviewed none of the threat assessment decisions, nor was he unaware of the assessment activity, and had little to no familiarity or knowledge of the process.¹⁴⁰

Even after Cruz fell through the gaps in the school’s threat assessment process, he continued to display concerning behaviors that should have been identified during follow-up activities, if an effective supervision or management plan had been implemented. Many individuals, including students and family friends, observed Cruz’s behaviors and expressed concerns.¹⁴¹ According to the commission, “At least 30 people had knowledge of Cruz’s troubling behavior before the shooting that they did not report or they had information that they reported but it was not acted on by people to whom they reported

¹³⁷ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³⁸ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹³⁹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁰ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴¹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

their concerns.”¹⁴² One student, following the nationally recognized “see something, say something” message, reported threats to a teacher who shared them with the school administration and SRO, but no additional risk management or intervention measures were taken.¹⁴³ Numerous indicators should have alerted the threat assessment team to take actions with strategic intervention steps. For example, students stated that Cruz had an interest in firearms or other weapons.¹⁴⁴ Cruz’s social media posts showed him with weapons, including firearms or knives, and a comment on YouTube by a user named “Nikolas Cruz” stated he wanted to become the “next school shooter.”¹⁴⁵ Both these posts had been reported to the FBI’s public access line, but these were never further investigated.¹⁴⁶ A friend of Lynda Cruz, his mother, had shared her anxiousness about Cruz’s apparent obsession with weapons, and she had even called the Broward County Sheriff’s Office asking the police to remove them.¹⁴⁷

Ultimately, the information gathered by the threat assessment team should have allowed the team’s members to make a judgment about any student of concern, including Cruz, with indications of the risk of violent behavior. Unfortunately, the team failed to operate accordingly. This situation clearly demonstrates the need for operational consistency, training, and the use of services readily available to support threat assessment teams.¹⁴⁸

2. Lessons Learned

Following this tragic event in 2018, under the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the state established the MSDHS Public Safety Commission. This commission was charged with conducting a formal review of the incident, along with

¹⁴² Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 264.

¹⁴³ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁴ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁵ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁶ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁷ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁴⁸ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

Cruz’s past behavior, and providing insights, considerations, and viable solutions for better managing risks of this nature in school communities. It was also responsible for working with the Florida Legislature to enact some of the identified recommendations.¹⁴⁹ As noted in the commission’s findings, there were several missed opportunities and serious gaps in managing the entire threat assessment process involving Cruz.¹⁵⁰ An independent audit of the entire district’s threat assessment process was also conducted.¹⁵¹ Most notably, it found there were serious deficiencies in information-gathering by the threat assessment team, and required documentation was missing in most cases.¹⁵² The audit cited a lack of training and knowledge of the threat assessment process among school officials and team members in compromising efforts to conduct an effective behavioral threat assessment. Additionally, there was no formalized process or mechanism for sharing the information that existed, and a disengaged leader, in the assistant principal, exacerbated the threat assessment team’s performance issues. Last, Broward County’s decentralized school-based process provided little to no support, oversight, or accountability by the school district or state.

The commission with State of Florida leadership highlighted behavioral threat assessments as the most vital prevention program for school communities to identify and formally manage students’ threatening or concerning behaviors before they manifest in violence.¹⁵³ In 2019, the district adopted a revised threat assessment policy to address the challenges identified in the commission’s after-action report and meet the new legislative requirements.¹⁵⁴ It stated that every school district should implement the standardized threat assessment policy and processes that require school faculty, staff, and students to report all suspicious indicators or concerning student behavior to a school administration member, who officially documents it and tracks the status of the student throughout the

¹⁴⁹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁵⁰ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁵¹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁵² Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁵³ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, *Report Submitted to the Governor, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Senate President* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2019), <https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/MSDHS/MSD-Report-2-Public-Version.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

threat assessment process. The policy also requires that school leaders and members of the threat assessment team receive annual training.¹⁵⁵ Additional details on Florida's legislative mandate for standardized behavioral threat assessments are further examined in Chapter IV.

C. SANTA FE HIGH SCHOOL IN SANTA FE, TEXAS

On May 18, 2018, as students sat down for their first class at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, student Dimitrios Pagourtzis opened fire on teachers and fellow classmates. He had also set up improvised explosive devices and Molotov cocktails in the area; however, they failed to explode during his attack. Pagourtzis was apprehended by law enforcement but not before he had killed 10 and injured another 12 students and teachers at the school. After the shooting, law enforcement officials discovered information in Pagourtzis's journal describing his plans and intent to conduct a mass shooting, also suggesting that he wanted to commit suicide after achieving his objective. No official after-action report was published to provide a retrospective analysis of the sequence of events and activities before, during, and after the shooting, but numerous other written accounts provide insights into the incident, outlining what preventive measures could have been implemented had a threat assessment program existed.

1. Flaws in Threat Assessment

At the time of the shooting, the State of Texas did not mandate a school-based threat assessment team. The Santa Fe Independent School District and Santa Fe High School recommended initiating a threat assessment on Pagourtzis, but it was never conducted.¹⁵⁶ A thorough review and examination of Pagourtzis's past would have identified stressors, social interactions, inappropriate interests, extremist symbology postings online, and access to weapons. Had a threat assessment been conducted, the school administration, with assistance from law enforcement and mental health professionals, might have

¹⁵⁵ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

¹⁵⁶ Bruno S. Dias, "Blip on the Radar: School Safety Synergy through Early Warning and Information Sharing" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2020), [https://www.hSDL.org/?view &did=850257](https://www.hSDL.org/?view&did=850257).

substantiated the threat of concern in Pagourtzis and appropriately intervened long before the shooting occurred.

Some red flags were raised for Pagourtzis. While he was an honor-roll student who played on the school football team and had no history with law enforcement, he did have stressors and displayed various troubling indicators, which influenced his thinking and behavior and led him down a path of violence to target his school community. Before the attack, some students, staff, and community members described Pagourtzis as quiet and isolated. He appeared to struggle to connect with other students socially and felt alienated. For example, before the shooting, it was reported that had he been romantically rejected by one of the victims. Pagourtzis had become increasingly aggressive with her, and she finally stood up to him about a week before the shooting took place.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, there were some reports that he had been teased and bullied, not only by fellow students but also by school officials.¹⁵⁸ Although he never reportedly made verbal threats against any of his classmates or school officials, he did display some disturbing indicators that raised concern among his peers.

Pagourtzis's appearance and outfits were often noticed by his classmates. He dressed in a trench coat and military boots, even during extremely hot days in the Texas weather. Several of his classmates reportedly joked that he looked like he could be one of the Columbine shooters, but no official documentation suggested students had shared these concerns with teachers, counselors, or school administration. Fein et al. note that rather than relying on students' appearance as the only threat indicator, schools should focus more on behaviors and other situational factors in their life.¹⁵⁹ In addition to his similar attire to the Columbine shooters, he also prominently displayed patches and pins of symbols from

¹⁵⁷ Molly Hennessy-Fiske, Matt Pearce, and Jenny Jarvie, "Must Reads: Texas School Shooter Killed Girl Who Turned Down His Advances and Embarrassed Him in Class, Her Mother Says," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-texas-shooter-20180519-story.html>.

¹⁵⁸ William Wan, Abigail Hauslohner, and Stephanie Kuzdym, "Alleged School Killer Dimitrios Pagourtzis Had a Fondness for Trench Coats and a Growing Darkness," *Washington Post*, May 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/alleged-school-killer-dimitrios-pagourtzis-was-nondescript-betraying-a-growing-darkness/2018/05/18/d69f5b88-5ade-11e8-8836-a4a123c359ab_story.html.

¹⁵⁹ Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools*.

conflicting and controversial ideologies, which could have raised sufficient concern to conduct a threat assessment. These symbols included the Communist Party's hammer and sickle, representing rebellion; Nazi Germany's iron cross, signifying bravery; the Japanese rising sun, suggesting Kamikaze or suicidal tactics; the Knights Templar's Baphomet, denoting evil; and the Cthulhu, indicating power.¹⁶⁰ With these different symbols on his clothing, Pagourtzis was showing an inappropriate interest in violence, and one could argue he was conveying that he believed in these divisive and destructive ideals. If, however, students and educators had little to no awareness or true understanding of these symbols, these signs would have been missed and most likely not reported to the school's administration to investigate further.

Pagourtzis's social media accounts also offered a glimpse into his mindset before the shooting occurred. The Instagram account that appeared to belong to him showed he had an interest in guns. He followed multiple gun-related accounts, including accounts that featured people holding firearms.¹⁶¹ Additionally, he made a series of disturbing posts on his different social media platforms. Images on his Instagram account included a picture of a knife and a handgun and a single scope sniper rifle arcade game.¹⁶² His Facebook page, approximately one week before the attack, displayed a picture of him in a shirt that read "Born to kill."¹⁶³ It is vital as part of the threat assessment process to examine social media postings and online activity. These activities can be a form of leakage to identify the need to run a threat assessment, or during a threat assessment's gathering phase, the student's social media activity can be effective in determining whether the individual poses a threat of harm and a need for intervention.

Pagourtzis initially became engaged in attack-related behavior when he started conducting research on past attacks, documenting the attack plan in his journal, and

¹⁶⁰ Julie Turkewitz and Jess Bidgood, "Who Is Dimitrios Pagourtzis, the Texas Shooting Suspect?," *New York Times*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/us/dimitrios-pagourtzis-gunman-texas-shooting.html>.

¹⁶¹ Jessica McBride, "Dimitrios Pagourtzis Politics: Instagram Page Followed Trump," *Heavy*, May 18, 2018, <https://heavy.com/news/2018/05/dimitrios-pagourtzis-politics-instagram-trump/>.

¹⁶² McBride.

¹⁶³ Turkewitz and Bidgood, "Who Is Dimitrios Pagourtzis?"

identifying ways to acquire weapons. His access to weapons was relatively simple, as his father was an avid hunter and legally owned two firearms—a shotgun and a .38 caliber revolver—both of which he used during his shooting spree at the school. In a recent study on school violence, the USSS found that most attackers who used firearms most often acquired them from the home of their parents where they were not secured properly in a locked safe or case.¹⁶⁴ In this instance, had a threat assessment been conducted on Pagourtzis, the administration would have explored his access to any weapons, with a focus on weapons in the home, by interviewing his parents and working with local law enforcement. In addition to the weapons access, he was found to have successfully purchased ammunition online, even though he was only 17 at the time of the shooting; federal law should have prohibited him from buying ammunition. A lawsuit states that Luckygunner.com, an internet-based ammo and gun accessories retailer, sold Pagourtzis ammunition rounds without verifying his age.¹⁶⁵ While a more comprehensive background check might not have prevented the incident, it could have served as a warning of his behavior for both his parents and local law enforcement. Unfortunately, neither were part of the investigation.

Before this incident, there were not as many red flags or warnings identified as with the shootings at MSDHS and STEM School Highlands Ranch. Pagourtzis did well in school, was involved in extracurricular activities in school and at church, and had no previous run-ins with law enforcement. Texas Governor Greg Abbot even stated that “unlike Parkland, unlike Sutherland Springs, there were not those warning signs” and that Pagourtzis had a fairly clean slate—though both his online activities and interactions with students suggested otherwise. Pagourtzis slipped through cracks—with dismissed urgings to conduct a comprehensive threat assessment on the student, a lack of a centralized reporting system, a general unfamiliarity of imagery or symbols that conveyed disturbing ideologies, and insufficient information-sharing processes between the school, law

¹⁶⁴ Associated Press, “Suit: Website Sold Ammo to Underage Accused Texas Shooter,” ABC News, March 6, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/suit-website-sold-ammo-accused-texas-school-shooter-69444187>.

¹⁶⁵ Associated Press.

enforcement, and community members—resulting in the loss of 10 innocent lives on May 18.

2. Lessons Learned

The May 18, 2018 shooting at Santa Fe High School prompted Texas officials, including school personnel, law enforcement, mental health professionals, government agencies, and others to identify strategies for preventing future attacks.¹⁶⁶ The USSS pointed out in its most recent guidance on preventing targeted school violence that the Santa Fe High School shooting demonstrated the need to provide leadership and support for all agencies in preventing future school attacks.¹⁶⁷ After this incident, the school district began to implement several changes and establish new safety initiatives for the following school year. It updated the Student Code of Conduct to establish threat assessment and a safe and supportive school team.¹⁶⁸ Although Pagourtzis did not display as many threatening behaviors as other earlier school shooters, identifying and acting on just one could have changed the course of this incident. Having trained threat assessment teams will help ensure that school officials better understand and recognize warning signs, indicators, and troubling behavior—whether in person or online—and assess their potential risk to others and themselves, as well as intervene with required support to address situational needs.¹⁶⁹

Since Pagourtzis’s most threatening indicators were on social media platforms and went unnoticed and unreported, the district has procured social media monitoring software that identifies warning signs and potential threats.¹⁷⁰ The information gathered from these services can be shared with the threat assessment teams as another tool to open a threat

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Secret Service, *Protecting America’s Schools*, 3.

¹⁶⁷ U.S. Secret Service, *Enhancing School Safety*.

¹⁶⁸ Santa Fe Independent School District, *Student Code of Conduct, 2020–2021* (Santa Fe, TX: Santa Fe Independent School District, 2020), <https://www.sfid.org/cms/lib/TX02215329/Centricity/Domain/1479/2020-2021%20SFISD%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>.

¹⁶⁹ Santa Fe Independent School District.

¹⁷⁰ “Santa Fe ISD Parent Information Meeting on August 16, 2018,” Santa Fe Independent School District, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.sfid.org/cms/lib/TX02215329/Centricity/Domain/8/SummaryNotesSantaFeISDParentInformationMeeting081618.pdf>.

assessment or gather information on the student to determine the level of risk. The district also noted the importance of leadership engagement; therefore, it outlined responsibilities and roles of the principal and other appropriate administrative staff to support the implementation of the threat assessment policy and procedures and ensure accordance with the state law. Additionally, as noted in other cases, the administrative staff shared that it would work closely with the threat assessment teams to provide a level of supervision and oversight of those policies and procedures.¹⁷¹ The Santa Fe Independent School District Police Department has committed to support the school's threat assessment teams, including expanding its anonymous reporting system with the creation of an app for students and facilitating greater information-sharing.¹⁷²

D. ARAPAHOE HIGH SCHOOL IN CENTENNIAL, COLORADO

On September 17, 2013, two months before the shooting at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, Karl Pierson documented a detailed plan for his vengeful attack in his journal, stating “I will shoot up my school, Arapahoe High School, before the year is over.”¹⁷³ Although neighbors of Pierson viewed him as a nice boy who was involved in sports and the community, he suffered from anger issues. He did have some friends at the school, but his reputation was relatively negative among most students. Several of his fellow classmates described him as disrespectful, arrogant, and verbally aggressive and said he always blamed others for his failures or missteps. Pierson had also demonstrated an infatuation with Eric Harris, one of the Columbine school shooters. In many ways, Pierson echoed behaviors of Harris and even tried to imitate his actions. This was seen particularly in the way he conducted his attack on Friday, December 13, 2013.

After the shooting, the investigation uncovered evidence that school officials and mental health professionals had known about Pierson's progressive decline and behavioral changes and that he posed a threat to himself and others in the school. If a threat assessment

¹⁷¹ Santa Fe Independent School District, *Student Code of Conduct*.

¹⁷² Santa Fe Independent School District.

¹⁷³ Kristen McCauley, *Investigative Report: Arapahoe High School*, Case No. CT13-44545 (Centennial, CO: Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, 2014), https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/official_report_karl_pierson.pdf.

protocol had been effectively implemented with a properly trained threat assessment team, Pierson might have been handled differently—with tailored intervention and management strategies that could have steered him toward appropriate assistance and away from his tendency to enact violence and revenge—ultimately saving Clarke Davis’s life. After this school shooting, several independent groups, including Safe Havens International and the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, and subject-matter experts examined the details leading up to the incident. They conducted an extensive review of the incident, researching Pierson’s past behaviors and examining the school’s threat assessment processes to identify gaps, opportunities, and lessons learned to improve violence prevention in the school community.

1. Flaws in Threat Assessment

At the time of the shooting, the Littleton Public School District and Arapahoe High School (AHS) did have a threat assessment program in place; however, there were several shortcomings and failures, which led to Pierson’s mimicking his hero, Eric Harris, and opening fire on Friday, December 13. Prompted by the earlier Columbine school shooting, the Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC) created threat assessment guidance for K–12 schools in 2011, titled the *Essentials of School Threat Assessment: Preventing Targeted School Violence*, which aligned with the USSS’s recommendation to use 11 key questions (see Table 1) to screen, gather, and analyze the information, and outline each step in the threat assessment process with an easy-to-follow flow chart. Although not required, many districts had taken action to implement such violence prevention programs.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ William Woodward and Sarah Goodrum, *Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting: Lessons Learned on Information Sharing, Threat Assessment, and Systems Integrity* (Boulder: University of Colorado, Boulder, 2016), https://cspv.colorado.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Report_on_the_Arapahoe_High_School_Shooting_FINAL.pdf.

Table 1. Eleven Key Questions¹⁷⁵

#	Question	Theme
1	What are the student's motives and goals?	Motives
2	Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?	Communications
3	Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in school attacks or attackers, weapons, or incidents of mass violence?	Inappropriate interests
4	Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors?	Planning
5	Does the student have the capacity to carry out the act?	Capacity
6	Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation, or despair?	Desperation or despair
7	Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?	Protective factors
8	Does the student see violence as an acceptable or desirable way to solve problems?	Violence as an option
9	Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with their actions?	Consistency
10	Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?	Concerned others
11	What circumstances might affect the likelihood of violence?	Stressors
Additional themes: Weapons access, Emotional/developmental issues		

In additional to the guidance, the CSSRC has offered threat assessment training for schools across the state since 2010. However, as noted in the after-action reports, between 2011 and 2013, only seven staff members received the formal training, and none of the trainees were principals.¹⁷⁶ Both the Littleton Public School District and AHS are believed to have followed the same guidelines from the USSS and included the recommended 6 principles and 11 key questions in their respective processes. However, AHS's threat assessment and action plan was preoccupied with gathering more information on whether the student was an actual threat rather than assessing whether the student posed a potential

¹⁷⁵ Adapted from Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools*, 55–59.

¹⁷⁶ Woodward and Goodrum.

threat of harm to oneself, others, or both. They failed to address the USSS's sixth principle: declaring "whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether the student *made* a threat."¹⁷⁷ Additionally, the district policy employed three threat levels based on the threat assessment: low, medium, and high. At the time of the shooting, the policy required the school to share threat assessment details with the administration and district security personnel for only those threats designated as medium and high, thus limiting the further review of all identified potential risks.¹⁷⁸ The threat assessment conducted on Pierson deemed him a low threat level.

Pierson's behaviors noticeably started to shift during his junior year of high school. His parents were in the process of getting divorced, fellow classmates felt that he had become a bully, and teachers noticed he was failing classes and becoming unreliable in his extracurricular commitments.¹⁷⁹ On September 3, Tracy Murphy, the debate coach at AHS, informed Pierson that he would not be captain of the debate team. In response to the demotion, Pierson became enraged and later threatened Murphy, yelling "I'm going to kill that guy."¹⁸⁰ The incident was reported to the assistant principal, who shared the information with local law enforcement, and on September 9, 2013, AHS began a threat assessment on Pierson.

The threat assessment performed on Pierson was insufficient and had major failures. The school's threat assessment team consisted only of the assistant principal—who had not been trained in threat assessment—and the school psychologist, despite state and federal guidelines promoting a multidisciplinary team.¹⁸¹ Additionally, when the initial threat assessment on Pierson was initiated, the team gathered information from only his parents and no other sources, such as his teachers or coaches. This deficiency created a significant gap, missing many people who could have provided more pertinent details about

¹⁷⁷ Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools*.

¹⁷⁸ Woodward and Goodrum, *Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting*.

¹⁷⁹ Woodward and Goodrum.

¹⁸⁰ Woodward and Goodrum.

¹⁸¹ Woodward and Goodrum.

the potential situation and risk factors. As the USSS recommends, each source may provide information on different pieces of the overall puzzle.

During the threat assessment on Pierson, there was a failure to follow proper procedures, and the information-gathering process seemed fragmented, as only 5 out of the 24 risk factors were identified on the threat assessment forms. However, the post-shooting examination found that an additional seven to nine other risk factors should have been checked, which would have led to designating a higher threat level. After the incident, the data collected and a documentation review showed that the student had a history of disciplinary issues, had sensitive responses to feedback, and had recently been humiliated, but none of that information was included in the assessment, despite numerous records detailing these accounts and showing these factors definitely applied to Pierson.¹⁸² The Safe Havens International report declared that the AHS evaluation of Pierson was completed haphazardly, noting the team did not thoroughly review the extensive documentation available for the required elements of the assessment inquiry, which ultimately led to a low risk classification.¹⁸³ Consequently, Pierson never had a follow-up session, received no significant measures of intervention, and practically fell off the team's radar as a viable threat risk once the evaluation closed, which led to that tragic day.

2. Lessons Learned

By the time of the incident, AHS and Littleton Public Schools (LPS) had implemented threat assessment procedures and processes that were more advanced than most of the districts and schools in Colorado.¹⁸⁴ Before the shooting, the CSSRC's guidelines for the school's threat assessment team called for three core members with multidisciplinary perspectives, which should have included a minimum of two involved and supportive teachers or staff members, who should have been trained in the process.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Woodward and Goodrum.

¹⁸³ Safe Havens International, *Post-Incident Review: Arapahoe High School Active-Shooter Incident* (Macon, GA: Safe Havens International, 2016), https://safehavensinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/SHI-AHS_Post-Incident_Review.pdf.

¹⁸⁴ Safe Havens International.

¹⁸⁵ Woodward and Goodrum, *Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting*.

In addition to the threat assessment team, the school should have established an interagency social support team to assume responsibility for building a support plan upon completion of the threat assessment. At AHS, the threat assessment team performed both duties.

The AHS and LPS threat assessment and program execution had obvious shortcomings. The AHS's team failed to adequately implement LPS's threat assessment processes and policies, and the LPS district never properly ensured that the threat assessment processes had been implemented or that the worksheets utilized were effective at identifying potential risks.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, the LPS program offered no staff support or training.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, inexperienced district administrators, counselors, and team members incorrectly implemented the school's prescribed threat assessment policy, failing to facilitate a thorough completion of the threat assessment instrument, and in some cases, actually dismissing or marginalizing information made available during the inquiry process.

There was an obvious lack of staff background capability and aptitude in managing a threat assessment. Clearly, all staff needed training on the threat assessment processes, evaluations, and documentation tracking, which might have led to a more comprehensive review and resulted in a higher priority rating. This could have enabled a more adequate and timelier follow-up and intervention effort for Pierson, as well as additional safety measures to address future risks for the entire school community.

While school staff recognized problems with the student and conducted a threat assessment, there was inadequate detail included for analysis, poor communication practices, and a lack of follow-up support and measures throughout the threat assessment process. Experts that developed an after-action report on the incident reiterated these shortcomings: "There was an opportunity to intervene, and the school did try to intervene, but didn't necessarily have the training in place to conduct the threat assessment properly

¹⁸⁶ Woodward and Goodrum.

¹⁸⁷ Woodward and Goodrum.

or the appropriate follow-up care for that student—things were missed.”¹⁸⁸ Even Safe Havens International noted that it would be incorrect to blame the incident solely on the current threat assessment processes or the lack of district involvement. The incident’s evaluation findings do, however, underscore the importance of having an established and widely understood threat assessment process, as well as recruiting capable school administrators who are willing to provide critical leadership in managing assessment programs and ensuring ongoing related training for their assessment teams and school community.

LPS and AHS have focused efforts to enhance school safety, with an emphasis on prevention planning, training, coordination and communication, reporting awareness, and increased mental health services to close the identified gaps from this shooting and prevent future violent incidents from occurring.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, the state, through the CSSRC and Safe2Tell program, now offers vital threat assessment and reporting training, resources, and services to assist school districts with the challenges of school safety and violence prevention programs. By leveraging state and federal resources, schools can dedicate tools and resources to educating students.

E. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In the four incidents examined in this chapter, several common flaws emerged. All the incidents showed a lack of leadership with very little staff competency, along with limited understanding or familiarity with the threat assessment process. There were no existing reporting, collection, tracking, or information-sharing mechanisms. Additionally, all cases showed significant warning signs and concerning behaviors before the attacks. These gaps led to the various mistakes and flawed decisions regarding the situation and the

¹⁸⁸ “Arapahoe H.S. Shooting Report Lists Many Errors,” ABC Denver 7, January 18, 2016, <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/arapahoe-high-school-shooting-report-many-small-errors-were-made-before-the-deadly-shooting>.

¹⁸⁹ Linda M. Kanan et al., *A Review of Psychological Safety and Threat Assessment Issues Related to the Shooting at Arapahoe High School on December 13, 2013* (Littleton, CO: Littleton Public School District and Board of Education, 2016), <https://littletonpublicschools.net/sites/default/files/Kanan%20et%20al.%20AHS%20Report%202016.pdf>.

students involved in the incidents. The following sections highlight the five main flaws delineated in the case studies.

1. Leadership and Oversight

The commitment of leadership to the program design and implementation process is fundamental to effective risk assessment. Buy-in and ongoing leadership support can lead to more consistent program requirements and dedicated resources, as well as ensure accountability, appropriate staffing, financial investment, training opportunities, and intervention management. In the several instances examined, there was blatant incompetency and ignorance at the leadership level, as specifically evident in the assistant principal at MSDHS, who was charged with heading the school's threat assessment team. The lack of leadership and overall support of any program clearly hinders and adversely impacts performance in evaluating and managing the risk within the school community. The school's administration, including the principals, should serve as managers who ensure that the threat assessment policy and plan are clearly articulated and followed and that training is effectively sustained. Additionally, leadership must assume responsibility for any coordination of the process with law enforcement and regional and community stakeholders, along with state agencies, to provide ongoing oversight, guidance, and technical assistance. Leadership must also secure dedicated funding sources to enable a comprehensive and effective program.

2. Policies and Procedures

Another flaw in three of the four case studies was that implementing behavioral threat assessment policies and procedures alone is insufficient in addressing the risk of violent attacks. Implementation practices within the district or school must involve continual review by the administration, core threat assessment team members, and other school staff who may be ad hoc members of the team, accompanied by new and refresher training relating to threat assessment protocols. As identified in the MSDHS case study, a district policy existed, but the execution and application of the policy and adherence to procedures were inadequate. Similarly, in the Santa Fe incident, the school had requested a threat assessment from the threat assessment team, but it was not conducted without any

clear reasoning. Last, in the Arapahoe school shooting, the threat assessment team followed the district policy improperly when it inaccurately designated the threat level and then failed to share information with appropriate parties. There should be clearly defined guidelines in place to ensure that the administration and threat assessment team members are aware of and clearly understand the policies and procedures, as well as their specific roles and responsibilities throughout that process. Human error and a lack of awareness of those policies and procedures can lead to noncompliance in those prescribed and approved guidelines and poor outcomes. As highlighted in the previous subsection, there should be leadership oversight and a mechanism in place to ensure that the school's application of the threat assessment policy and procedures is upheld and followed in accordance with state laws or requirements.

3. Training

School safety is a shared responsibility across all school staff, teachers, students, and community members. The USSS's guidance on *Enhancing School Safety* highlights the need to provide training to all stakeholders.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, at the 2018 Federal School Safety Commission meeting, Donna Michaelis, from the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety, highlighted that "training is absolutely vital to the success of a threat assessment program."¹⁹¹ In all the reviewed incidents, the perpetrators displayed concerning behaviors, risk indicators, and warning signs that were evident to many school members—staff, teachers, and students—as well as those in the community. In some instances, these bystanders, including students, friends, and staff, recognized the concerning behaviors and reported them, highlighting the success of the national "If you see something, say something" awareness campaign. However, in several of the case studies, after that initial report or notification, there was an evident lack of staff competency in the threat assessment processes. In both the MSDHS and AHS shootings, examinations found that the threat assessment teams had limited understanding or familiarity with the

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Secret Service, *Enhancing School Safety*.

¹⁹¹ Michael Farkas, *Creating a Citadel of Learning: Transcript of the Federal Commission on School Safety Meeting* (Washington, DC: Capital Reporting Company, 2018), 54, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/transcript-08-16-2018.pdf>.

threat assessment process, which led to various mistakes and flawed decisions regarding the situations. This issue connects back to the lack of administrative leadership, oversight, and accountability. South Carolina's best practices guide for school-based behavioral threat assessment outlines that for a quality and valuable threat assessment process, all team members and other staff should receive regular training and professional development on threat assessment from trained subject matters or identified state programs.¹⁹² The threat assessment team should receive ongoing training on the threat assessment processes, and all other stakeholders, including school staff, students, and even community members, should be offered awareness training on recognizing and reporting behavior indicators and warning signs of those who may be on the pathway to violence.

4. Reporting Platforms and Information-Sharing

There is a need for addressing the challenges of reporting threats and sharing information within and among threat assessment teams and outside stakeholders involved with the teams, such as mental health professionals, local law enforcement, and others. USSS guidance outlines the need to implement a central reporting system as a platform to receive potential threats and share them with the threat assessment team. In the cases described, some of the threats were reported properly, but the information fell into a silo, or no action was taken. As mentioned previously, Colorado's Safe2Tell reporting platform was utilized and had received a report before the STEM School Highlands Ranch incident, but the school took no action. Similarly, in the Santa Fe High School shooting, information had also been reported, but a threat assessment on Pagourtzis was never conducted, and no information was shared with the threat assessment team. In the MSDHS shooting, Cruz's social media post was reported on the national FBI public access line, but no incident report or follow-up was conducted.¹⁹³ Had an effective reporting technology or information-sharing process existed, there might have been a different outcome. Before the Arapahoe

¹⁹² South Carolina Department of Education, *School-Based Behavioral Threat Assessment & Management: Best Practices Guide for South Carolina K–12 Schools* (Columbia: South Carolina Department of Education, 2020), <https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/school-safety/resources-and-training/safety-resources/sc-school-based-threat-assessment-guide/>.

¹⁹³ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

school shooting, there was a lack of information-sharing between the school and the SRO, which limited the support and resources from local law enforcement. In this specific instance, the school's threat assessment team used physical forms and documents, which the SRO might never have seen, so he never could have signed off on the review. Many states have implemented information-sharing and threat-reporting platforms, like Safe2Tell, that allow community members to report threats, including school threats, anonymously. For example, the New Jersey Suspicious Activity Reporting System (NJSARS) serves as an information-sharing platform to gather and communicate tips and leads with public safety partners throughout the state—requiring that school threats be reported based on a 2018 direction by the New Jersey attorney general.¹⁹⁴ These collaborative reporting and information-sharing platforms provide a standardized, consistent process and cohesive approach to manage statewide threats, include school threats.

5. Building Community Relationships, Awareness, and Trust

In all the cases examined, the four perpetrators had shown signs of being on a pathway to violence, all with access to weapons. Schools should not only determine the threshold for law enforcement or mental health support and intervention during the threat assessment process but also leverage relationships by integrating these community organizations and others into the overall process, whether it be to gather information or participate in intervention or management strategies. Before and during the STEM School Highlands Ranch incident, there was a disconnect between school and law enforcement because of friction between contract issues. Also, there was no connection with the local mental health support systems, which should have been included in the multidisciplinary threat assessment team. The integration of all community stakeholders is essential to ensuring timely and appropriate intervention and management strategies for those students moving along that pathway to violence. Awareness, education, and engagement of the entire school and all community members is crucial for ensuring all can support the

¹⁹⁴ Gurbir S. Grewal, "Immediate Notification of Investigative Tips and Leads" (official memorandum, New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety, 2018), https://www.nj.gov/oag/dcj/agguide/directives/AG-Directive-2016-7_Investigative-Tips-Leads.pdf.

process. As seen in several of the case studies, community representatives can play a critical role in providing insight into a student's risky behavior. They can offer relevant information and observations concerning behavior as well as provide intervention support. This can be on an individual basis or through affiliated organizations. For example, in Oregon, under the Salem-Keizer process, health and social services departments involve various agencies within the community. In doing so, they can provide expertise and resources in support of the broader community, including help to students, and enable a more comprehensive approach to managing risk situations.

F. CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the details leading up to several incidents of targeted school violence in U.S. schools. Specifically, it detailed shootings at STEM School Highlands Ranch, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School, and Arapahoe High School. These tragic events in Florida, Texas, and Colorado—affecting numerous families, friends, and communities across the nation—provide valuable lessons for schools, as well as local, state, and federal agencies, in reviewing and implementing actionable solutions. These case studies draw attention to several gaps and flaws in the respective threat assessment processes and violence prevention strategies: leadership that ensured proper implementation and oversight to ensure teams were effective at following the prescribed policies and procedures; ongoing training and increased awareness of processes; and information-sharing and rapport-building with the community. In recognizing these shortfalls, federal, states, and schools can develop standards for effective implementation of behavioral threat assessments programs within the educational community. The next chapter further outlines statewide requirements in Florida, Texas, and Colorado—among others—and efforts toward effective school-based threat assessment programs following these events.

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IV. REVIEW OF STATE K–12 BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT MANDATES AND GUIDANCE

Since the late 1990s, several significant incidents of shootings and targeted violence at schools have forced federal agencies, states, local communities, and schools to reimagine approaches to violence prevention. These have included the implementation of school-based threat assessment policies and procedures, which are now considered a priority in violence prevention within school environments. With growing numbers of states, localities, and educational institutions establishing and implementing threat assessment and targeted violence prevention programs, a variety of methodologies and approaches have been developed. As of 2022, many states have proposed and several others have passed legislation mandating the use of threat assessment teams in public K–12 school systems.

This chapter examines states that have a statutory requirement for K–12 school-based threat assessment programs—Virginia, Florida, Texas, and Maryland. Although Colorado does not have a legislative mandate, it was included because of the state’s robust resources for school districts in the threat assessment discipline since the Columbine shooting. The details and specifics on these programs were collected through a direct survey along with communication with the states’ agencies that coordinate the respective programs. The state K–12 school behavioral threat assessment data, which appear in Appendix A, outline information on statutes, guidance, and standards for threat assessment programs in these and the 46 other states.

A. COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

The Commonwealth of Virginia has been a national leader at the forefront of implementing threat assessment policies at public elementary, middle, and high schools and institutions of higher education. Immediately after the Columbine shooting, in 2000, Virginia adopted Virginia Code § 9.1-184, which established the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety (VCSCS).¹⁹⁵ The statute charged the VCSCS with leading the

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety Created; Duties, Va. Code § 9.1-184, <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title9.1/chapter1/section9.1-184/>.

state's schools with the appropriate training and resources in all aspects of school safety and security. Additionally, a decade later, in 2013, the Virginia General Assembly enacted legislation mandating that threat assessment teams be stood up in all public schools, expanding from just institutions of higher education, which made Virginia the first state with this standardized requirement in K–12 schools.¹⁹⁶ The VCSCS worked to create a set of standard guidelines for all Virginia schools, outlining strategies for implementing the school-based threat assessment and management programs. In 2016, the VCSCS updated these guidelines to provide schools with the most current information, trends, and best practices in the realm of threat assessment and management. These standardized guidelines outline properly conducting a threat assessment, offering checklists to ensure that the threat assessment team engages all the appropriate parties during the assessment, and other necessary tips to support effective implementation and management. To support a holistic approach—assisting school districts and their staff with effectively implementing and complying with the threat assessment mandate—the VCSCS offers a series of threat assessment trainings to school officials, mental health officials, and law enforcement officers. As detailed in the state survey responses (see Appendix B), the VCSCS respondent noted the need for mandatory training: “With 132 school divisions, if they haven’t received appropriate training or understand the guidance properly, they will miss important signs and situations.”¹⁹⁷

As the first state to implement school-based threat assessment teams and a model for other states, Virginia continues to adapt and refine its processes to address the current threat landscape and the needs of the school community. A cornerstone of the effort to ensure programs remain effective, the Virginia General Assembly expanded the requirements for districts to create a violence prevention committee as an oversight

¹⁹⁶ Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, *K–12 Threat Assessment in Virginia: A Prevention Overview for School Staff, Parents, and Community Members* (Richmond: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2021), <https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/k12-threat-assessment-prevention-overview.pdf>.

¹⁹⁷ Survey response from VCSCS participant.

authority.¹⁹⁸ The violence prevention committee consists of experts in mental health, student affairs, counseling, education, and law enforcement and collects and reports data on the school's threat assessment programs.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, school threat assessment teams must consist of people with similar backgrounds to those on the violence prevention committee—counselors, teachers, administrators, and law enforcement officials. The threat assessment teams conduct the threat assessment process according to the policies established, provide guidance to community members on the warning signs potential threats can pose, and report any quantitative data on its activities to the VCSCS. An oversight committee supports the threat assessment teams within the district, connecting the team to local law enforcement, mental health professionals, and other community resources should their intervention be warranted.

Schools implement threat assessment policies and procedures consistent with the model policies developed by the VCSCS and coordinate with community services when appropriate. Under these guidelines, when a threat assessment team identifies a student as a threat to the school, the superintendent must inform the student's parents or guardians and provide information on any further action needed. However, the VCSCS guidelines note that should individuals be an imminent threat, the threat assessment team must take the proper steps with local law enforcement and mental health professionals to appropriately move forward in preventing any acts of violence.²⁰⁰ In the state survey, the VCSCS highlighted the importance of following up in the threat assessment process—a step often found lacking in smaller districts. The need for additional support from community partners, including local law enforcement, and the VCSCS can serve as critical and essential resources for the process.

¹⁹⁸ Threat Assessment Teams and Oversight Committees, Va. Code § 22.1-79.4, <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title22.1/chapter7/section22.1-79.4/>.

¹⁹⁹ Threat Assessment Teams and Oversight Committees.

²⁰⁰ Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, *Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines*, 2nd. ed. (Richmond: Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2016), <https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/threat-assessment-model-policies-procedures-and-guidelinespdf.pdf>.

B. FLORIDA

After the tragic incident at MSDHS in February 2018, the Florida Department of Education conducted an examination of its school safety and security practices, including those in place at MSDHS at the time of the shooting. This review identified vulnerabilities that might have allowed the tragedy to take place. The MSDHS Public Safety Commission reviewed BCPS's threat assessment policy and processes and the assessment conducted on Nikolas Cruz. The commission found that while the district's threat assessment program was comprehensive, the application and execution of the threat assessments were inconsistent and flawed.²⁰¹ As noted in Chapter III of this thesis, in the analysis of the MSDHS shooting, the school administrators and staff were not adequately trained or competent in threat assessment to execute the prescribed district's policies.²⁰² Additionally, the district had limited oversight over the schools conducting those threat assessments.

Based on the commission's findings and subsequent recommendations, the Florida Legislature passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act in March 2018, also known as Senate Bill 7026, establishing the Office of Safe Schools within the Florida Department of Education, which would be tasked with addressing the threat assessment and other school safety concerns.²⁰³ The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act requires school boards to create a multidisciplinary threat assessment team for each of their educational institutions, which must include specialists from school administration, counseling, instructional staff, and law enforcement. These threat assessment teams will conduct a threat assessment when a student displays troubling and worrisome behavior and is believed to pose a threat to one's classmates. If the team determines a student to be a threat, it must report its findings to the superintendent of the school, who will, in turn, alert the student's parents or guardians.

²⁰¹ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, *Report Submitted to the Governor*.

²⁰² Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission.

²⁰³ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act, S.B. 7026 (Fla. 2018), <http://laws.flrules.org/2018/3>.

After the findings of the investigation into MSDHS’s security practices were published, the Florida Legislature passed Senate Bill 7030 in May 2019, expanding on the statutes outlined in Senate Bill 7026.²⁰⁴ It states that the Office of Safe Schools must develop a standardized statewide behavioral threat assessment model to be implemented in all Florida public schools, including charter schools, by August 1, 2019.²⁰⁵ As noted in the state survey responses (Appendix B), a respondent from the Office of Safe Schools stated, “Consistency is a primary advantage to having a statewide standardized behavioral threat assessment policy.”²⁰⁶ This requirement standardizes the approach at the state level to addresses identification, evaluation, intervention, and student support management efforts. Specifically, the assessment includes family and social dynamics; the threat type (transient or substantive); a response including school officials, mental health, and law enforcement referrals; and ongoing monitoring to assess management strategies.²⁰⁷ As described in the state’s survey response, the participant from the Florida Office of Safe Schools stated,

Florida is considered a rather transient state and by standardizing the process, this should ideally support consistent expectations, terminology, and understanding of the overarching manner in which threat assessments are to be conducted, no matter where they are done. One disadvantage is that Florida is also rather diverse and it is challenging to apply the same expectations in a large urban school district as you would in a small rural school district. Allowing some flexibility in the process is key to ensuring the goal of consistency while adapting to the individual needs of each school district and/or school.²⁰⁸

Furthermore, the law requires that all threat assessment team members receive training on the use of the behavioral threat assessment, the instrument, and forms before

²⁰⁴ “SB 7030 Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission,” Florida Department of Education, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://info.fldoe.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-8569/dps-2019-76a.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ Office of Safe Schools, Fla. Stat. § 1001.212 (2022), http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View+Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=1001.212&URL=1000-1099%2F1001%2FSections%2F1001.212.html.

²⁰⁶ Survey response from Florida Office of Safe Schools participant.

²⁰⁷ Florida Department of Education, Office of Safe Schools, *Model Behavioral Threat Assessment Policies and Best Practices for K–12 Schools* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, 2022), <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/18612/urlt/threat-assessment-model-policies.pdf>.

²⁰⁸ Survey response from Florida Office of Safe Schools participant.

the beginning of the school year or 90 days after they have been appointed to the team. Based on state survey data, the training courses are delivered by a certified trainer or regional staff from the Office of Safe Schools who support training and technical assistance as requested and when identified on compliance checks.

This statute also mandates that the Office of Safe Schools create a Statewide Threat Assessment Database Workgroup to evaluate the threat assessment measures of Florida schools.²⁰⁹ Such a group necessitates a database that contains information on the different threat assessment procedures in Florida schools, used by the Office of Safe Schools to assess the threat assessment procedures in place across the state and make recommendations for the statewide plan. By August 1, 2020—one year after implementing the statewide behavioral threat assessment plan—the Office of State Schools was required to submit a report detailing the compliance of each school district.²¹⁰

C. TEXAS

After the shooting at Santa Fe High School in 2018, Texas set out to improve its school security practices to ensure that a massacre in K–12 schools never occurred again. The director of the Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC) testified before Congress, stating, “I have spoken with several of the superintendents in these communities . . . and what is paramount throughout these discussions is the desire to engage in preventive strategies—specifically through the threat assessment process—to avert acts of violence before they ever occur, whether in our schools or in our communities.”²¹¹ In June 2019, the Texas State Senate passed Senate Bill 11, a set of policies pertaining to school security. This bill outlines clear procedures for Texas public schools relating to the implementation of threat assessments in their institutions. The bill states that every district in Texas must have a threat assessment team made up of experts in mental health, safety, law enforcement,

²⁰⁹ Florida Department of Education, Office of Safe Schools, *Model Behavioral Threat Assessment Policies and Best Practices*.

²¹⁰ Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, *Report Submitted to the Governor*.

²¹¹ Kathy Martinez-Prather, “Engaging the Community: Perspectives on School Security,” (Washington, DC: House of Representatives, 2019), 4, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110021/witnesses/HHRG-116-HM12-Wstate-Martinez-PratherK-20190926.pdf>.

special education, and classroom management. Every campus within those districts must also have a threat assessment team. One team can serve multiple campuses, but every campus must have access to a threat assessment team. Team members must complete proper threat assessment training through the TxSSC or a similar educational service center.

The TxSSC has focused on violence prevention efforts as part of its overall approach to school safety. As detailed in the state survey responses, Texas has modeled its program after Virginia’s legislation on school threat assessment and management—requiring school districts to have behavioral threat assessment teams. The TxSSC provides guidelines for school officials to properly conduct a threat assessment and identify the behavioral indicators in students that signal a potential threat.²¹² Furthermore, its website offers ongoing threat assessment and management training opportunities, whether in person, online, or through its learning management system. The TxSSC has also developed a behavioral threat assessment toolkit of relevant resources, open to anyone, which allow school representatives and other threat assessment members to learn about school-based threat assessment principles, including how to properly conduct an assessment in a school setting.

The survey responses related to Texas threat assessment standards note that guidelines can be vague, but all schools must have officials attend training, whether through state sessions or regional offerings. Each school and each district are required to send team members and administration to these training courses. This can be challenging because of the size of the state, the limited course offerings, and the availability of district representatives to support these efforts. Additionally, as described in the state survey responses (Appendix B), a TxSSC respondent stated that ongoing training with the whole team is a critical component in understanding the threat assessment processes with fidelity. The TxSSC outlines a model for implementing threat assessment but does not identify how to operationalize a team or process. Therefore, these models require better support for the

²¹² Texas School Safety Center, S.B. 11 (Tex. 2020), <https://locker.txssc.txstate.edu/c881b7c60284413b7bae3bb66386de78/SB-11-Threat-Assessment.pdf>.

implementation and technical assistance of school teams even after the training is completed. This support could help ensure the team is properly constructed and prepared to support the policies and procedures. In the state survey responses, representatives also noted that “it is partially up to the schools to govern policy drafting, standard operating procedures, documents to be used.”²¹³ Although the TxSSC can offer the training, and it serves as a valuable resource that does not have to be funded locally by the district, each region or locality should have a threat assessment coordinator to support the educational and operations of the district’s threat assessment and management capabilities. The survey respondent from the TxSSC highlighted the continued coordination and collaboration between schools, law enforcement, health agencies, mental health agencies, other responder agencies, and stakeholders as part of a successful threat assessment program.

D. MARYLAND

In April 2018, the Maryland Safe to Learn Act, Senate Bill 1265, was signed by Governor Larry Hogan. This statute required the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS) to provide a model for threat assessment and management to K–12 public schools across the state by September 2018.²¹⁴ Maryland schools must apply the model policies developed by the MCSS. In September, the MCSS released its threat assessment model, which detailed the creation of threat assessment teams in schools, proper threat assessment protocols, and guidelines for handling various situations during the threat assessment process.

The MCSS model states that each school district’s superintendent must establish district-wide threat assessment teams.²¹⁵ The superintendent determines the number of teams per district, so one team may serve multiple schools, depending on need. The teams

²¹³ Survey response from TxSSC participant.

²¹⁴ Maryland Safe to Learn Act, S.B. 1265 (Md. 2018), https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/chapters_noln/Ch_30_sb1265E.pdf.

²¹⁵ Maryland Center for School Safety, *Maryland’s Model Policy for Behavior Threat Assessment* (Baltimore: Maryland State Department of Education, 2018), <https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/Reports-Docs/Maryland%20Model%20Policy%20for%20Behavior%20Threat%20Assessment-2018-19.pdf>.

must consist of experts in student counseling, educational instruction, school administration, and law enforcement.²¹⁶ The MCSS respondent noted in the survey that it is critical that the team be led by a non-law enforcement member and that the core team be trained and hold exercises, so they are prepared to assess and manage an individual who may be on the pathway to violence. During the threat assessment process, if the team determines that a student poses a threat to the institution, the team must report its findings to the district's superintendent and the school's principal.²¹⁷ The principal will, in turn, alert the parents or guardians of the student. In addition to threat assessment teams, each school system will create a school system oversight team led by senior administrators to offer support from an administrative level to threat assessment teams.²¹⁸ The oversight team can reach out to local law enforcement or mental health professionals in the area to better support and assist the teams in completing their assessments.

The MCSS provides detailed information on how to conduct a threat assessment with a student as well as on the warning signs and troubling behaviors that might indicate a student poses a threat. This model is based on other models, including those published by the USSS, the FBI, and Dewey Cornell.²¹⁹ The MCSS reports the findings from these models to provide as much information as possible to help Maryland schools adapt the model to their needs.

E. COLORADO

Despite being home to some of the most notorious school shootings in U.S. history, as of this writing, Colorado has not passed legislation to mandate behavioral threat assessments in its K–12 schools. However, based on survey data received from a representative of the CSSRC, districts and schools are encouraged to receive threat assessment training, and about 80 percent of Colorado schools have implemented the threat assessment protocols and have been trained by the CSSRC team. After the shooting at

²¹⁶ Maryland Center for School Safety.

²¹⁷ Maryland Center for School Safety.

²¹⁸ Maryland Center for School Safety.

²¹⁹ Maryland Center for School Safety.

Columbine High School in 1999, the government established the Safe Schools Act, which mandated that schools create a safety plan and train their employees in crisis response. However, the act did not detail how schools should create their plans, and there was no explicit mention of threat assessments and their importance in schools. However, schools have still implemented threat assessment practices on their campuses. They have been taking threats of violence very seriously, with one county reporting it had evaluated over 700 threats during the 2018–2019 school year. The CSSRC respondent noted in the survey that Colorado is a local-control state, so districts have the choice whether to implement threat assessment policies and processes. However, state legislation waives governmental immunity in cases where schools have been found negligent in protecting students and staff in the aftermath of a murder, aggravated assault, or felony sexual assault. The CSSRC respondent states that this massive responsibility has been a huge motivator and factor in schools’ establishing threat assessment programs.

In 2008, Senate Bill 8 called for the creation of the CSSRC within the Department of Public Safety to serve as a repository for all practices and procedures dealing with school security. Its website offers numerous resources for school employees and parents to utilize that cover many different aspects of crisis control, including a set of threat assessment guidelines. Its procedures were first published in 2011 but were also updated in 2019 to include the most recent information on threat assessments. Additionally, the CSSRC respondent noted in the survey that the center has been training district and school personnel for over 11 years.

After the passage of the STOP School Violence Act of 2018, the CSSRC received grant funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, which it is using to create a pilot program in select Colorado schools to work on the schools’ threat assessment procedures; the goal of this program is to refine Colorado’s threat assessment guidelines to provide better assistance to the schools in their security practices.²²⁰ The program is currently accepting applications and working with Colorado schools on this effort.

²²⁰ See Appendix B for state survey responses.

F. ADDITIONAL STATE K–12 SCHOOL BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT DATA

In the aftermath of the shooting at MSDHS in 2018, many other states have followed suit in mandating threat assessment processes for K–12 schools. Since that time, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Washington have passed legislation for K–12 school-based threat assessments. Before 2018, only Virginia had a statutory requirement for K–12 schools. Therefore, as of 2022, 16 states have threat assessment requirements. Six additional states have pending legislation that has not yet been passed. Of all the states, 44 have some level of K–12 threat assessment program services, through guidance or training and technical assistance. Appendix A presents information on each state regarding existing statutes, pending legislation, and other operational assets, including guidance, training, and resources for threat assessment programs in K–12 schools.

G. CONCLUSION

This chapter examined state-level mandates for K–12 school-based threat assessment programs across the nation, including those in Virginia, Florida, Texas, and Maryland. However, the analysis also delved into Colorado’s school-based prevention and threat assessment programs, which have no legislative requirements as of this writing, because of the state’s existing long-term efforts and resources for schools dating back to the Columbine shooting.²²¹ This chapter included research from survey responses and open-source research from state web pages outlining the details of each program related to school-based threat assessments. Of note, only 16 states have passed threat assessment mandates, mostly within the last four years, and six additional states have introduced some legislation, which has yet to pass their legislatures. Furthermore, this research has found that 90 percent of states offer some level of K–12 threat assessment services through guidance or training and technical assistance offered to districts, schools, and communities.

²²¹ Erickson, *Owens’ Columbine Review Commission*.

Following the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018, a growing number of states have begun to support their educational institutions in establishing threat assessment programs, with varying methodologies and approaches. Sharing these existing programs across state governments provides an opportunity to begin standardizing practices and successes nationwide, thus providing states with best practices to better align funding, staffing, tools, and other resources to sustain efforts in the long term to prevent future targeted violence in schools.

V. FEDERAL SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION INITIATIVES

This chapter examines a variety of federal resources, funding programs, and national legislation that support the application of behavioral threat assessment and management programs in schools and communities and describes how standardized and consistent approaches are leveraged to inform program implementation.

A. THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY’S TARGETED VIOLENCE PREVENTION EFFORTS

The National Preparedness Goal, as outlined in Presidential Policy Directive 8, is defined as a “secure and resilient Nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk.”²²² As outlined in the *National Prevention Framework*, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the principal lead for domestic incident management, preparing for both natural and human-made disasters.²²³ One of the main missions of DHS is to prevent terrorism and targeted violence within the United States.²²⁴ Additionally, in September 2019, DHS released the *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, which emphasizes its focus on building capabilities by establishing local prevention, highlighting the need to identify concerning behavioral indicators, information-sharing, and intervention efforts.²²⁵ DHS supports these targeted violence and behavioral threat assessment programs through several of its agency components.

²²² “National Preparedness Goal,” Federal Emergency Management Agency, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/goal>.

²²³ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Prevention Framework*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2016), https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/National_Prevention_Framework2nd-june2016.pdf.

²²⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency.

²²⁵ Department of Homeland Security, *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2019), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf.

DHS has two program offices that directly support the countering-terrorism and targeted-violence mission space by building prevention frameworks and implementing behavioral threat assessment and management capabilities. DHS's National Threat Evaluation and Reporting (NTER) program provides public safety and security stakeholders, both in the public and private sector, "with resources and training to identify and prevent terrorism, targeted violence, and mass attacks."²²⁶ NTER supports state and local agencies in implementing community-based behavioral threat assessment and management capabilities through its Master Training Program (MTP). NTER's MTP is a train-the-trainer program that certifies security officials in instructing members of their community on the concepts and techniques of behavioral threat assessment and management. Additionally, the core focus of DHS's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) is to engage leaders from the state and local levels and other areas of the community to ensure they have the resources and training needed to build prevention capabilities.²²⁷ CP3 regional prevention coordinators and grant funding opportunities support community-based threat assessment and management teams. These funding opportunities, as outlined in the following subsections, have identified several important areas whereby state and local government agencies and non-profits can build pilot projects for other agencies and organizations to replicate within their jurisdictions or gain knowledge from the lessons learned from their implementation.

1. Countering Violent Extremism Grant Program

In 2016, before the creation of the CP3 office, DHS had \$10 million to fund projects countering violent extremism (CVE), to combat this threat in the United States.²²⁸ The

²²⁶ "National Threat Evaluation and Reporting Office," Department of Homeland Security, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/NTER%20Slick%20Sheet.pdf>.

²²⁷ "Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships," Department of Homeland Security, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.dhs.gov/CP3>.

²²⁸ Department of Homeland Security, Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, *Fiscal Year 2016 Countering Violent Extremism Grant Program: Preliminary Report on Programmatic Performance* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2020), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/20_0326_tvtp_preliminary-report-programmatic-performance-fy16-cve-grants_0.pdf.

CVE Grant Program for fiscal year 2016 funded 26 projects across the country, each geared toward five activities to prevent violence:

1. Developing Resilience
2. Training and Engagement
3. Managing Interventions
4. Challenging the Narrative
5. Building Capacity²²⁹

From the 26 funded projects, six distinct models were identified for other communities to replicate, including intervention capabilities, regional prevention efforts, and training, awareness, and capacity-building—all of which recognized the importance of threat assessment in prevention strategies. The Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) used its \$300,000 grant award to develop an intervention and prevention framework to prevent individuals from radicalizing and escalating to violent extremism within its pilot community. It created an effective threat assessment strategy and toolkit that was adaptable to various communities in implementing similar threat assessment and management processes. With NEMA's success in developing a sustainable threat assessment and management program, DHS identified NEMA's training and engagement project as one for replication in other communities nationwide, highlighting the importance of threat assessments and early intervention processes. NEMA's threat assessment and community engagement model for replication, including toolkit resources, training, and surveys, can be found on the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center's website.²³⁰

2. Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program

Building on the findings from the CVE Grant, since 2020, Congress has continued to earmark \$10 million in funding annually for the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program.²³¹ It was designed to strengthen community efforts and raise awareness of the threats posed by violent extremists and terrorists, aligning directly with DHS's *Strategic Framework to Counter Terrorism and Targeted Violence*.

²²⁹ Department of Homeland Security, Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, 7.

²³⁰ Department of Homeland Security, Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention.

²³¹ Department of Homeland Security, Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention.

The TVTP Grant Program focuses on developing community-based prevention frameworks and threat assessment and management teams. The awardees of this grant can use the funding to create new training programs for their communities, strengthen existing threat assessment measures, and generate new and innovative solutions to aid in the prevention of targeted violence. While it is like the CVE Grant Program, the TVTP Grant Program aims to expand on the findings of the previous grant. This program concentrates on building local prevention frameworks through community threat assessment and management teams to combat targeted violence in schools, houses of worship, and the rest of the community.²³²

B. USSS NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER

Since the inception of NTAC, the USSS has directed resources to study targeted violence and mass attacks and has used those findings to develop training and specialized support for state and local agencies in conducting threat assessments.²³³ In a follow-up to the Columbine shooting, the USSS and ED released the Safe School Initiative to analyze the behavior indicators of students who commit these types of attacks. Additionally, in July 2004, the USSS released its guide, *Threat Assessment in Schools*, outlining policies for conducting threat assessments. The USSS encourages schools to develop a critical threshold of concerning behavior, so when a student's conduct surpasses the threshold, it prompts a threat assessment inquiry.²³⁴ Each school or at least each district, according to the USSS, should establish a threat assessment team. More recently, in 2018, the USSS introduced a companion operational resource to the aforementioned model that provides actionable steps for schools in conducting threat assessments. This guide, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*, reiterates the need to implement threat assessment procedures in schools and include practices for reporting activities, reviewing

²³² Department of Homeland Security, Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention.

²³³ National Threat Assessment Center, *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots against Schools* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service, 2021), <https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2021-03/USSS%20Averting%20Targeted%20School%20Violence.2021.03.pdf>.

²³⁴ Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools*.

records, conducting interviews, and tracking gathered information. Under the Presidential Threat Protection Act of 2000, NTAC, in coordination with field offices, offers training and awareness seminars for school officials, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officers. Furthermore, NTAC studies and analyzes findings from previous school attacks in the United States, supports the dissemination of critical information on developing threat assessment programs, and provides assistance to possible school threats.²³⁵ NTAC training and resources, which can be requested through NTAC's regional representatives or local USSS field offices, focus on the whole-community role in leveraging a multidisciplinary approach to identify and prevent acts of targeted violence.

C. THREAT ASSESSMENT, PREVENTION, AND SAFETY ACT

In January 2019, Congressman Brian Babin (TX-36) and Congresswoman Val Demings (FL-10) introduced the TAPS Act, which proposes the development of a national threat assessment strategy to combat and prevent instances of targeted violence. The TAPS Act aims to provide state and local authorities with a set of standards and guidelines for a behavioral threat assessment process that can be adapted and modified to fit the needs of each community. The legislation would create a Joint Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Task Force comprising state representatives, threat assessment experts, mental health professionals, and educational officials. The task force's duties would involve developing a set of guidelines and recommendations "on the development and implementation of a national strategy for preventing targeted violence through the evidence-based process of behavioral threat assessment and management."²³⁶ This guidance would also outline details needed to establish community-based behavioral threat assessment and management teams, including necessary support, technology, training, and funding.

²³⁵ Presidential Threat Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-544, 114 Stat. 2715 (2000), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-106publ544>.

²³⁶ Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety (TAPS) Act of 2019, H.R. 838, 116th Cong. (2019), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/838>.

D. CONCLUSION

Examining the different opportunities allows states and local jurisdictions, including school communities, to leverage additional support through funding to build pilots and a threat assessment capability. The ability to expand partnerships with federal, state, and local governments offers an opportunity for a community or local-based prevention program and threat assessment program to be more successful. The replication track allows for schools to partner with other stakeholders and develop a standardized approach that works for their community. The findings from these grants could benefit several states and local jurisdictions by providing various accounts of successfully implemented prevention methods to address the increasingly complex and evolving threat of targeted violence in communities. States can leverage the *Programmatic Performance Report* for the CVE Program Grant from fiscal year 2016 and findings from the subsequent TVTP Grant Programs to identify best practices and solutions for prevention methods. States can gain valuable insight on threat assessment management from those who were awarded funding and leverage these findings to employ threat assessments in their communities through collaboration with multiple agencies and organizations. Additionally, state and local communities can adjust their threat assessment processes based on the strengths and weaknesses discovered by awardees of the grant.

If the TAPS Act passes, states can leverage the task force recommendations and tailor them to state, local, or organizational needs. One benefit is that adherence to this legislation is entirely voluntary and funded. The School Violence Prevention Program within the TAPS Act would be valuable for states in creating threat assessment guidelines. Furthermore, the TAPS Act will have \$25 million from Congress to award grants to eligible entities for implementing national strategies in their communities, so state and local jurisdictions could apply for federal funding to assist in creating a statewide threat assessment strategy. Overall, the TAPS Act would allow all states, including those without current threat assessment programs, to leverage national expertise, standardized best practices, and funding to implement these violence prevention strategies.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FINAL CONCLUSIONS

An informed and alert community is crucial in keeping schools safe. As recognized earlier, before most violent acts in schools, there were indicators and warning signs of a student's tendency toward committing an act of violence. Such tragedies, however, can be prevented through a comprehensive, well-implemented threat assessment process. As the cases studies highlighted, a behavioral threat assessment program is only as good as the time, resources, and training of people involved in managing established policies. Any threat assessment program can be vulnerable to an institutional culture of information silos, an inherent lack of leadership, limited staff competency, and insufficient training. If a threat is appropriately evaluated and identified as a legitimate concern, the threat assessment team and school safety specialists or law enforcement should act on and follow the required policies and procedures.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this research, the following recommendations are offered to advance school safety measures and minimize the incidence of violence by employing an effective threat assessment program.

1. Implementation Process

The school or school district should have a clearly defined threat assessment program, ensuring it aligns with state mandates, models, and requirements if necessary. This should include developing and establishing threat assessment processes and policies while requiring regular reviews and adjustments to meet the school's needs. Programs can be implemented more effectively if there is a standardized model, forms, reporting technology, and training to support the ongoing needs. Additionally, the implementation will require a clear commitment from leadership.

2. Leadership and Oversight

There were little to no oversight or leadership commitments in the case studies. As seen with state mandates, requirements now exist for oversight and built-in accountability. A measure of oversight and authority in the threat assessment process at the state and district level should be required or considered to ensure leadership is aware and involved in the threat assessment details and routinely monitors the threat assessment team's performance. Additionally, as noted in Virginia, Florida, Texas, and other states, annual audits can ensure districts and schools are in compliance and provide beneficial data on trends, needs, and potential gaps.

3. Training

The lack of administrative leadership and staff competency in understanding the familiarity with the threat assessment process was a critical component of its failure in all of the case study incidents. Thus, the threat assessment team should receive regular training on threat assessment processes, and all school staff and students should receive training on principles of threat assessment, behavior indicators, warning signs, the steps of a threat assessment, and the respective roles on the threat assessment team. Schools should routinely review their program processes and outcomes and offer annual and refresher training. Additionally, schools should leverage their relationships with state, local, and federal agencies that can play a vital role in training staff, as well as support the threat assessment and management processes.

4. Community Outreach and Awareness

School safety is a shared responsibility; it is vital to ensure all members of the school staff, students, parents, and community members are aware of the district's and school's threat assessment program and processes. Members from the entire community should understand their role in reporting possible warning signs and the ways in which reporting supports threat assessment efforts. Schools and the community can promote stakeholder awareness through several events at the school, including board meetings, parent events, school safety seminars, and school assemblies, and in the community, at council meetings, houses of worship, and local community gatherings.

5. Reporting Platforms

Districts or schools should establish methods to report threats and concerning behaviors. These systems can be at the school or local level and pass information up to a state reporting system, like Colorado's Safe2Tell. The reporting platforms should allow for anonymous tips. As in New Jersey, there is an attorney general requirement to report all school threats to the NJSARS for review and additional follow-up. Such a requirement allows more partners to support the threat assessment processes and offer viable strategies to move someone away from or off the pathway to violence.

6. Information-Sharing

As shown in the cases, information-sharing was limited and critical details of threats remained in silos. The appearance of these information silos is often a sign of the need to build collaborative relationships with all disciplines on the threat assessment team, as well as with outside agency partners. Other concerns related to sharing information stem from the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, which are designed to protect the privacy and security of individuals; however, in many states, mental health service providers have a legal duty to warn law enforcement when a threat is made. In their current state, the community of mental service providers and local law enforcement do not have established relationships and an effective process to communicate these concerns. Additional guidance documents and training from the state or district should be developed to ensure a full understanding of these misinterpretations.

B. LIMITATIONS

This thesis was limited in scope as it explored whether standardizing behavioral threat assessment programs in K–12 schools was an effective approach in school safety and security to prevent violence. However, adopting such a focus was not meant to suggest that other models or existing school violence prevention strategies and programs, such as anti-bullying campaigns, youth mental health first aid, and suicide prevention, would not also work. Furthermore, although some states have been at the forefront of implementing behavioral threat assessment programs for K–12 schools, in the past couple years, more

states have begun to join the effort. In the future, such policy change will allow for additional information and data for studying the effectiveness of those approaches. Further research on this topic could be examined as more states pass legislation that mandate or require standardized K–12 behavioral threat assessment programs. Additional research could be conducted to examine the implementation of such programs from the state or local perspective.

C. CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to examine the most effective standardized approach that New Jersey and other states without existing K–12 school behavioral threat assessment policies or programs could leverage for implementation. Although New Jersey has offered threat assessment training through various state and regional supports and many disciplines that would be represented on a threat assessment team, it has no consistent approach or foundation to support schools in implementing these processes. The field of school-based behavioral threat assessment and management is still relatively new for K–12 schools, and although several states have legislative requirements for these violence prevention programs, the implementation at the school and district level may vary based on leadership, training, resources, and funding. One size may not fit all for districts and schools. However, 44 states have begun to identify resources to support their districts and schools in implementing behavioral threat assessment programs to provide safer learning environments.²³⁷

Many of the states with legislative requirements have developed processes of implementation through guidance, model policies and procedures, continuous training, technical assistance, and consultations. These states also prioritize gathering data on the threat assessment activities to inform their performance measures. For example, as identified in the behavioral threat assessment data for state K–12 schools (see Appendix A), Washington and Texas have regional field representatives or offices that support and provide expertise to schools and can assist with implementing school-based threat

²³⁷ See Appendix A for state K–12 school behavioral threat assessment data.

assessment programs. Similarly, although neither state has legislative mandates as of this writing, Indiana and New Jersey have a statutory requirement for districts or schools to employ a school safety specialist—an employee with security experience—who could be enlisted to build threat assessment processes, provide supervision and oversight to ensure compliance with state requirements, and provide the necessary training for teams and staff. Additionally, by leveraging federal training initiatives, like NTER’s MTP, these representatives can become certified trainers in this field and support their local training and awareness needs.

As noted in the case studies, the overarching priority of school administrators and teachers is to be educators, and they often do not have the skills, time, training, or awareness for threat assessments. Therefore, at the state level, the support of several educational, homeland security, or public safety departments have the capacity to support district and schools with these programs. According to the state K–12 school behavioral threat assessment data, nearly 90 percent of states offer some level of services, guidance documents and forms, training, or technical assistance. An innovative concept, as needed and outlined in Hawaii’s pending legislation, is leveraging the state or regional fusion centers—central information-sharing hubs of multi-agency partners to prevent, mitigate, and respond to threats.²³⁸ The existing fusion center structure, multi-agency collaboration, and existing localized liaison programs could be beneficial for districts and schools. Not only could they support training and technical assistance, but they also could leverage their experience and duties in gathering, assessing, and responding to suspicious activity, warning indicators, and threats through the threat assessment model—i.e., identifying, gathering, assessing, and managing.

This thesis identifies that most shortfalls and gaps in school-based threat assessment processes that have led to tragic incidents were the result of lacking leadership and oversight, familiarity in threat assessment processes, trained staff and general awareness, and information-sharing mechanisms. Providing a standardized process and

²³⁸ “Fusion Centers,” Department of Homeland Security, September 19, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-centers>.

leveraging existing structured and formalized violence prevention programs can ensure a way forward that supports schools, allowing them to provide a safe learning environment while also helping them steer individuals off the pathway to violence toward the help they need—before it is too late.

APPENDIX A. STATE K–12 SCHOOL BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT DATA

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
AL	N/A	N/A	Task Force recommendations	• Offer threat-assessment model • Threat report system • Information-sharing with State Education office • Training support • Regional safety teams	https://governor.alabama.gov/priorities/education/school-safety/
AK	N/A	N/A	None	• No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://www.ready.alaska.gov/Plans/schools
AZ	N/A	N/A	Guidance, templates, and training services	• Offers the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) • State provides training services • Awareness tools and resources for students, parents, teachers, other staff	https://www.azed.gov/wellness/sep/threatassessmentdocs https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/54leg/2R/bills/HB2089H.pdf
AR	N/A	N/A	Guidance and training services	• Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) toolkit instructing concepts and guidance on implementation • Offers training with 1-hr. introduction course and 7-hr. basic course	https://arsafeschools.com/new-behavior-threat-assessment-for-schools-virtual-training-online-resources/

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
CA	Pending; 2022	• Multidisciplinary teams • Integrate community partners • Policies consistent with NTAC • Identify evidence-based trainings • State funding • Oversight committee	Threat assessment guidance, resources, and training	• Links to threat assessment documents • Offers behavioral intervention training and federal threat assessment training courses	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/vp/cssp.asp https://www.pent.ca.gov/bi/overview/index.aspx https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB99
CO	N/A	N/A	Guidance, resources, funding, and training services	• Colorado Threat Assessment and Management Protocol training • Essentials of School Threat Assessment Guide • Secure portal to track threat assessment and management plans • Safe2Tell statewide anonymous reporting tool	https://cssrc.colorado.gov/threat-assessment https://safe2tell.org/best-practices-and-guides
CT	N/A	N/A	None	• No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/School-Safety-and-Security/School-Safety-and-Security/Documents

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
DE	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment resources and training	- Behavioral threat assessment and mental health training “StopIt” anonymous reporting tool - Developing a statewide behavioral assessment platform	https://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib09/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/156/virginia-model.pdf https://dema.delaware.gov/safety/school/
DC	N/A	N/A	None	No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://sboe.dc.gov/
FL	Passed; 2019	- All public and charter schools establish threat assessment teams - Use of the standardized, statewide behavioral threat assessment instrument - Establish governing board for oversight - Multidisciplinary teams - Threat Assessment Database - Annual training requirements - Reporting tool (FortifyFL)	Statewide standardized behavioral threat program, model instrument, resources, and tipline	- Standardized, statewide behavioral threat assessment instrument, policies, and forms - Links to the statutes, announcements, and FAQs - Compliance monitoring - Threat Assessment Database Working Group “FortifyFL” reporting tool - CSTAG training in a train-the-trainer format	https://www.fldoe.org/safe-schools/threat-assessment.shtml http://laws.flrules.org/2019/22 https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/18612/urlt/threat-assessment-model-policies.pdf

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
GA	N/A	N/A	Crisis response and emergency planning resources, threat assessment guide	- Provides various school safety and student wellbeing resources including hotlines, planning, and training templates - Also offers documents detailing emergency planning and threat assessment guides	https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Pages/Positive-Behavioral-Interventions-and-Support.aspx
HI	Pending; 2022	- Multidisciplinary teams - Training - Development of protocols and model guidance - Information-sharing with fusion center - Develop a statewide education threat assessment team	None	No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2021/bills/HB539_HD2_.HTM
ID	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment training, reporting apps, and links to federal resources	- Offers BTAM links to federal resources and academic studies - Offers on-site Behavioral Threat Assessment Team training sessions “See, Tell, Now” Student Threat Reporting System	https://schoolsafety.dbs.idaho.gov/

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
IL	Passed; 2019	- School boards to develop threat assessment protocols - All K–12 public schools to form multidisciplinary Behavioral Threat Assessment and Intervention Teams or may utilize a regional team - Annual review of threat assessment protocols - State providing behavioral threat assessment training	Threat assessment assistance, training, and links to federal resources	- Details on forming a how to form a team - Regional Behavioral Threat Assessment and Intervention Teams - Offer training courses - Federal guidance on past attacks and indicators of threats	https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/101/PDF/101-0455.pdf https://ilschoolsafety.org/index.php/K-12-resources/behavioral-threat-assessment
IN	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment resources, funding, and training for school safety specialists	- Various documents detailing threat assessment forming a team, screening process, template, checklist of warning signs, etc. - Potential funding through Secured School Safety Grant Program - School Safety Specialist Academy offers threat assessment training	https://www.in.gov/schoolsafety/education-and-training/#schoolsafetyguide-label

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
IA	N/A	N/A	General threat assessment training and resources	Offers training programs and webinars on threat assessment	https://homelandsecurity.iowa.gov/programs/school-safety/ https://educateiowa.gov/resources/legal-resources/legal-lessons/school-safety-and-emergency-operations-plans-eops
KS	N/A	N/A	None	No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://www.ksde.org/Kansas-Safe-Schools
KY	Passed; 2019	- Appointment of a school safety coordinator (oversight) - Threat assessment team at each school of the district of two or more staff members	General threat assessment training and resources, models, and statewide tip line	- Threat assessment models and tools developed by federal or state level agencies - CSTAG evidence-based model - Safe Schools Tip Line	https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/recorddocuments/bill/19RS/sb1/bill.pdf https://education.ky.gov/school/sdfs/Documents/Threat%20Assessment%20Tools.docx.pdf
LA	Passed; 2018	N/A	State reporting tool, but limited state resources on threat assessment, links to federal resources and grants	Safe Schools Louisiana Anonymous Reporting App	http://www.legis.la.gov/legis/ViewDocument.aspx?d=1103844
ME	N/A	- Adopt threat assessment policy - Implement behavioral threat assessment teams	General threat assessment training and resources; Advisory Committee	- Threat Assessment Advisory Committee - State provides technical support and training - Piloting the CSTAG evidence-based model	https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/6027 https://www.maine.gov/doc/safety

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
MD	Passed; 2018	- Develop a state model policy for behavior threat assessment - Public school systems to adopt a local policy consistent with the state policy - Threat assessment team or teams in each local school system	State model policy, training and outreach to local school systems, State Reporting Tipline	- State model policy and guidance for school districts - Safe Schools Maryland Tipline - School Safety Subcabinet and School Safety Advisory Board (regulatory authority and as the governing board)	https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Documents/Reports-Docs/Maryland%20Model%20Policy%20for%20Behavior%20Threat%20Assessment-2018-19.pdf https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2018RS/Chapters_noln/CH_30_sb1265e.pdf
MA	N/A	N/A	Task Force Report on School Safety and Security	Report outlines components of an effective threat assessment strategy	https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-task-force-report-on-school-safety-and-security-0
MI	Pending; 2022	State training to SROs and school staff on threat assessment guidelines and reporting processes	Interim threat assessment guidance; OK2SAY Tipline	- Interim Threat Assessment Guidance - OK2SAY Reporting Tipline	http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2021-2022/bill-introduced/House/pdf/2022-HIB-6322.pdf https://www.michigan.gov/msp/divisions/grantscommunityservices/school-safety/interim-threat-assessment-guidance#:~:text=Threat%20assessment%20involves%20determining%20whether,spoken%2C%20written%2C%20or%20gestured

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
MN	Pending; 2022	Develop a school threat assessment policy	Threat assessment resources and documents	NTAC threat assessment guidance and 11 key questions worksheet	https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF229&version=latest&session=ls92&session_year=2021&session_number=0 https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/mn-school-safety-center/Pages/prevention-threats.aspx
MS	Passed; 2019	- State develops curriculum, train, and certify threat assessment officers - Certified threat assessment officers to conduct annual inspections of threat assessment	Provides School Safety Resources	- NTAC threat assessment guidance - Mississippi School Safety Manual	http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2019/pdf/HB/1200-1299/HB1283SG.pdf https://www.mdek12.org/OSOS/SS
MO	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment recommendations	- Violence Prevention Curriculum Frameworks (school staff training and threat assessment procedures) - Courage2ReportMO Report Tipline	https://dese.mo.gov/media/pdf/mo-violence-prevention-curriculum-frameworks https://www.mshp.dps.missouri.gov/MSHPWeb/Courage2ReportMO
MT	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment guidance and recommendations	- NTAC threat assessment guidance - Recommends schools implement threat assessment protocols	https://opi.mt.gov/Leadership/Management-Operations/Emergency-Planning-Safety/School-Violence-Prevention

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
NE	Passed; 2021	- State to provide training to school threat assessment teams - Threat assessment team at each school five trained staff members - Safe2HelpNE report line - Threat assessment information considered security records (not educational records)	Threat assessment resources, reporting tipline, and training	- Safe2HelpNE Reporting Tipline - Basic and advanced threat assessment training	https://www.education.ne.gov/safety/ https://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/107/PDF/Slip/LB322.pdf
NV	N/A	N/A	Provides threat assessment guidance, Task Force recommendations, and reporting tipline	- NTAC threat assessment guidance and findings - Recommendation to develop a model threat assessment - SafeVoice Reporting Tipline	https://doe.nv.gov/SafeRespectfulLearning/School_Safety/
NH	N/A	N/A	Task force report, NTAC guidance, grants, and training	- Task force recommendation to develop a threat assessment task force at the community or district level - Introduction school behavioral threat assessment training	https://www.education.nh.gov/parents-and-students/school-safety https://schoolsafetyresources.nh.gov/

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
NJ	Pending; 2022	- Develop guidelines for school districts - Develop a school threat assessment policy aligned with State guidelines - Multidisciplinary teams - Training requirements	Task force report and recommendations, Reporting Tipline, training, and NTAC guidance	- Basic and advanced threat assessment training - Attorney General School Threat Reporting Directive - NJSARS tipline	https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/bill-search/2022/A4075/bill-text?f=A4500&n=4075_R2 https://www.nj.gov/education/security/ https://www.njohsp.gov/njsars http://www.nj.gov/oag/dcj/agguide/directives/AG-Directive-2016-7_Investigative-Tips-Leads.pdf
NM	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment guides with federal resources	School Safety Manual that addresses threat assessment practices	https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/safe-healthy-schools/safe-schools/ https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SHSB_PlanningForSafeSchoolsNM2018REV.pdf
NY	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment guidance and resources	- Resources and guidance documents from the FBI, NTAC, DHS - School safety plans and emergency response protocols	https://www.nyscfss.org/resources-threat-assessments

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
NC	Pending, 2021	- State develops policies for school threat assessment teams - Superintendent or designee may establish a committee for oversight - Each school to have a multidisciplinary threat assessment team - Utilize reporting applications	Threat assessment guidebook and reporting tipline	- Behavioral Threat Assessment Unit's K-12 School Resource Guidebook - Say Something Anonymous Reporting System	https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/district-operations/center-safer-schools https://www.ncsbi.gov/BeTA/School-Resources https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2021/H657
ND	N/A	N/A	None	No specific K-12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	https://www.nd.gov/dpi/districtschools/safety-health
OH	Passed; 2021	- Threat assessment teams for 6-12 grade schools - State model threat assessment plan - State approved threat assessment trainings - Multidisciplinary teams - Utilize SaferOH tipline - Annually submit threat assessment data to State - Promote creation of student-led violence prevention clubs	Threat assessment guidance, training, and reporting tipline	- State Model Threat Assessment Plan - Approved threat assessment training programs - Safer Ohio School Tip Line - Resources and guidance documents from the FBI, NTAC, DHS	https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-summary?id=GA133-HB-123 https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/threatassessment https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Safety-and-Violence-Education-Students-SAVE-Stude#Threat%20Assessment%20Approval

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
OK	N/A	N/A	Multi-assessment system threat assessment program	- Threat assessment toolkit, fillable forms, and training presentation - Salem-Keizer Model	https://sde.ok.gov/ok-cares-bta-toolkit https://sde.ok.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/SSSOKBTA_Docs.pdf
OR	Passed; 2019	- School districts to have multidisciplinary student safety assessment - Utilize statewide school safety tip line	Recommendations from Task Force	- School Safety and Prevention Systems Advisory Group - SafeOregon Tipline - Regional School Safety and Prevention Specialists	https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/SchoolSafety/Pages/School-Safety-&-Prevention-Systems-Guidance.aspx https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_339.341
PA	Passed; 2019	- State model procedures and guidelines for schools - Schools establish multidisciplinary threat assessment teams - Facilitate team member training - Inform school community awareness on program - Reporting threats to Safe2Say Program	State Threat assessment guidance, training, and reporting tipline	- Model K–12 Threat Assessment Procedures and Guidelines - Training and technical assistance - Threat Assessment Working Group - PA Safe2Say Program - Other state presentations and federal resources	https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Pages/Threat-Assessment.aspx https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/Legis/LI/uconsCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&yr=2019&sessInd=0&smthLwInd=0&act=0018

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
RI	Passed; 2019	- Local school boards/ committee shall adopt policy - School-based multidisciplinary threat assessment teams - Team to provide awareness on recognizing threats to students, faculty, and staff	Rhode Island Threat Assessment Teams Implementation Guidance	- Threat assessment process and procedures - Threat levels - Action and support plans - Model forms - References to federal guidance and resources	http://media.ride.ri.gov/Commissioner/RI-Threat-Assessment_Guidelines.pdf http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/Statutes/TITLE16/16-21/16-21-23.2.HTM
SC	N/A	N/A	State and federal threat assessment guidance, training	School-based Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management: Best Practices Guide for South Carolina K–12 Schools	https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/school-safety/ https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/school-safety/resources-and-training/safety-resources/sc-school-based-threat-assessment-guide/
SD	N/A	N/A	Provides training but limited threat assessment guidance	Offers violence prevention and threat assessment training	https://doe.sd.gov/schoolsafety/

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
TN	Passed, 2019	- Each local education agency may establish threat assessment teams (not required) - Multidisciplinary team - Obtain training from local law enforcement or mental health providers - Team provides guidance to students and school employees on recognizing warning behaviors - Team shall develop procedures - Team shall regularly report threat assessment team activities and data - Guidance on disclosure of records	Threat assessment training and technical assistance	State school safety mentors training and technical assistance consultations	http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/111/Fiscal/HB1158.pdf https://www.tn.gov/education/health-and-safety/school-safety

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
TX	Passed; 2019	- Each district to establish a threat assessment team - State develops model policies and procedures for school districts - Teams required to receive State threat assessment training - Multidisciplinary team - Oversight committee - Team provides guidance to students and school employees on recognizing warning behaviors - Team shall report threat assessment activities	Provide model policies, legislation information, and training	- School Safety and Security Committee - Model policies and procedures - Basic and advanced training (in-person, virtual, and online) - Threat Assessment Toolkit - Legislative Guidance Video	https://txssc.txstate.edu/events/sbta-trainings/ https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/tam-toolkit/ https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/86R/billtext/html/SB00011F.HTM
UT	Passed; 2019	- Creates the Student Safety and Support Team program - State board develop model policies and protocols - State board to provide training	Threat assessment model policies and federal guidance	- School Student Threat Assessment Model policy - Local Education Agency Student Threat Assessment Model policy - Model Memorandum of Understanding for School Resources Officers	https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title53G/Chapter8/53G-8-S802.html?v=C53G-8-S802_2020051220200512 https://www.schools.utah.gov/safehealthyschools/statecollaboration/ssc/resources

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
VT	N/A	N/A	School Crisis Guide with threat assessment resource, school safety reporting tipline, and threat assessment training	- Resource outlines threat assessment principles, behavioral indicators, and the NTAC 11 key questions - Training to schools to establish at least one threat assessment subject-matter expert - VT School Safety Tipline	https://schoolsafety.vermont.gov/planning/vermont-school-crisis-guide http://safe4vt.org/
VA	Passed; 2013	- State develops model policy for threat assessment teams - State threat assessment training and technical assistance - State collects threat assessment data - Each school board shall adopt policies consistent with State model - Oversight Committee - Multidisciplinary team	Threat assessment model policies, procedures, and guidelines, training and technical assistance, annual threat conference, school reporting tipline, and federal guidance and resources	- Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines - Ok2SpeakOut Tipline - K–12 Threat Assessment Video - K–12 Threat Assessment Forms	https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/virginia-center-school-and-campus-safety/k-12-school-safety-and-threat https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/22.1-79.4/ https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/9.1-184/ https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/threat-assessment-model-policies-procedures-and-guidelinespdf.pdf

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
WA	Passed, 2019	- State shall develop a model policy and procedure - Monitoring and data collection of threat assessment programs - Regional School Safety Centers to provide training and technical assistance - School-based multidisciplinary threat assessment team	Statewide threat assessment guidance, training, and coordinators for training and technical assistance	- Washington State Threat Assessment Fidelity Document - School Based Threat Assessment Policy - School Based Threat Assessment Procedure - Regional School Safety Centers - District threat assessment coordinators provide training and technical assistance	https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/health-safety/school-safety-center/school-based-threat-assessment https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.640 https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.645 https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.320.123
WV	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment resources, protocols, and tipline	- Standard operating procedures for acute crisis or student threat - Response protocols for danger self and to others - Safe Schools Helpline	https://wvde.us/leadership-system-support/safe-supportive-schools/safe-schools-toolkit/student-threat-assessments/
WI	N/A	N/A	Threat assessment resources, protocols, training, and tipline	- School Threat Assessment Protocol - Basic threat assessment team course and advanced threat assessment course - Comprehensive School Security Framework - Speak Up, Speak Out Threat Reporting System	https://www.doj.state.wi.us/office-school-safety/office-school-safety https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2017/related/acts/143

State	Legislation Status/ Year	Legislative Requirements	State Agency Resources	Key Details	Web location(s)
WY	No	N/A	None	No specific K–12 school-based behavioral threat assessment resources found	

APPENDIX B. STATE SURVEY RESPONSES

Survey Respondents	
State	Agency
Colorado	Colorado School Safety Resource Center
Virginia	Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, Center for School and Campus Safety
Missouri	Missouri School Boards' Association Center for Education Safety
California	California Department of Education
Idaho	Idaho Office of School Safety and Security
Washington, DC	Washington, DC, Public Schools
Maryland	Maryland Center for School Safety
Texas	Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University
Texas	Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University
Florida	Florida Department of Education

State	QUESTION 1: Describe the State’s process for establishing a state behavioral threat assessment program or policy to support K–12 schools.
Colorado	The state does not have a legislated threat assessment program or policy. Schools are urged to have a trained threat assessment team and about 80 percent of the Colorado schools use the protocol and are trained by the CSSRC team.
Virginia	TAs and TATs are legislatively mandated by our state, and we also are required to provide guidance through model policies, procedures, and guidelines as well as host [threat assessment] TA trainings to our constituents throughout the state.
Missouri	Missouri has not legislatively mandated school districts to have behavioral threat assessment programs/teams. Missouri does mandate trauma-informed training. In the new Missouri State Improvement Standards (accreditation regulations for schools) they need to have plans for supporting the mental health needs of all involved in a crisis. MSBA CES is a subrecipient of 2018 STOP School Violence Mental Health training grant. We provide behavioral risk assessment team training and Youth Mental Health First Aid training to those schools that want it.
California	New legislation Senate Bill 541 requires research and report on effective programs, demographics on who is implementing TA and procedures, including impact of drills on students/staff, report to governor. This new law comes with no funding to implement.
Idaho	Program development included implementation of “Making Prevention a Reality” training protocol, development of a structured professional judgment investigation tool, no-cost training to community -level BTAM teams.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	State mandated through legislation that each school district establish a Behavior Threat Assessment policy to be implemented by September 2019. The State model policy was implemented in October 2018.
Texas	Legislative requirement for K–12 and Charter Schools. Requirements for the Texas School Safety Center to support schools with training and best practices. Coordination and collaboration required between schools, law enforcement, health agencies, mental health agencies, other responder agencies and stakeholders.
Texas	In 2019, Texas passed legislation that requires all Texas schools to implement behavioral threat assessment teams. The TxSSC is charged with developing model policies and procedures for implementing these teams and providing training, along with the Education Service Centers. Legislation also identifies the composition of the team members to ensure multidisciplinary representation and what types of incidents would trigger a behavioral threat assessment. In addition, the state education agency is required to collect certain data from the behavioral threat assessment teams (e.g., interventions implemented, demographics of students, names of team members, training information, etc.).
Florida	Florida Statute (s. 1001.212(12)) requires all public schools, including charter schools, to use a standardized, statewide behavioral threat assessment instrument for conducting threat assessments. The state identified and adopted CSTAG in August 2019 and provided training for all school districts in a train-the-trainer format.

State	Question 2: How many years has your state's behavioral threat assessment program or policy existed? (If more than one year, how many times has it been updated, and why?)
Colorado	The CSSRC has been training teams for eleven years.
Virginia	Since 2013 for K–12, and was updated in 2016 to go from “students that pose a threat” to “individuals that pose a threat.”
Missouri	MSBA CES has offered behavioral threat assessment training to schools since 2016.
California	N/A
Idaho	2 years.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	Since 2019. Reviewed by the Maryland Center for School Safety.
Texas	September 2019 was first legislatively mandated requirement for schools to create behavioral threat assessment (BTA) teams and processes. Many years been a part of best practices but not to the extent it is today.
Texas	This law became effective September 1, 2019.
Florida	In 2018, Florida law established the requirement for school boards to adopt policies for threat assessment teams at each school. In 2019, the law was amended to add additional requirements to include a standardized, statewide behavioral threat assessment instrument identified by the state and used by all public schools, including charter schools.

State	Question 3: What are some of the advantages/disadvantages to having a statewide and standardized behavioral threat assessment program or policy?
Colorado	A statewide protocol and training leads to consistency.
Virginia	The advantage is that it helps us to look for and identify individuals that are on a path to violence and work to help them off that path and also help those who are a threat to themselves and get them needed help as well. The disadvantage would be that with 132 school divisions, if they haven't received appropriate training or understand the guidance properly, they will miss important signs and situations.
Missouri	N/A
California	If there were a program/policy, it would provide consistency and guidance to schools and districts who are anxious and eager for assistance and resources.
Idaho	We find that the uniformity of response is advantageous; however, a compelling disadvantage is that there is a huge disparity of resourcing throughout the state. Each team normally ends up implementing a plan that fits within their local resourcing. However, for a school that has a part-time district-shared contract counselor as the team lead, the level of ability has a lower level of capacity than a district with more mental health resources. This is reflected in nearly all the key positions within an effective team structure.

Washington, DC	The disadvantages are evident; not addressing concerning behaviors and targeted school violence is a national concern in schools. Threat Assessment Teams are the best way to mitigate this threat according to the USSS.
Maryland	1. The policy gives each school district a model to operate from. 2. The policy allows the state to evaluate the effectiveness based on the core concepts of the policy. 3. Since it is a policy, each school district based on their personnel are able to fashion their approach to its implementation to fit their school environments.
Texas	Advantages are that all will comply or attempt to comply based on their resources and understanding of requirements. Disadvantages are limited to those that view this as another mandate they can't or shouldn't have to comply with. Another advantage is that standardization provides all schools with solid methods to use, and orgs like TxSSC and state education agencies are required to work together to provide resources so that schools can implement BTA programs to meet the needs of their community and schools.
Texas	One of the main advantages of a standardized policy is that it ensures that everyone is implementing the behavioral threat assessment process. For example, Texas requires that all schools have a team and establishes some of the parameters around the composition of those teams and required training. There is also required data collection involved that must be reported from the campuses. However, there is still some flexibility for how schools structure their teams based on size and available resources.
Florida	Consistency is a primary advantage to having a statewide standardized behavioral threat assessment policy. Florida is considered a rather transient state and by standardizing the process, this should ideally support consistent expectations, terminology, and understanding of the overarching manner in which threat assessments are to be conducted, no matter where they are done. One disadvantage is that Florida is also rather diverse and it is challenging to apply the same expectations in a large urban school district as you would in a small rural school district. Allowing some flexibility in the process is key to ensuring the goal of consistency while adapting to the individual needs of each school district and/or school.

State	Question 4: In your opinion, what critical elements and features should a behavioral threat assessment program or policy include, and what should it not include?
Colorado	Please see our Essentials of School Threat Assessment document on the CSSRC website.
Virginia	It should include all threat types, including threat of harm to self, and offer guidance to the whole school community, not just the TA team members of staff. It should make following the program mandatory and make training mandatory. If it doesn't include threats of harm to self, then the program creates a detriment where things can be missed by the [threat assessment team] TAT and school.
Missouri	State-level support, active engagement from state leaders. An identified state coordinator for the program would be helpful to ensure consistent training, processes and protocols at some level. While schools should adapt the program to their specific environment, there are some processes that should be consistent. More support/engagement from the behavioral health community. Partnerships should be established for the program within the school community.
California	We are in initial stages of research.
Idaho	A common, thorough investigation protocol: for schools that do not have many opportunities to conduct BTA's, this provides a good framework and provides an opportunity to make sure all the areas of investigation are covered to an adequate degree. A research-based evaluative tool: this will not supplant professional judgment but helps to evaluate cases fairly as well as to temper the emotional element in systems with less experience in case management. Resource appropriate management plan resources: having a menu of appropriate restrictive practices for the person of concern beyond the option of expulsion helps to walk with schools through the "now what" element of case management.

Washington, DC	USSS guidance.
Maryland	1. Training for your core team in the function of the BTA team. 2. MOUs for the members participating. 3. Multi-disciplinary make-up of the team. 4. Schedule practice sessions for team members. 5. Leadership of the team that is not law enforcement. 6. Varied approaches to solutions to issues that are brought to the BTA team's attention.
Texas	Should include identification and use of collaborative partners to work together to identify and provide resources to students, staff, and community members on a pathway to violence. Too many individuals are identified in after-action reviews of serious and deadly events. If there is not an agency or someone assigned to assist and MONITOR compliance, often the lack of compliance will lead to the same deadly result as doing nothing. It is also important not to be so prescriptive in the required actions that small, rural, or other identified schools find it impossible to comply with intent of the BTA process.
Texas	It should have standard guidance on policy and procedures for implementing a team. Training should be outlined and required to be evidence-based. Identifying the composition of the team is critical to ensure schools do not just have the principal or SRO conducting behavioral threat assessments.
Florida	Ensuring the inclusion of key members of the team is essential to the success of a quality threat assessment program. The required members identified within Florida law are those with expertise in counseling, instruction, school administration, and law enforcement. In our state, this involves more than just expertise in these areas, but also current credentialing, which allows for full access to various data necessary for conducting a thorough assessment. Additionally, there may be other key individuals beyond those listed, which have valuable insights and information to address the concerns being discussed (such as a school nurse or other health related expert).

State	Question 5: Are there some school districts or schools that do not follow the state's behavioral threat assessment program or policy? How does the state handle those school districts or schools?
Colorado	Colorado is a local-control state, so districts can conduct threat assessment and have policies of their choice. However, there is also legislation in Colorado that waives governmental immunity in cases where schools have been found not to protect students and staff in the aftermath of a murder, aggravated assault, or felony sexual assault.
Virginia	Yes. As an agency, we reach out, offer assistance and training to help them.
Missouri	N/A
California	There is no current policy. It is years away due to the nature of the new legislation requiring data and written reports rather than action.
Idaho	Yes. The state's program is totally voluntary. Training and technical assistance are available to all public schools and post-secondary institutions.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	All school districts have complied based on their submission of their own BTA policy for their jurisdiction.
Texas	I have to believe there are. Until data is received from schools, and even then, it is not easy to determine absolute accuracy in data. In Texas, there are requirements and agencies with specific audit and reporting requirements to monitor those requirements.
Texas	We are in the first year of implementing this new legislation. State data collection efforts to gather information on the implementation of these teams will occur later this year but may be pushed to next year due to COVID-19. The TxSSC, however, will collect some initial data on behavioral threat assessment teams through its safety and security audit data this year.
Florida	Since we are still in the early stages of implementing the expectations and ensuring compliance, we are still identifying school districts and/or schools which are not following the state's policy. Since the expectation is provided for within Florida Statute and has been met with ongoing and intense scrutiny by the MSDHS Public Safety Commission, the Florida Grand Jury, and the Auditor General, there should not be any deliberate noncompliance. As concerns arise, we will address the issues to ensure all are meeting the requirements to ensure compliance with the law.

State	Question 6: In your experience, what are some of the critical processes, resources, and tools needed to gather support and buy-in from state partners, school districts/schools, and local communities?
Colorado	Time and expertise for training using a protocol based on the work of the USSS and the FBI.
Virginia	Helping them understand the process is not adversarial, and actually a tool to help individuals that are struggling. Having the ability to share this with schools and communities as whole (TA Overview) can be quite helpful to alleviate the fear that TA is a “gotch ya” when that isn’t the point of it at all. Having more resources for case management tools for follow-up is important and is often lacking, especially in smaller districts.
Missouri	Leaders in state government need to embrace the behavioral risk need and process. They need to lead from the top down to show the importance of implementing such training and programs in schools. If the leaders of departments of education, public safety, mental health, and Governor’s Office do not make this a priority, school boards and administration will not make it a priority.
California	Buy-in is here. State agency needs to provide guidance and resources.
Idaho	Having free training has been a huge advantage to the schools. This has been an area of strength of having a Bureau of Justice Assistance grant award.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	There is a necessary need is for relationship building, prior to the BTA team attempting to implement the process. Also, to make the school environment aware of the [threat assessment] tool and processes to prevent school violence.
Texas	The representation of a variety of expertise and experience in identification and implementation of programs to provide assistance to those making threats or that are on a pathway toward violence. Mental health resources are often not existent or too scarce to provide the needed assistance once someone with mental health needs is identified.
Texas	It takes time to implement a philosophical change in how we deal with student misconduct. I think educators struggle with the ultimate intent of behavioral threat assessment, which is to connect students with interventions so they can be successful in the educational setting. That is not to say that a student may not be placed in a disciplinary alternative education program or suspended, but exclusionary discipline should not always be the final disposition after conducting a behavioral threat assessment. Regular training is so critical to getting schools to understand how to work this process with fidelity and ensuring that teams are training together.
Florida	The inclusion and requirement outlined within Florida law gives a lot of leverage for buy-in from all stakeholders. As well, the adoption of CSTAG provides ongoing research, training, and support to ensure the threat assessment process is implemented as intended and in a manner that enhances school safety while supporting the needs of students displaying troubling behaviors.

State	Question 7: Describe any underlying or unanticipated issues that diminished or compromised program execution.
Colorado	Lack of time for training and the resources needed to support identified at-risk students.
Virginia	None.
Missouri	It is not mandated or made a priority at the state level.
California	Legislation is new.
Idaho	Many systems do not understand the need of using a community-based approach. There is a strong presumption that threats are a school-only issue, and in many communities, the prototypical response is to use BTAM as means to an expulsion rather than being viewed as a management process and stabilizing factor.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	In the beginning, many school districts were interested in the concept but were unsure how to implement it, and there were some districts that were doing it but did not know what to call it. Statewide rollout of the State model policy and discussions with lead school districts assisted in the common understating of concepts and understandings. Also, language for the various threat levels was a problem.
Texas	Training resources are not available in enough quantity to get all school teams trained in one year. Turnover complicates training situations.
Texas	We are in the first year of implementing this new legislation. One challenge we have encountered is training capacity. While the TxSSC and Education Service Centers are providing training, we do not have the capacity to train every potential team member in a single school year. As mentioned prior, Texas has required all campuses to have a behavioral threat assessment team and has over 9,000 campuses with a up to 9 areas of expertise required to be on these teams. We are working on developing a train-the-trainer to increase training capacity across the state and then develop online continuing education.
Florida	Time. In recent years, Florida has established a number of school safety laws and along with that, several requirements and expectations for all involved. While without question, the heightened focus on school safety is of utmost importance, quality implementation takes time and involves thoughtful decisions on what that looks like from school to school, district to district. The extreme urgency that weighs upon all involved in the policies and practices set forth can often impede full success; however, waiting to implement is not an option.

State	Question 8: How is policy compliance and program performance monitored and evaluated? (For example, annual reporting requirements or mandatory training)
Colorado	Districts monitor their schools on their own.
Virginia	Yearly school safety and division audits and TA Training evaluations for each training.
Missouri	N/A
California	In development/research phase.
Idaho	Program performance is evaluated at the time of initial training, three-month check-in, one-year anniversary survey to determine use.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	Currently the State policy is under review, and mandatory training is under discussion.
Texas	Reporting required annually to state educational agency as well as three-year reporting as part of an overall safety and security audit process for all educational entities. The approved training has specific requirements and also for those being trained.
Texas	Texas Education Agency is mandated to collect annual data from campuses.
Florida	Policy compliance is monitored and evaluated through a variety of means. Although we are still in the early stages of implementation, annual reporting on requirements identified within the law is one aspect of the process. Additionally, the Florida Department of Education's Office of Safe Schools has regional staff who conduct school and school district compliance checks, as well as provide training or technical assistance when identified as a need.

State	Question 9: Describe the critical success factors in establishing, implementing, and managing the state's behavioral threat assessment program and policy.
Colorado	Having a robust school safety center and the expertise of other professionals within the state to create a protocol and training for Colorado schools are huge factors in the successful Colorado program. It also takes the motivation of the schools to get their staff trained. Unfortunately, legislation that waived governmental immunity was a huge motivator for many schools.
Virginia	Committed legislature, strong and committed agency to oversee the program and the funding to make things happen.
Missouri	N/A
California	In development/research phase.
Idaho	Stakeholder buy-in, especially school boards. Outreach to school boards is critical in our state. The individual school board is responsible for the safety of the students within their district. Many did not realize they are the statutory responsible party for student safety (not law enforcement). School boards are also the only entity that can remove a student from enrollment within a system (expulsion), so they often have been brought in only at the end of the threat process and only look at whether or not a student has made a threat, but do not evaluate whether or not a student poses a threat.

Washington, DC	N/A
Maryland	1. The most critical factor: having the school district to establish the team approach to analyzing a person with concerning behaviors. 2. Then allowing the BTA team to make the recommendations and all parties adhere to the team resolution. 3. A critical factor was not all behavior was criminal . . . law enforcement does not lead the team. 4. We will utilize our training sessions to gauge the strengths and challenges of the policy and its implementation.
Texas	Texas is in the process of determining what the data requirements that will be used to determine effectiveness and holding schools accountable for specific intervention results.
Texas	State legislation, that still allows for some flexibility in implementation, is critical.
Florida	Ongoing communication is essential for all aspects of the success of the state's behavioral threat assessment program and policy. Clear communication from the state to all stakeholders on the requirements and expectations is important to ensure clear understanding. In conjunction with this, an open line of communication from stakeholders is key to ensuring the state understands the challenges faced and is able to support schools and school districts when and if possible. This bi-directional communication is the best way to ensure success and full understanding for all involved.

State	Question 10: What other advice, counsel, or suggestions would you offer to entities embarking on the path of developing and implementing a behavioral threat assessment program/policy?
Colorado	Underscore not only the importance of creating a protocol and training based on the best practices as outlined by federal agencies, but the resources to support students who are identified as at-risk are extremely important and often not available. Having trained mental health providers as part of the threat assessment teams along with mental health resources for identified students has been a huge shortfall in Colorado.
Virginia	Use the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety resources and others out there to help build and guide your path. https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/virginia-center-school-and-campus-safety
Missouri	<i>No response</i>
California	Engage multi-levels of government agencies and diverse stakeholders.
Idaho	Make sure your tools and resources are scalable (both for the determined severity of the concerns as well as the resources available to assist in the management plan).

Washington, DC	Look at what TAT model works best for their state.
Maryland	What is critical is that many entities [know] what to do . . . they just have challenges on how to do it.
Texas	Start the process as quickly as possible to include requirements for teams and processes to be developed and provide for training resources in sufficient quantities, both in-person and online. Keep training consistent with national proven models.
Texas	Schools need to be provided time to train and implement these programs. Behavioral threat assessment is a perishable skill and schools need proper training and regular implementation (as appropriate) of this process to ensure they are doing it with fidelity. It's a process that some schools are more sophisticated and experienced in implementing. That said—any required statewide data collection efforts should be conducted at a time that true results following training and time to engage in the process can be realized.
Florida	<i>No Response</i>

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