# Behavioral Threat Assessment

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### Key terms and definitions:

▸ **Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM):** The process of identifying a person of concern, assessing their potential to carry out a homicidal threat, and identifying interviewing strategies to manage that risk. (Note: The term is sometimes confused with other terms indicating a suicide screening/assessment or physical security infrastructure review.)

▸ **Behavioral Threat Assessment Protocol (BTAP):** The specific protocol an organization uses to conduct Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management. The term is often interchanged with BTAM.

▸ **Target Hardening:** Measures taken to reinforce or strengthen the physical environment of a location or facility to deter a criminal or terrorist act.

## Balanced school safety plans emphasize violence prevention

The devastating impacts of a school shooting on students, staff, and the community are deep and long lasting. School shootings often initiate a pattern of blame and reactive opinions that may involve target hardening, placing armed officers at schools, and many other strategies focused primarily on the response to a violent emergency — the immediate detection and/or prevention through physical security measures. Although every Comprehensive School Safety Plan (CSSP) should include essential physical and response elements, the most balanced plan will place an emphasis on violence prevention.

Governance teams support the safety of their district or county office of education through their guidance, engagement with the review of CSSPs, adoption of local policies, and their role in budget oversight. Additionally, new legislation, Senate Bill 553, requires all employers with more than 10 employees to establish, implement, and maintain a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan (WVPP). Best practices for local educational agencies (LEAs) include continuing to coordinate and collaborate across departments, staff, and with partners to ensure that both the CSSP and the new WVPP are written, edited, and updated in tandem. More information on SB 553 is available in the resources section of this document.

This brief focuses on behavioral threat assessment to provide board members with background information that can facilitate informed discussions and decision making.

### *Behavioral threat assessment is key to violence prevention*

Unlike many other aspects of public education, there are no clear mandates for behavioral threat assessment as a required violence prevention tool at the time of this writing. Since the initial findings of the 2000 United States Secret Service Safe Schools Initiative, published in the wake of the paradigm-shifting Columbine High School attack, there has been a growing body of research and ensuing federal guidance that strongly recommends behavioral threat assessment as the most effective tool to prevent targeted violence within the scope of CSSPs.

### What is behavioral threat assessment?

United States Secret Service (USSS) guidance for educators establishes the goal of threat assessment is "to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk."[1]

USSS recommends that a comprehensive threat assessment process include:

‣ Developing multidisciplinary threat assessment teams

‣ Forming central reporting mechanisms

‣ Identifying behaviors of concern

‣ Defining the threshold for law enforcement intervention

‣ Identifying risk management strategies

‣ Promoting safe school climates

‣ Providing training to stakeholders

It is important to note that, according to the USSS, "there is no profile for a student attacker nor is there a profile for the type of school that has been targeted."[2] As such, behavioral threat assessments should gather evidence of concerning behaviors, situational factors, and circumstances to assess the risks of harm or violence.[3]

### Interventions, not just expulsions, to promote health and safety

In the most extreme cases, removal may be necessary; however, it should never be seen as a single, common solution. The Parkland High School shooting and other cases have illustrated that removal, or expulsion alone, can fail to mitigate danger. Nevertheless, community and internal fears can place tremendous pressure on leaders to opt for these perfunctory options rather than investing in a more thorough and coordinated, long-term threat management and student support strategy.

Furthermore, the USSS guidance strongly reminds that there are no useful profiles of an active shooter. The assessment process must be as objective as possible; best practices include using an equity lens, awareness of bias, and implementing cultural awareness and responsiveness. The main purpose of the assessment is to identify the most suitable interventions, monitoring, and case management goals — with the ultimate objectives of helping an unwell student become healthy and providing safety for all.

It is also important to reiterate that behavioral threat assessment is **not** a substitute for processes that address nonviolent behavior, nor is it a disciplinary process to remove "difficult" students.[4]

## Implementing behavioral threat assessment protocols

Ample federal guidance provides well-researched universal investigative themes and comprehensive detailed considerations for behavioral threat assessment protocols; however, LEAs will most often be required to work with county authorities and/or subject matter experts to arrive at their own specific protocol for documentation, data collection, data sharing, analysis, student supports, and other administrative details required in a comprehensive system at the local level. Although resources vary widely between LEAs, thorough documentation is critical at all phases of the threat assessment process, and particularly in regions where there may not yet be a standardized countywide or regional joint reporting protocol. The San Diego County School Threat Protocol serves as an example of a comprehensive joint product developed across multiple agencies.

### Law enforcement agencies are essential partners in school safety efforts

California's Senate Bill 906 requires school officials to notify law enforcement of homicidal threats. Moreover, if a school has a robust threat assessment process, a series of parallel and coordinated investigative processes will often ensue — driven by the initial student behaviors and communications or concerns from reporting peers, staff, parents, or community. School Resource Officers (SROs) and local law enforcement have a wide spectrum of investigative resources, skills, and authorities that complement the education-based threat assessment process.

LEAs, with support of general counsel, should have a clear understanding of laws that govern information sharing in order to balance privacy requirements and disclosure or sharing permitted for safety. Policies should also be in place to ensure any law enforcement officers who work with students are trained to work with youth in ways that are appropriate to their development and are culturally proficient. Basic disciplinary concerns should be left to the LEA's administrators. CSBA offers sample policies about SROs and school police, which highlight training and recommend that LEAs track and review officer contact with students, disaggregated by race. LEAs ultimately have a moral imperative to promote safe learning environments.

### Multidisciplinary case management

Threat assessment is ultimately a multidisciplinary process that can simultaneously engage parallel networks in more complex cases, including, for example, LEA safety and security, student support services, special education, risk management, and legal departments, along with local (and occasionally federal) law enforcement, county and private mental health, and other community resources. The most complex cases, particularly those with higher threat potential,

often require ongoing coordination and cooperation to effectively provide the appropriate supports and safeguards and surmount barriers to success. It is recommended that smaller LEAs form working relationships with LEAs with strong processes that are willing to share best practices.

## Civil liability

Beyond the moral imperative for LEAs to endeavor to maintain a safe school environment, the potential for civil liability also encourages concrete violence prevention efforts. In civil case law, there is an increasing expectation for LEAs to prevent violence that could be determined as foreseeable and, thus, preventable. This evolving case law is gradually raising the standard for what constitutes due diligence. Moreover, other related aspects are in flux, such as foreseeability and education responsibilities as well as the higher thresholds for arrest for terroristic threats and involuntary 5150 holds (California Code, Welfare and Institutions Code - WIC § 5150, allows a person with a mental challenge to be involuntarily detained for a 72-hour psychiatric hospitalization).

## Partnering with experts

Retaining the expertise of a certified threat manager can be critical to gaining insight into difficult cases. The Association of Threat Assessment Professionals has developed a rigorous and specialized certification process. Sometimes, behaviors that may not yet rise to the level of a threat could still indicate a high threat potential. There have been cases in which the student of concern never actually broke a law or violated a district policy. However, the behaviors and/or communications elicited such deep concerns that full attention and preventative actions were necessary. An external threat assessment professional augmenting an extended network of supports can be critical to effectively assess the situation and advise management of ways to promote safety and achieve the most positive, healthy outcome for the student of concern — the ultimate goal of behavioral threat assessment.

# Questions for governance teams to consider

## Threat assessment process

1) **Staffing and internal coordination**
   - Have staff been identified for LEA leadership and internal coordination, site threat assessment teams, site case managers, and district case navigator(s)?
   - Has the LEA established thresholds for internal notifications, law enforcement notifications, and legal counsel involvement?

2) **Partnerships and external coordination**
   - To what extent has the LEA established relationships with the county's extended network of support? Note that these potential partners could include, but are not limited to, the following organizations or people: county offices of education, county health and human services, county mental health, Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT), district attorney, federal and local law enforcement fusion/coordination center, other LEAs, local community agencies, and threat management subject matter experts/consultants.

3) **Protocol**
   - Does the LEA's behavioral threat assessment protocol meet current industry best practices?
   - Does it contain the core USSS investigative themes?
   - To what extent is it integrated within the larger county network (see, e.g., San Diego County School Threat Protocol)?
   - Does it help ensure compliance?
   - Does it contain documentation to satisfy a range of student support and intervention needs, potential disciplinary processes, and criminal and civil law expectations?
   - Does it help meet current standards of care (e.g., due diligence, shifting civil liability thresholds, etc.)?

4) **Implementation**
   - Is the LEA providing an adequate professional development and training process?
   - Are there clear student and staff reporting mechanisms?
   - Does the LEA provide ongoing site guidance and operational support processes?

# Relevant resources

**California Legislative Information**

**Senate Bill 906 (2021–22) — School Safety: Homicide threats**

SB 906 requires LEAs to annually notify parents and guardians of proper firearm storage and laws related to the safe storage of firearms. The entirety of text of the bill can be found here: https://csba.pub/4ciktJA.

**SB 553 (2023–24) — Occupational safety: Workplace violence: Restraining orders and workplace violence prevention plan**

SB 553 requires an employer to establish, implement, and maintain an effective workplace violence prevention plan, to provide training for employees on the plan, and to provide additional training when the plan is updated, or a new workplace violence hazard has been identified. The entirety of text of the bill can be found here: https://csba.pub/3U62cse.

**United States Secret Service (USSS)**

This guide provides basic instructions for schools on creating a targeted violence prevention plan, the focus of which is to decrease the risk of students engaging in harm to themselves or the school community. These recommendations serve as a starting point on a path to implementation that will need to be customized to the specific needs of your school, student body, and community. https://csba.pub/3IyWSaa

**USSS Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting**

This toolkit provides schools with actionable, practical, and cost-efficient steps toward preventing harm or acts of violence among our most important populations. The Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) works with partners to defend against an evolving and unique set of threats, hazards, and security challenges facing schools, and it collaborates to build a more secure and resilient school infrastructure for the future. USSS has maintained a focus on preventing targeted school violence for over 20 years by providing research, training, and consultation on multi-disciplinary behavioral threat assessment programs and the prevention of targeted school violence. Together, CISA and USSS are working to ensure all children in our nation's schools are safe. https://csba.pub/3PnNCtj

**National Association of School Psychologists**

Evidence-based policies and practices for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth. Efforts to improve school climate, safety, and learning are not separate endeavors and must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach. https://csba.pub/4ahuIfL

NASP tipsheet https://csba.pub/3VpGFLQ

**Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center**

An overview of school behavioral threat assessments to prevent and reduce targeted violence. https://csba.pub/3x52JkM

**San Diego County District Attorney's Office**

This link directs users to a protocol to reduce the risk of an incident of targeted violence in San Diego county schools through the formalization of a comprehensive protocol for San Diego school districts, law enforcement, and mental health professionals that helps identify individuals whose behavior causes concern and facilitates communication of those concerns to the involved parties. https://csba.pub/3PohTrP

# Relevant CSBA board policies and administrative regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy *Plus* subscribers have access to sample policies. The following are sample policies and administrative regulations relevant to behavioral threat assessment.

- ‣ BP/AR 3515.3 - District Police/Security Department
- ‣ BP 3515.31 - School Resource Officers
- ‣ BP 5112.5 - Open/Closed Campus
- ‣ BP/AR 5131.2 - Bullying
- ‣ BP/AR 5131.4 - Student Disturbances
- ‣ BP/AR 5131.7 - Weapons and Dangerous Instruments
- ‣ BP/AR 5136 - Gangs
- ‣ BP 5137 - Positive School Climate
- ‣ BP 5138 - Conflict Resolution/Peer Mediation
- ‣ BP 5141.5 - Mental Health
- ‣ BP/AR 5142 - Safety
- ‣ BP/AR 5144.1 - Suspension and Expulsion/Due Process
- ‣ AR 5144.2 - Suspension and Expulsion/Due Process (Students with Disabilities)
- ‣ BP 5145.11 - Questioning and Apprehension by Law Enforcement
- ‣ BP/AR 5145.12 - Search and Seizure
- ‣ BP 6120 - Response to Instruction and Intervention
- ‣ BP 6164.2 - Guidance/Counseling Services
- ‣ BP/AR 6164.5 - Student Success Teams

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# Endnotes

1   United States Secret Service. Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence. (2018). https://csba.pub/3vm1xsR

2   Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence. (2019). https://bit.ly/4a3W09c

3   See Endnote 2.

4   NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee. (2020). Behavior threat assessment and management: Best practice considerations for K-12 schools, Brief Overview. National Association of School Psychologists. https://csba.pub/48PcC3q