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Overview and Framework for Building a

Team-Based Procedure

For Responding to
Student Threats of Violence

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Today's Goals

- Introduce research-based model w/strong legal support
- Predicting and Preventing School Violence
- Developing Effective School Policies & Intervention Procedures



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Understanding

Introduce a systematic approach to understanding the facts about school violence and potentially violent offenders.



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Action

Participants will receive an introduction on on how to:

- Build an effective threat assessment team, &
- Create a climate of trust between students and adults.



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Why Do We Need Threat Assessment?

As a result of the fear and concern generated by school shootings.

Schools need a safe, rational approach to evaluating students who demonstrate potentially dangerous behavior.



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FACTS

Homicides committed by
students at school are
exceedingly rare.



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FBI Study

In almost every case, the student shooter **communicated his intentions** to peers days or weeks in advance to the crime.

The FBI found in other cases in which school shootings were prevented because **students did report a classmates' threats** to authorities.



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Identify & Evaluate Threats

FBI researchers concluded that schools should be prepared to **identify and evaluate student threats in a prompt and systematic manner**. Remember,

- All threats are not created equal
- Each must be carefully investigated to determine what danger the student poses



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Effective Alternative

Threat assessment offers an alternative to **fear-based, subjective reactions to student threats.**

Although homicides are rare other forms of violence are more frequent in schools.



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Focus of Threat Assessment

Should be focused on **the kinds of violent incidents that are most likely to occur** and should not be skewed by a few high publicity homicides that are unlikely to occur in the career of any school administrator
(Cornell et Sheras, 2006).

(DeVoe et al., 2004)

Zero Tolerance Policies

Ineffective because -

All threats of violence are treated as **equally dangerous** and deserving of the same consequences.

(Tebo, 2000)



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Profiling

Initial response to the school shootings was the effort to **profile seemingly dangerous students before they engage in violence**. Unfortunately, the criteria in warning signs checklists tend to cast an overly broad net in identifying potentially violent youth.



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Profiling Checklists

- Items on checklists of characteristics of youth who have caused violent deaths in schools **describe a small group of youths** who committed school shootings.
- Base rates for severe violence is **low**
- Lead to false positive identification of students who will **not be violent**.



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What is Threat Assessment?

This kind of threatened violence is termed “**targeted violence.**”

- A threat assessment is a process of **evaluating threat & circumstances** surrounding it in order to uncover evidence that indicates if the threat is likely to be carried out.



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Risk Assessment

- Assessment of the degree to which a student is at risk of engaging in violent behavior
- **Not** necessarily in response to a **specific threat**



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FBI Report on School Shooting

Identification of Potentially Violent Students

- Ineffectiveness of Profile approach
 - Effectiveness of Threat Assessment Approach
-
- (O'Toole 2000)



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U.S. Secret Service & U.S. DOE

Made compelling arguments for the use of

- **Threat Assessment Teams**

Articulated key principals for conducting threat assessments

- (Fein et al, 2002)

Research & Development

- Virginia Youth Violence Project (2001-4)
- 3 yr Grant – Jessie Ball DuPont Fund
- 35 Virginia Schools field testing
- Team Based Threat Assessment Model
- (Cornell, Sheras, Kaplan, McConville et al, 2004)
- Curry School of Education, U. Virginia

The Virginia Model

This model provides practical guidelines for school-based response and intervention to students who threaten to commit an act of violence.

Reference

- Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence
- Dewey G. Cornell Ph.D. – Clinical Psychologist & Professor, U. Virginia
- Peter L. Sheras Ph.D. = Virginia Youth Violence Project & Professor U. Virginia
- Sopris West Educational Services – 2006



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Goals of Threat Assessment

- To maintain a safe school environment by preventing an act of violence from taking place &
- To resolve student conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior.



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Policy

Establish clear dynamic policy that will:

- Hold up under scrutiny
- Provide a consistent procedure
- Reduce risk of violence



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Procedure

Provides a step-by-step procedure for:

- Developing a school based team
- Identifying Transient vs. Substantive threat
- Responding to substantive threats
- School-wide Violence Prevention



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Threat Assessment Team

- A school based team
- Capable of immediate response
- Familiar with environmental context
- Consistent with school policy & procedures
- Facilitates follow-up



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Team Members

- School Principal or Assistant Principal
- School Resource Officer or Police Liaison
- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- School Social Worker
- Other relevant school staff



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Function of Team

To assess the threat

- Type
- Level of risk

To Develop an effective intervention



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Threat Team Procedure



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#1: Has a Threat Been Made?

**A person (or persons)
threatens to commit a violent
act or engages in behavior
that appears to threaten an
act of violence**



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What is a Threat?

An expression of intent to harm someone.

Threats may be spoken, written, or expressed in some other way, such as through gestures



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Weapons

Illegal possession of a weapon should be presumed to indicate a threat unless careful investigation reveals otherwise (e.g., student accidentally brought a knife to school).



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Uncertain?

When in doubt about whether a student's behavior is a threat, evaluate it as a threat.



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#2: Interviewing

- Immediately Interview student, recipient & witnesses
 - What happened?
 - What did threatening student do?
 - What do you think s/he meant?
 - How do you feel about what s/he did?
 - Why did s/he do this?

Do I need parent permission for the team to interview the student who made the threat?



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Does the Student Pose a Threat?

A threat assessment is ultimately concerned with:

- Whether the student **poses a threat,**
- **Not** whether the student has **made a threat**



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#3. Determine Level of Threat: Transient vs. Substantive

Any student can **make a threat**,
but relatively few will engage in
behavior that indicates planning
and preparation necessary to
carry out the threat.



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Transient Threats

Do not express lasting intent to harm someone:

- Figures of speech
- Dissipate in short period of time
- End in apology or other retraction
- Clear that the threat is over



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Substantive Threats

A continuing intent to harm someone

- Specific plausible details
- Repeated over time
- Reported to others as a plan
- Accomplices
- Others invited to observe
- Physical evidence of intent to carry-out



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Considerations

- Age
- Credibility
- Discipline Record
- Acknowledgement of inappropriateness w/credible denial of intent
- Consistency of accounts

When in Doubt

- It there is significant doubt as to whether a threat is transient or substantive
- **Treat the threat as Substantive**



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#4. Response: Transient Threat

Vary depending on severity and tend to follow school discipline code:

- Verbal reprimand/detention/suspension
- Contact Parents
- Conflict resolution procedure
- Counseling
- Anger management/social skill training



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Response: Substantive Threat

Protective action so threat is not carried out - Immediate steps to protect potential victim(s):

- Contact Law Enforcement
- Provide or arrange for supervision
- Notify potential victim
- Notify parents of perpetrator & potential victim(s)



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Further Steps

- Mental Health Assessment
- Safety Plan
- ARMS



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Mental Health Assessment

- Conducted by a school based mental health professional
 - Purpose – To maintain safety of student and potential victims
 - Identify treatment & referral needs
 - Why was the threat made?
 - Interventions that will reduce risk of violence
- NOT** predict likelihood of violence

Safety Plan

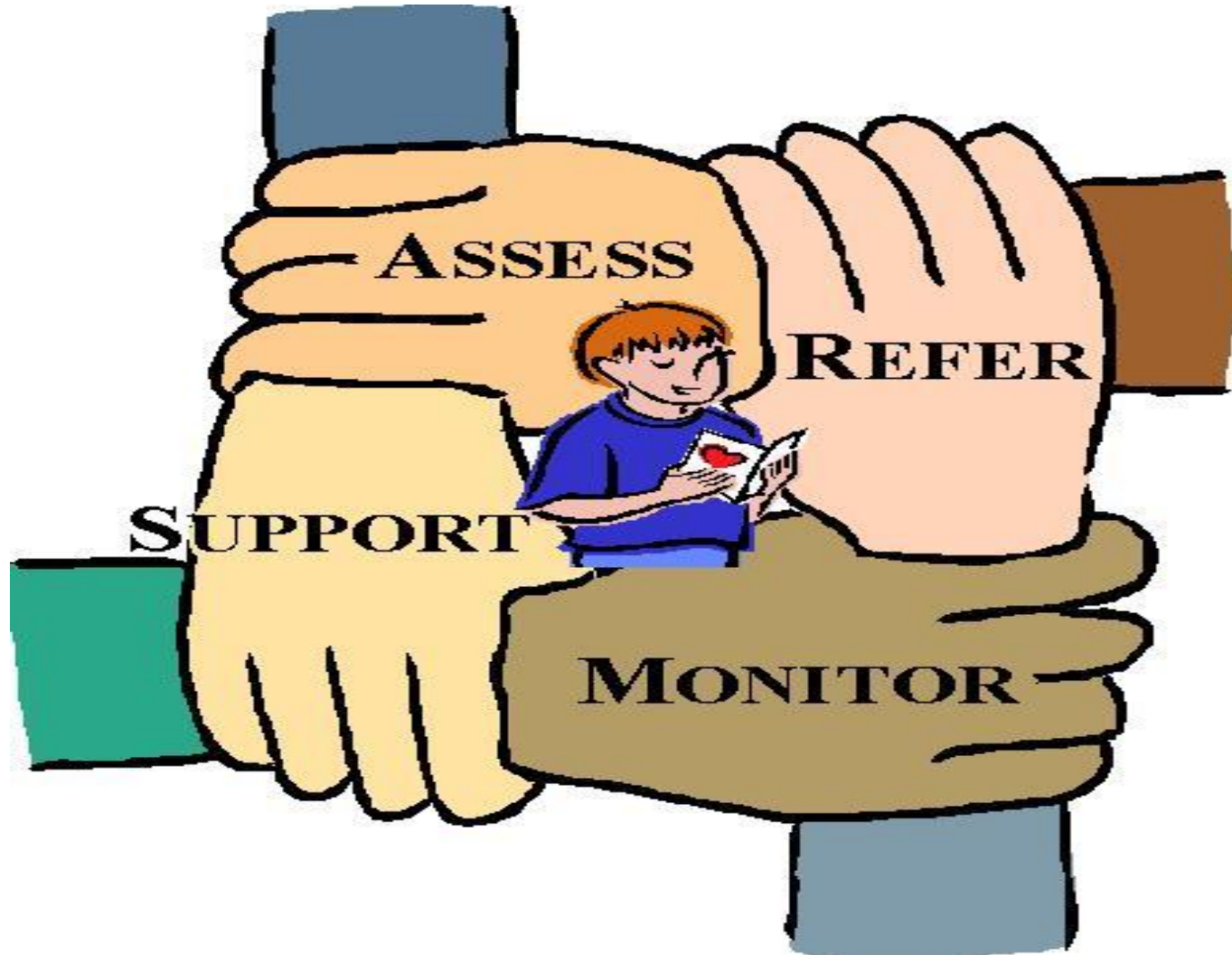
- Resolve the threat of violence.
- Address school environment factors:
 - Bullying
 - Peer conflict
- Return the student to school or alternative educational placement.



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ARMS



#5 - Written Report

- Identifying information
- Threat Description
- Threat Response
- Action Plan



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Confidentiality

- Can I notify other school staff about a student threat of violence? **YES**
- Can I share information about the student with the school resource officer? **YES**
- Can I notify staff at another school? **YES**
- Can I notify parents of threatening student and also the threatened student? **YES**



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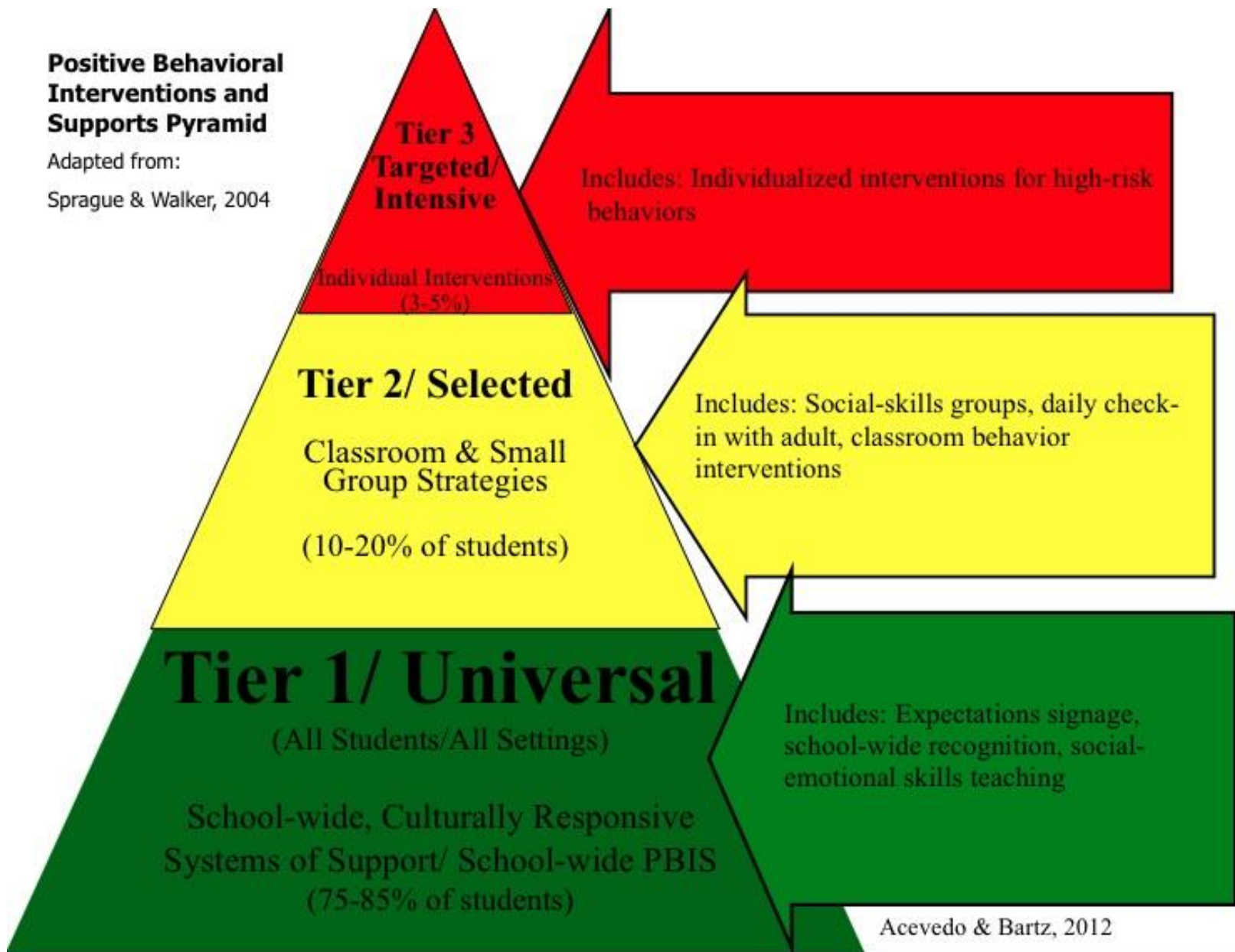
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Comprehensive Plan

- Threat assessment is only 1 component of a school-wide safety plan
- **Positive Behavior Intervention System**
- **Bullying Prevention Programs**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Pyramid

Adapted from:
Sprague & Walker, 2004



Examples from the Field