

To: Members of the House Judiciary Committee

From: William Modzeleski, Senior Consultant
SIGMA Threat Management Associates

Date: February 22, 2017

Re: Testimony regarding School Safety Threat Assessment

Chair Barker and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Bill Modzeleski. I currently serve as a Senior Consultant with SIGMA Threat Management Associates in Colorado. Previously I served as the associate deputy undersecretary in the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.

I want to start by thanking the House Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to testify on a strategy of great significance in our battle to ensure our schools provide everyone with the opportunity to learn in a safe and nurturing environment and that is “threat assessment.”

While there is much to be discussed about “threat assessment,” in the limited time allotted this afternoon, I want to focus on two aspects of the threat assessment process: (1) What is threat assessment and, (2) Why should we adopt “threat assessment” as part of our safe school strategy. I should like to note that I will address other aspects of threat assessment, such as the status of threat assessment today, issues (directly related to threat assessment) that we will likely confront in the near future, and actions that are needed to ensure that threat assessment remains a relevant violence prevention strategy with the Oregon Task Force on School Safety.

Before focusing on the “what” and “why” of threat assessment, I’d like to provide some background on just how the U.S. Department of Education came to adopt threat assessment as an integral part of our violence prevention strategy.

Background:

In the 1990s there were a series of shootings (28) that occurred in schools throughout the United States that resulted in serious injury or death. Following the attack at Columbine H.S. in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, the U.S. Secret Service (U.S.S.S.) and the Department of Education initiated in June 1999, a study of the thinking, planning and other pre-attack behaviors engaged in by attackers who carried out school shootings.

The goal of the study, which was called the *Safe School Initiative* (SSI), was intended to provide answers to two questions: (1) Could we have known that these attacks were being planned and (2) If so, What could we have done to prevent these attacks from occurring? Answers to these two questions could be found in the SSI's key findings (see below), which were included as a major part of the SSI.

Key findings of the *Safe School Initiative* were:

- There wasn't any profile of a school shooter.
- School based targeted attacks are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
- Most attackers had seriously concerned others in their lives before the attack.
- Prior to the attacks others knew of the attackers idea/plan.
- Many students felt bullied.
- Most attackers had significant difficulties with losses or failures. Many were suicidal.
- Most incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement.
- In many cases, other students were involved

Overall the SSI concluded that the best approach to ensuring that schools remain safe was through the development of a comprehensive strategy that focused on "prevention" and "early intervention" strategies, including the development of school based threat assessment teams. The SSI also recognized that in order to be effective, prevention strategies, including threat assessment had to include a wide variety of partners, including those from schools, law enforcement, health, mental health and the family.

Immediately after the SSI was released (2000/2001) The Department of Education and U.S.S.S. took the findings of the SSI one step further by setting forth a process for identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools. The U.S. Secret Service first pioneered the process, known as threat assessment, as a mechanism for investigating threats against the president of the United States and other protected officials. ED and the U.S.S.S. issued a Guide (*Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*) in 2002 that provided suggestions for developing a threat assessment team within a school or school district. The Guide included, steps to take when a threat or other information of concern comes to light, consideration about when to involve law enforcement personnel, issues related to information sharing and ideas for creating safe school climates. The Guide is still used a basis for many of the threat assessment programs used in schools today.

What is Threat Assessment?

Understanding that releasing a report on school shooters was only part of the story, ED and the U.S.S.S. developed a threat assessment guide. To most educators (as well as many law enforcement officials) threat assessment was an entirely new concept: a concept that was misunderstood. Many believed that threat assessment was a program designed to identify and arrest those who made threats against other students, staff, or a school's physical property. It was viewed as a punitive measure that focused more on stopping (typically by arrest) a threatening event such as a shooting before it happened. Little attention was paid to not only intervening before an event occurred but also in the assessing the needs of those involved in threatening behavior and in developing a plan to ensure services needed to ensure there is a change in behavior.

Threat assessment is unique in that it is a process that focuses on "behaviors" not "characteristics" (like how someone looks, dresses, etc.) to identify those who are on the pathway to harming themselves or others. Essentially, threat assessment is designed to identify those who "pose a threat" not merely "make a threat."

It is also unique in that it promotes the use of multi-disciplinary teams to conduct behavioral assessments (often collecting and assessing information from a variety of sources) and that it uses resources found in home, school, and community to "help" those found to be on pathway to harmful behavior.

Why Engage in Threat Assessment:

There are numerous reasons school for developing and engaging in a threat assessment strategy.

First, we believe that a "sound threat assessment strategy" can prevent targeted violence from occurring, that is when done properly school officials could intercede "before" an event occurs. While a comprehensive set of data on the number of events deterred because of the actions of a threat assessment team is not available, there is antidotal information that indicates that threat assessment teams have had a role in deterring events that had the potential for harming students, staff, or physical property.

Second, by preventing an incident, such as a school shooting from occurring, schools can reduce the trauma caused by school violence. Research has shown that there are significant consequences to the trauma caused by violent events (experienced as either victim or observer of violent event) the consequences, which can last for decades, affect not only the immediate victim(s) and their families but also fellow students and community members. Consequences range from depression and despair to increased alcohol and drug use, and from poor performance in school to actually dropping out of school.

Third, there is a growing body of evidence (see University of Virginia studies) that indicate that threat assessment when done properly, can reduce some negative behaviors that lead to poor performance in schools and possible entry into the juvenile justice system. For example, threat assessment has the capability of identifying students before behaviors such as truancy, violations of minor criminal laws or students code of conduct, and alcohol and drug use begin to affect school performance. By identifying students early on and by providing them with appropriate services as soon as these problems are identified we can help ensure that minor issues or problems don't escalate into major ones

Fourth, threat assessment has the ability to break down the silos that have heretofore, been formed to address behavioral problems of students and their families. Instead of addressing these problems in isolation, without concern for what services other groups may be providing, threat assessment has the potential for bringing service providers, from inside and outside the school, together.

Lastly, threat assessment has the potential for addressing issues other than identifying those on pathway for engaging in violent behavior. The process for conducting a threat assessment review of an individual who is on pathway for engaging in a violent act has expanded to using the process to identify those on pathway to harming ones self (suicide), as well for engaging in activities that may be harmful to not only the school but an entire community, such as engaging in what are considered violent extremist actions.

Closing:

In closing let me state that I believe that we (Federal, State, and local school authorities) have laid the foundation for a sound threat assessment strategy, a strategy that I firmly believe can improve the safety of our school children and those who work in schools. Let me also state that I applaud the actions being taken in Oregon to expand their threat assessment activities. I believe that adoption of the proposed actions will place Oregon as a leader in the field of school safety.