**School Safety Analysis: Making Schools Safer**

By Bernhard Meissner and William Pfohl

Schools are among the safest places for children to be. However, recent events of violence in schools around the world make educators and parents concerned about their children’s safety. Recent school violence in Finland has increased the concern for conducting a more comprehensive approach to investigating threats of violence. The student posted his threat to the Internet and then carried them out. Could this situation have been prevented using school safety analysis? Research would support that a comprehensive school safety analysis can help prevent such occurrences.

After shootings and other violent acts occur, threats against schools, individual students, or teachers increase. Some individuals are excited by the idea of doing something similar, and threaten others. In many cases, these threats are not really meant to be carried out. When shootings and bomb threats are actually being made, there is a need to accurately determine whether they are fake threats or not. The question is not whether something should be done but what is the correct procedure to follow. For this purpose – to do the right thing – the school safety analysis was developed.

It is the aim of the school safety analysis to react in a proper way when school personnel become aware of violent threats. The procedure of this analysis is based on results of research carried out by the U.S. Secret Service. The same results were found in Europe when shootings in schools were analysed.

The U.S. Secret Service examined 38 school shootings (1974-2001) in the USA to see if a certain ‘shooter profile’ would allow a prediction of future perpetrators. This approach proved to be impossible. There was not a definite profile, just signs that could be observed in the majority of perpetrators. They suggested a case by case analysis for each threat situation. The following findings were found useful to determine extreme violence in schools.

* Most of the perpetrators showed troublesome behaviour before the violent act
* The use of violence was seldom impulsive.
* In many cases, there had been plans for a long time
* In 75% of the cases, others knew about the plan beforehand
* Perpetrators had difficulties coping with loss and personal failure; they were not always social loners; they had problems coping with distress
* Many perpetrators felt humiliated, bullied, or hurt by others
* Perpetrators usually had not threatened the future victim(s) directly
* Most of the perpetrators had access to guns/weapons and knew how to handle them
* The incidents were not ended by the police; witnesses did or suicide by the shooter

Research supports six principles upon which the school safety analysis is based:

* 1. Violence against certain persons is the result of perpetrator’s thinking that can be analysed and understood
  2. Violence against certain persons is the result of the interaction between the perpetrator, the situation, the environment, and the target person(s)
  3. An analytic and fact oriented attitude is necessary for a successful safety and security analysis
  4. An effective analysis is based on known facts and observable behaviours, not on traits and personality characteristics
  5. The analysis and investigation should be based on an

Integrated, systemic approach

* 1. The main issue is whether the student is a real threat for violence; not whether he has just threatened somebody or school

**When is immediate action necessary?**

There are 4 types of violent threats. They are: direct, indirect, veiled, and conditional. Some threats are so clear and concrete that immediate action is necessary (direct); in other cases threats are rather vague as similar threats often have occurred in the past. We must discern between the kinds of threats:

**Direct threats**: These threats are usually written or can be found posted to the Internet. They contain detailed information about the time of the planned attack, sometimes the target persons (death lists) and sometimes whether bombs or other weapons will be used. In many cases, other persons (usually friends of the one threatening) will know about the plan. Unfortunately, they often do not tell an adult about the plan. This is called the ‘conspiracy of silence’. They typically state they thought the person was joking or was not serious about the threat. There is a much smaller group of peers who encourages the person to act violent as an act of revenge.

**When direct threats become known, the police must be contacted at once** in order to protect the targeted person(s) or the whole school - including the threatening person. The potential perpetrator is in danger, too, because they may be determined to die as part of the plan. Recent events have seen the perpetrator kill himself after the event and before the police arrive.

**Indirect threats**: These threats are usually more general, not written and do not give concrete details. They often are anonymous, sometimes posted on social network pages (FaceBook, Beebo, MySpace) on the Internet.

These indirect threats lack details found in the direct threats. Though rather vague, they must be taken seriously because you can only determine whether they are serious after information is gathered about the threatening person, the background of this person, and the specific context of the threat.

The reason for action is that the person may not be inclined to use violence from one moment to the other. However, there is a pattern: from ideas about using violence to direct plans and then making preparations for using violence.

One behaviour in this process could be an indirect threat(s) or confronting statement(s). There could be an expression of violence in stories, essays, pictures, music. Many teachers have access to these pieces of the puzzle. A statement that they wish to be dead or to kill others may be made.

There can be personal traumatic events in the past, situations without solutions for which others are blamed, and thinking and feeling focused on using violence as a real solution.

There can be pathological warning signs, too: perception of being threatened, commanding voices (hallucinations), fantasies of grandiosity, disturbance of thinking (psychosis), etc. We often find excessive use of violence oriented video games, or idealization of former perpetrators and acts of school violence (Columbine, Erfurt). Torturing animals can be a significant warning sign. Previous acts of violence and increases in alcohol/drug use are important signs.

The other two forms of threats are *veiled* (strongly implies but does not explicitly threaten violence) and *conditional* (similar to extortion, in that certain demands or terms must be met.) These types of threats need to be investigated, too, but they are not typically of immediate danger.

**Why is action necessary for indirect threats?**

If someone is deciding to or planning to use violence, perhaps it can be prevented. For this reason and for determining how imminent the danger is, one must know more about the person threatening him/herself and others. Careful investigation is necessary not only for this purpose but also to identify measures which can reduce danger by offering peaceful solutions/alternatives to the threatening person.

**What are the possible levels of risk?**

All threats are not the same level of risk. Low, medium, and high are seen as an effective way to categorise threats. A high level would be a direct and specific, detailed plan. A medium level has some specific details but not time, method, or place. Low level is vague, not direct, and lacks a specific plan. (See U.S. Secret Service guidelines.)

**What questions should be answered?**

All available background information helps to understand a threatening person and the level of risk. It is recommended that a Safe School Team (SST) (details later) be assembled to determine the level of threat and the plan to prevent violence. The U.S. Secret Service (2002) outlined 11 questions which need to be answered.

The following questions should be answered for each case:

1. Are there any communications of intent to attack?
2. What are the student’s motives or goals?
3. Any signs of inappropriate interest in other attacks, weapons, or mass violence?
4. Any attack-related behaviors? Making a plan, acquiring weapons, casing sites, etc.
5. Does student have competence/ability to attack?
6. Is there hopelessness or despair?
7. Any trusting relationship with an adult? Any protective factors – good family; close friends (this can reduce risk.)
8. Is violence regarded as way to solve a problem? Any peer influences?
9. Are student’s words consistent with actions?
10. Are others concerned about student?
11. What circumstances might trigger violence?

Other consideration by the SST:

- What do we know about the student’s background: family, social

relations, behaviour in school/class, history concerning dealing with

conflicts, bullying, violence, criminal behaviour, alcohol/drug abuse,

access to weapons and use of weapons?

- Are there others involved? (Several acts have had two involved.)

- What do we know about the life situation, frustrations, recent losses,

achievement at school, or their notion of injustice?

- Are there motives for use of violence: revenge, desperation, wanting to

become famous, wish to die?

- Are there other known targets outside of school?

Quick and efficient gathering of information must be completed to find out whether the police should be asked for intervention. After it becomes evident what can be done to support or warn target persons, (or those who feel targeted) and what can be done to de-escalate or prevent potential danger, an *Action Plan* will be developed and individuals on the SST are assigned duties.

**Where to find the answers**

Individual teachers may not know enough about their students to answer all these questions. In order to get a complete overview, all teachers and school personnel who know the student to be evaluated should come together and go through the catalogue of above questions carefully. The principal/headmaster of the school invites the relevant participants. All teachers who know the student, who currently have the student in class, who may feel threatened, or who could help with interventions should be invited.

Other school personnel may be important and have additional information (e.g. janitor, secretary, school nurse, bus driver) and need to be included. The School Safety Team can then analyse the information. The School Safety Team can consist of a school psychologist or mental health person, school safety officer, nurse, responsible student, teacher, and headed by the school principal.

Check the student’s personal web page and do an Internet search to determine if threats have been posted to any sites. YouTube video site has been used lately as well as Beebo, MySpace and Facebook. See the ‘friends’ that are posted on their wall and possibly question them.

Knowledgeable experts may be invited to lead the meeting because school personnel are involved (or are potential target persons) making their impressions blurred or distorted. The expert can be a school psychologist, if they are not involved themselves. The outcome of the meeting – Safety Conference - should be as detailed and objective as possible. Notes of the discussion should be made and kept confidential. All collected information should be filed with the notes as well.

Parents and classmates should be consulted before the meeting. Because of legal reasons concerning strict confidentiality, these persons will not be invited to be present in the Safety Conference. Be sure to know the specific laws, regulations, and policies about threats and potential violence.

**The agenda and actions of a Safety Conference**

The meeting must be officially convened. If possible, ample time should be announced beforehand, unless the threat is seen as direct and high risk. Quick action will be required in these cases. Do not schedule discussions until ‘later’ or after a weekend or holiday. Time is important to prevent violence.

Information should be given to the participants and SST in the beginning of the safety analysis guidelines about the findings of the U.S. Secret Service. The questions above should be used to guide the discussion. It should be made clear that the main aim is to share all relevant information about a potential danger, evaluate it, and decide whether to inform the police or another agency, or decide on school based action intervention.

If possible, it is recommended that a neutral facilitator (as indicated above) lead the meeting; a co-facilitator writes down the information to be seen by everybody on the flipchart. It might be useful to use oak tag type cards that can be written on and can be re-grouped based on the discussion.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] (USA) suggested a Four Prong Approach. The four areas to be explored are: school dynamics, peer and social dynamics, family factors and dynamics, and behavioural and personality characteristics. This approach may serve as a way to group information. The facilitator takes care that participants in the meeting do not criticise others in the meeting. It is important that safety can be restored and the group supports each other.

Facts have to be gathered, not speculation or assumptions. Sometimes it is very difficult to discern facts from impressions. This is a critical part of not over responding to a specific threat. Safety of everyone is the primary goal. Most threats do not reach the level of a well planned attack.

When information is as complete as possible a **decision has to be made** whether the **police** or **other agencies** should be askedfor support or involvement. The situation may be discussed with the police or other experts anonymously. For this latter purpose, it is advisable to be in contact with the police in advance. Many members of the school staff will never believe it could happen at their school. This attitude has resulted in missing serious threats. It can happen in any school. Again, know the specific laws and regulations of your state, region, or country.

If it is decided that the school will be able to handle the case on its own, the responsibility will remain in the **school.** In this case an Action Plan has to be developed. Sometimes the first part of the meeting has been long and tiring. The larger group may identify just the main aims of an Action Plan. Details can be decided on later by a smaller group (SST). Each part of the Action Plan should have two aspects: a responsible individual and a time to be completed. The Action Plan should contain:

**who does what, with whom, by when?**

This Action Plan can be revised to determine whether the measures taken were successful. A next scheduled meeting time – typically 24-36 hours - should be scheduled at the end of each Safety Conference.

Action has to be decided on the following questions:

* What can be done to make the target person(s) feel safe?
* What can be done for safety in the school, for those who feel afraid?
* What specifically must be done to **STOP** the aggressor?
* How can the desperate student be supported? Who can offer support? In school? Outside of school?
* Who is a person of trust to him/her?
* What can be done for the one who reported the threat? Those who break the ‘conspiracy of silence’ are often accused by peers to be disloyal.
* How should he/she be recognised publicly? What are the limits of confidentiality?
* What can be done for the whole school to make it more supportive and that everyone feels safe in the future?
* Can workshops for all staff, students and teachers on safety/threat analyses be held? Talk about how important it is for **everyone** to be responsible for school safety.

**Promotion of Safe Schools**

A more general question at the end of a safety analysis is “What can be done to make the school as safe as possible in the future?”

There should be crisis intervention plans for various scenarios when the school is actually threatened or attacked. A School Crisis Intervention Team can take care of and inform the school staff about their planning.

Situations such as school shooting, fire, bomb threats, accidents, natural disasters, hostages, etc. need to be planned for. The idea behind these preparations is for school personnel to know what to do and be able to help prevent violence. If they cannot do that, they can provide a social support system to limit the psychological damage when a critical incident occurs.

An additional goal should be to try to prevent future violence. Most important for this goal is that the school does as much as possible so that no child or teacher feels left behind. For this purpose, the agenda of the Safety Conference also can be used to identify students at risk for violence. These may be those who are disadvantaged by family background, by their special life situation, who may be severely frustrated, being bullied/mobbed, or feel in a desperate situation.

Programs for violence prevention, dealing with bullying, support of high academic achievement, close cooperation between parents and school, close cooperation between communities and schools are all advisable and extremely helpful in preventing violence. If everyone is involved, then schools will be safer. Schools tend to want to act without others’ support.

The stakes are high: if there is an incident, others will criticise the school for not involving other experts.

To develop schools in this direction, larger School Safety Teams consisting of teachers, parents, community members, first responders, and students proved to be helpful and successful.

In a PowerPoint presentation by Prof. William Pfohl, USA, (Pfohl, 2005, Personal Communication) the following list of helpful safe school messages are given:

* We need to identify and respond to troubled children, and to increase the number of staff and parents who can do so
* Children who are isolated, rejected, bullied, and alienated are at high risk and require intervention
* All of us must listen to the concerns of our nation’s youth
* We must end the ‘conspiracy of silence’ among teens
* We must teach our children how to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence
* Programs that teach effective problem solving, anger management and conflict resolution must be in place in our schools
* We must have effective after care school programs that provide protection, supervision, instruction and enrichment for our youngsters
* We need more trained personnel in the schools, such as school psychologists, school counselors and school social workers who can respond to and help troubled youth
* Parents must spend time communicating with their children
* All children need at least one caring adult in their lives
* We need to find better ways to keep guns out of the hands of distraught youngsters
* All schools need to have programs in place that emphasize prevention as well as response teams that intervene to either prevent a crisis from occurring or to respond in the aftermath

**Summary**

In a changing world, some schools have begun to lose their image as a safe place to learn. They actually never been without aggressive acts, e.g. bullying and fights; now weapons have been introduced to resolve problems, not fists. When there are crises occurring in schools caused by extreme acts of violence, the school and community at large are reminded of the core values and virtues to provide a climate where teachers can teach and children can learn without fear. Acts of violence can be prevented if there is a plan of action to assess threats in a timely manner.