

School Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

Melissa A. Louvar Reeves¹ · Stephen E. Brock²

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Abstract While schools are safer today than in years past, one act of school violence is one too many. Recent reports have conveyed the importance of schools developing and implementing protocols and procedures to prevent or mitigate school violence. To assist with this task, this article addresses behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) in the K-12 school setting and the school psychologist's role in risk and threat assessment. Best practices in establishing a K-12 behavioral threat assessment and management process, including the assessment of risk factors and warning signs, identification of concerns, and follow-up interventions and monitoring are discussed. Ethical and legal considerations are also reviewed.

Keywords Violence · Threat assessment · Risk factors · Warning signs · Intervention

While schools are safe places and there is evidence that they are safer today than in years past (Kann et al. 2016; Robers et al. 2014; Snyder and Dillow 2013; Zhang et al. 2016), one act of school violence is one too many. Consequently, it is necessary for schools to develop and implement protocols and procedures to prevent or mitigate school violence. To assist with this task, this article addresses behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) in the K-12 school setting.

✉ Melissa A. Louvar Reeves
reevesm@winthrop.edu

¹ School Psychology Program, Department of Psychology, Winthrop University, 135 Kinard Hall, Rock Hill, SC 29733, USA

² Graduate and Professional Studies in Education, California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA

Further emphasizing the need for such assessment and management are practice expectations. Specifically, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP 2010; Skalski et al. 2015) specifies that school psychologists are expected to be able to apply knowledge of risk and protective factors to address the problem of youth violence (Domain 6: Preventive and Responsive Services). In addition, multiple reports and agencies have recommended that schools establish multidisciplinary threat assessment teams (Amman et al. 2017; Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate 2014; Fein et al. 2004; Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016; Sandy Hook Advisory Commission 2015; U.S. Department of Education 2013; Vossekul et al. 2002).

Before proceeding with this discussion, it is important to acknowledge that the student who presents as a danger to others is a constant concern and school resources are not always available. In addition, the school psychologists and administrators who typically conduct these assessments may not have BTAM as a *primary* professional responsibility. Thus, especially for cases in which safety concerns are imminent, it is necessary to collaborate with others, in particular with law enforcement. Well-trained clinically oriented mental health professionals may also be needed to help provide further review and interventions. In other words, the school-based BTAM is often the first step in a longer term and more involved assessment and intervention process.

The primary goal of school-based BTAM is to prevent the immediate risk of harm to others. While behavioral consequences (e.g., suspension) may need to be implemented in response to student actions, particularly if there was a violation of school rules or laws, a more important goal of a BTAM is to connect a student of concern (and potential victims) to continually available resources. Another important prefacing comment is that there is currently no accurate “profile” of students

who engage in school violence. In addition, profiles run the risk of unjustly stigmatizing students. They may result in discrimination, invasion of privacy, unfair punishment, isolation, and/or exclusion from school and activities without due process (Bailey 2001; Burns et al. 2001; Vossekuil et al. 2002).

Establishing a Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Process

Often the terms *risk assessment* and *threat assessment* are used interchangeably. However, while they complement each other they are different. A violence risk assessment includes analyzing known, empirically derived, risk factors (Meloy et al. 2011). It allows for an estimation of an individual's capacity to react violently and is both static and dynamic (Meloy et al. 2014). On the other hand, a behavioral threat assessment assesses the level of concern based upon behaviors displayed (Meloy et al. 2011). Threat assessment also includes risk management, the goal of which is to interrupt pathways to violence. Threat assessment measures change (it always includes follow-up) and is based upon individual and dynamic factors (Amman et al. 2017; Meloy et al. 2011). Thus, a violence risk assessment is used for prevention and initial identification, whereas threat assessment is activated when the concern is known and threat management is necessary. While risk assessment might be conceptualized as an event, threat assessment is a process.

In the K-12 school setting, a threat assessment should be initiated when information about a student's behavior and communications is considered excessive. A school BTAM team leads this process. A formal *investigation* is conducted by law enforcement when a potential threat is serious (substantive) with the school providing information about the threat to law enforcement. The central question in a threat assessment inquiry and investigation is whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether the student has made a threat (Fein et al. 2004). To accurately assess risk and implement interventions, school's must establish the authority to conduct threat assessments, establish multidisciplinary BTAM teams, establish an effective and systemic BTAM process that follows legal guidelines, and have self-awareness of biases that can influence conclusions and decision making. General principles of BTAM that schools must adhere to include (a) early identification, intervention, and integrated case management; (b) centralized data collection; (d) corroboration and an inquisitive mind-set; (e) coordinated and sustained efforts; (f) assessments are placed in context; and (g) longitudinal monitoring (Amman et al. 2017; Deisinger and Randazzo 2017).

Establish District Policy, Protocol, and Authority to Conduct Threat Assessments

School administrators must demonstrate commitment to establishing a threat assessment protocol. The integrity and

outcomes of BTAM are dependent on the quality of staff training and a system that focuses on accountability (Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016).

Multiple courts have recognized that no educator can predict the future or completely control a student's behavior. However, courts have also asserted that schools must make good faith efforts to prevent acts of violence and have critically examined if the school has met established standards of care. This includes being held accountable for failing to train school staff members in the identification, reporting, intervention, supervision, and parental notification of safety threats. In addition, while courts have not found school authorities responsible for student acts of violence that occur without warning, schools can be held accountable under tort law claims of *foreseeability* and *negligence* if they fail to respond appropriately when a concern had been identified (Pace v. Talley 2006; Shuman v. Penn Manor SD 2005; The Estate of Montana Lance et al. v. Kyer et al. 2011; Witsell et al. v. School Board of Hillsborough 2011).

Establish Multidisciplinary BTAM Teams

Given the stakes of BTAM, and the volume of data that such an assessment requires, it is essential that a multidisciplinary threat assessment team be developed. No one person should bear the responsibility for this process. At a minimum, an effective BTAM team should include three trained professionals (i.e., an administrator, a school psychologist, and, for moderate to serious risk situations, a law enforcement professional; Amman et al. 2017; Deisinger and Randazzo 2017).

Given the importance of understanding both covert and overt behaviors, and effectively conducting interviews, a school psychologist must be included on the team. As indicated, other members familiar with the student of concern (e.g., counselors, teachers, coaches, nurse, special education case manager) can be included on a case-by-case basis (as they may have important information and insights). It is critical the determination of risk and the appropriate intervention plan be a team decision. In addition, a BTAM team leader should also be identified to receive reported concerns. This individual is also responsible for ensuring the integrity and coordination of the process. Without a team leader, information may be overlooked, ignored, missed, or not communicated due to confusion and diffusion of responsibility (Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016). In addition, back-up team members need to be identified for situations wherein primary team members are unavailable. Effective BTAM teams understand and value (a) caretaking and interventions to support individuals, (b) the need for urgency when responding to a concern, (c) collaboration among team members, (d) the need to establishing BTAM rules and boundaries, (e) the limits of confidentiality,

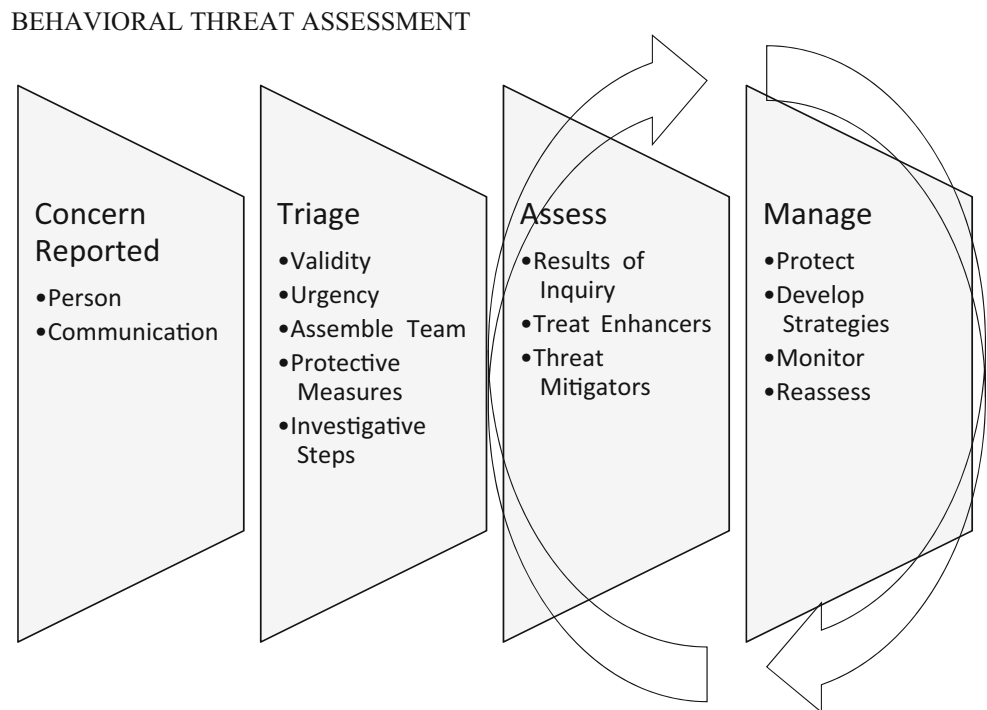
(f) the importance of providing guidance and follow-through, (g) ensuring implementation of management plans, (h) continually re-evaluating active cases and re-engaging when necessary, and (i) that patience is needed throughout this process (Amman et al. 2017).

Establish a Systemic Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Process

The FBI’s Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (Amman et al. 2017) has offered an effective and systematic threat assessment is an ongoing process, not a one-time event (see Fig. 1). An effective BTAM process identifies and determines level of concerns and then manages the situation to mitigate risk. This requires an organizational culture that values a safe

and positive school climate; has strong anti-bullying policies; and promotes acceptance, trust, and connectedness among teachers, students, and families. Training in early risk factors and warning signs must be offered to students and school staff members, as they are often the first to become aware of a concern. It is critical a confidential reporting system be established to break the so-called *code of silence*, with emphasis placed on getting a person at risk help (versus simply snitching; Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016). There should be clear and consistent procedures for reporting concerns across different schools (Fein et al. 2004; Nicoletti and Spencer-Thomas 2002; Vossekul et al. 2002). In addition, target vulnerability reduction, careful handling discipline and limit setting, preserving the dignity and respect of individuals

Fig. 1 The threat assessment and management process. From Amman et al. (2017). This document is in the public domain



<p>Concern Reported</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does it involve a person of concern or a communication by an unknown author?</p>	<p>Triage</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does the referral have validity in terms of raising concern for violence?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What level of urgency is needed for the treat assessment team response?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What expertise is needed to assemble a team?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What immediate protective measures should be implemented?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What investigative steps are needed to ensure sufficient information is gathered to enable a thorough assessment?</p>	<p>Assess</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The results of inquiry are assembled to facilitate analysis.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The threat enhancers are identified and thoroughly discussed.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The threat mitigators are identified and thoroughly discussed.</p>	<p>Manage</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Take steps as needed to protect persons and property from violence.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Develop strategies to be implemented throughout management process (e.g., treatment, discipline, detention).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Further monitor for behavioral changes, which indicated escalation or improvement.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Continually reassess the person or situation to determine the accuracy of the assessment and effectiveness of management strategies. This process is cyclical until case retirement.</p>
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involved with the process (Amman et al. 2017), and managing victim fear (de Becker 1997) are elements of the BTAM process.

According to Deisinger and Randazzo (2017), a systematic BTAM process includes an effective and relevant multidisciplinary approach capable of addressing threats. This process enables centralized awareness of developing concerns through active outreach programs and consultations. It facilitates a thorough and contextual assessment and implements proactive and integrated case management. On an ongoing basis, it monitors and re-assesses cases and conducts all practices in accordance with relevant laws, policies, and standards of practice.

In an analysis of the Arapahoe High School targeted school shooting (see Gurman et al. 2016, for event details), multiple reports found concerns in many areas (Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016). The school's BTAM team did not implement the threat assessment process thoroughly nor did they follow best practice guidelines. While the school district had provided threat assessment training, it was not a required training. The high school did not have a clearly identified multidisciplinary BTAM team with an identified leader. Thus, there was diffusion of responsibility and it was not clear who was responsible for ensuring the assessment's integrity, thorough data collection, and documentation of findings. There was inadequate training for staff and students for when and how to report concerns (Nicoletti and Spencer-Thomas 2002). Thus, data was missed, not shared, and/or overlooked. In addition, many school staff members misunderstood Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) and exceptions to confidentiality. As a result, critical information on risk factors, warning signs, and escalating behaviors were not shared. There was also no interagency agreement signed with law enforcement; thus, the school resource officer's engagement in the BTAM process was minimal and he was not aware of critical information. Ultimately, the failure to develop and implement an effective and systemic BTAM process leads to an underestimate of risk; inadequate intervention, support, and follow-up; and, most tragically, the death of a student.

In the authors' opinion, school psychologists have the expertise and leadership skills to help schools and districts establish a high-quality BTAM process. Our experiences have found school psychologists' training in both suicide and behavioral threat assessment as well as mental health, consultation, educational systems, family dynamics, and ethical and legal practices places these professional in a strong position to facilitate the initiation of a BTAM process. It can begin with conversations regarding the legal implications and risks of *not* establishing a quality BTAM process, followed by promotion of the specific best practices (such as those outlined in this article) associated with an effective BTAM process.

Legal Implications

There have been instances where students and their parents have questioned actions of BTAMs. Typically, they argue that First Amendment safeguards protect them from consequences associated with statements they had made. Thus, educators need to be aware of the fact that there are exceptions to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The right to free speech does not protect those who offer fighting words, obscenities, and defamations. In addition, the First Amendment does not apply if a student's speech has caused substantial disruption to, or material interference with, school activities. However, in such instances, schools must be able to prove substantial disruption or material interference (*Biom v. Fulton County SD 2007*; *Francisco v. Solano County 2011*; *Wisniewski v. Weedsport Central School District 2007*). In addition, concerning words must constitute a "true threat." The Ninth Circuit court in *United States v Orozco-Santillan (1990)* asserts:

Whether a particular statement may properly be considered to be a threat is governed by an objective standard—whether a reasonable person would foresee that the statement would be interpreted by those to whom the maker communicates the statement as a serious expression of intent to harm or assault. (13)

In addition, parents may file lawsuits according to the 14th Amendment, which ensures due process and equal protection. Thus, establishing a *standardized* and *consistent* BTAM process is critical. Absent such standardization and consistency discrimination claims might be made. Further, the BTAM process must attend to IDEA and ensure that the rights of students eligible for special education are protected (Hutton and Bailey 2007).

Exceptions to Confidentiality Amman et al. (2017) assert that confidentiality should not be allowed to interfere with effective BTAM. While there are limitations when it comes to sharing educational records, these limits are not absolute prohibitions. For example, *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California (1976)* requires notification of threats of violence to potential victims. While FERPA ensures confidentiality of educational records, in 2008, the Code of Federal Regulations (34 CFR § 99.36) was modified to allow school officials to disclose information to appropriate parties (i.e., staff who have legitimate educational interest in the behavior of the student), without consent, when knowledge of information is necessary to protect the health and safety of a student or other individuals, and if there is a significant and articulable threat to the health and safety of an individual. The threat must be directly related to an actual, impending, or imminent emergency. In addition, educational agencies and institutions may

share information from educational records of at-risk or delinquent youth to an appropriate party (i.e., law enforcement, public health officials, trained medical personnel, parents, and possibly emergency management agencies) and communicate via a court order or subpoena for criminal investigations. This also includes sharing information regarding an imminent safety concern to school officials where the student is enrolled or seeks to enroll. In addition, disciplinary action may be kept in student records if the behavior posed a significant risk to safety and well-being. (For additional FERPA resources, the reader is referred to <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/safeschools/index.html> and <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/ferpa-disaster-guidance.pdf>).

Foreseeability and Negligence If a child writes, talks, or acts in a threatening manner, adults should be able to foresee potential safety issues. As a result, a school could be considered negligent (and liable under a tort claim) if it does not (a) notify caregivers and potential victims when students are known to be dangerous; (b) provide appropriate supervision; (c) implement a BTAM process with fidelity; and (d) provide staff training in regards to identification, reporting, and intervening/supervision. For example, during litigation, courts have required schools to produce records of staff training on suicide prevention (Erbacher et al. 2015).

Legal Guidelines Violation of a student's civil rights can also place a district at risk for litigation. Specifically, if peer harassment is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability and creates a hostile environment and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees, schools can be held liable. Thus, schools must do more than take steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment. Schools must also "... take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the bullying, eliminate the hostile environment, prevent it from recurring, and, as appropriate, remedy its effects" (Lhamon 2014, p. 4). A school's responsibility does not end with the implementation of consequences. Overall school climate is considered and districts can be held accountable for more than individual behaviors.

Manifestation Determination Reviews and Expulsion Hearings For those student's receiving special education services, it is important to note that a threat assessment is different than a manifestation determination review (MDR). A MDR focuses on a student's special education needs and services as it relates to a specific event and determines whether or not a student's specific act was a manifestation of the identified area of disability. MDR's may lead to changes in service and placement or to an expulsion hearing. An expulsion hearing determines whether a specific behavior violated school policy and whether a student may be expelled, whereas

BTAM determines level of concern regarding a student's pattern of behavior over time and leads to preventative planning for safety to reduce risk. While information from a BTAM may be used in an MDR or expulsion hearing, it does not replace those processes. For additional information on this topic, the reader is referred to Browning Wright (2008) and Disability Rights California (2011).

Recordkeeping and Program Evaluation

Keeping accurate records is critical if a school needs to defend their decision and seek supports outside of the school. In addition, quality record keeping helps to (a) more accurately determine the severity of the problem; (b) identify trends and patterns; (c) understand current concerns, future concerns, and appropriate corrective actions; (d) evaluate prevention methods; and (e) develop solutions that guide extra training and supports. Record keeping should include a centralized incident tracking database, copies of all assessments, and a listing of action plans. In addition, documentation should include reports and actions of the student of concern including date and time of threats, others involved (if applicable), targets, behaviors of concern, witnesses, and the preservation of evidence (e.g., copies of emails, screen shots of texts). It is important to note that FERPA governs educational records, not observations, communications, or law enforcement records that were created by and maintained by law enforcement. As was mentioned earlier, FERPA does allow for the sharing of information when there is a safety concern among those with a "legitimate educational interest." These interested persons include BTAM team members and further emphasizes the importance of identifying team membership.

Self-Awareness

de Becker and Associates (2017) and Amman et al. (2017) both emphasize how personal behaviors and viewpoints influence how we perceive situations and interpret information. Thus, it is important to understand bias. *Confirmation bias* is the tendency to look for evidence or interpret information in a way that confirms a preconceived opinion. *Implicit bias* is an attitude or stereotype that affects one's understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner and results in feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. These associations develop over a lifetime, often beginning at a very early age, through exposure to direct and indirect messages. *Explicit bias* refers to attitudes and beliefs about a person or group on a conscious level and these are often formed as a direct result of a perceived threat. Thus, when threatened, a person is more likely to draw group boundaries to distinguish themselves from others. This can lead to fear of a certain type of person or group and unfair assumptions made about a person's level of concern or behavior

in absence of data to support the assumptions. Lastly, *inattentive blindness* (also known as perceptual bias) is failure to recognize an unexpected stimulus that is in plain sight, often missing critical details of a situation. BTAM team members must be aware of how these different sources of bias can lead them to minimize or exaggerate student behaviors of concern. Thus, those serving on BTAM teams need to challenge their perceptions and be open to data that may be inconsistent with their belief system.

Pathways to Violence

While it is a complex interaction of risk factors, warning signs, situational and contextual barriers, and mental states that leads to violence, it has been suggested that there are two primary types of violence: *predatory/planned* and *impulsive/reactive* (Amman et al. 2017; Deisinger and Randazzo 2017). Predatory/planned violence is premeditated, often emotionless, and serves a purpose or goal. Perpetrators of this kind of violence are individuals who often have grievances, are attack oriented, and do not have a time limit on their actions (i.e., their planning takes place over time). Impulsive/

reactive violence, on the other hand, is emotional, impromptu, and frequently a defensive behavior in response to a perceived imminent threat. These behaviors are time-limited. If the perceived threat or emotion is eliminated, then the risk of violence is reduced. The actions of adolescent and adult mass murders can typically be classified as predatory/planned violence (Meloy et al. 2011).

Further discussion of pathways to violence (and summarized in Table 1) is offered by Langman (2009, 2015), who distinguishes between psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized school shooters. Langman reports that many perpetrators had (a) physical deformities; (b) military, educational, occupational, and/or romantic failures; (c) frequent and significant relocations; (d) sibling rivalry (among psychotic shooters they had high achieving siblings); (e) some substance use; (f) a history of legal troubles; (g) loss of loved ones; (h) negative peer influence (peers who encouraged targeted violence); and (i) ideologies and role models encouraging violence (particularly found on social media). Many of these serve as current stressors and help to rationalize the act of targeted violence.

Table 2 provides a list of warning signs that might be considered to suggest increasing degrees of risk. Meloy et al.

Table 1 Three primary types of school shooters

Psychopathic	Psychotic	Traumatized
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narcissistic—no conscience; sadistic with personality traits • Lack capacity for empathy, remorse, guilt • No regard for social norms, morality, ethics, law • Dislike for those who represent authority • Inability to take responsibility for own behavior • Blame victims and paint self as “good guy” • Punishment seen as injustice—feel they are being wronged • Good at “impression management” • Charming, witty, charismatic • Want to be “Godlike” • Do not care if they hurt others; often experience euphoria when doing so • Impervious to fear—nothing fazes them ...yet • Narcissism is fragile, hypersensitive to any perceived slight (paranoid) • Feel justified in killing those who rejected, failed, or frustrated the gratification of their desires • 29% of secondary school shooters (e.g., Eric Harris, Columbine; Andrew Golden, Jonesboro, AK) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidant; schizotypal and dependent personality traits • Schizophrenia—paranoid delusions, auditory hallucinations • Depressed and full of rage • In adult mass murders, severe mental illness is observed in higher rates (Amman et al. 2017) along with a complex combination of mental disorders and personality disorders (Meloy 2013) • 29% of secondary school shooters (e.g., Dylan Klebold, Columbine; Kip Kinkle, Springfield, OR; Michael Carneal, Paducah, KY; Luke Woodham, Pearl, MS; Adam Lanza, Sandy Hook; Seung Hui Choi, Virginia Tech) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suffered emotional and physical abuse at home • Some sexually abused • Ongoing stress and losses, parental substance abuse, frequent moves, lost parent to separation; jail and death; trauma history resulted in suicidal thoughts • Most common type of secondary school shooters (42%; e.g., Mitchell Johnson, Jonesboro, AR; Evan Ramsey, Bethel, AK, Jeffrey Weise, Red Lakes, MN)

Adapted from Langman (2009, 2015)

discuss acts that constitute evidence of increasing or accelerating movement along a pathway to violence (Meloy et al. 2011, 2014, 2015). They are acute, dynamic, and toxic changes in patterns of behavior and are evidence of preoccupation and movement towards violent behavior. These acts have also been referred to as “signaling the attack,” “telltale behaviors,” “high-risk indicators,” “stalking-type,” and “pre-attack signals.” Meloy et al. (2014) analyzed nine German school shooters (ages 15 to 23) and 31 students of concern (ages 12 to 22) who did not carry out an act of violence. Results revealed that the following warning signs (italicized in Table 2) had large effect sizes (Cohen 1988) for the school shooters: pathway = .875, fixation = .718, identification = .823, novel aggression = .612, and last resort = .855. Additional qualitative data revealed similar patterns among U.S. school shooters. Vossekuil et al. (2002) provided further data on the warning sign of leakage and reported that in over three-quarters of the incidents, at least one person had information that the attacker was thinking about or planning the school violence. In nearly two-thirds of the incidents, more than one person had information about the attack before it occurred, and in 93% of the cases, the person who knew was a peer, friend, schoolmate, or sibling.

Behavioral Threat Assessment Risk Factors and Warning Signs

We define risk factors as variables, which when present increase the probability of a student being violent. While far

Table 2 Acts that constitute evidence of increasing or accelerating risk

Pathway. Research, planning, preparation, and implementation
Fixation. Preoccupation with a person or cause
Identification warning behavior. Presenting with a “pseudo-commando” or “warrior mentality,” intense interest in weapons or military/law enforcement paraphernalia, identifies with prior attacks and assassins, identifies self as an agent for a particular cause/belief system, and spreads globally through the Internet and social media
Novel aggression warning behavior. Commits act of violence unrelated to any targeted violence pathway warning behavior that is committed for the first time. A test of ability or a behavioral tryout
Last resort warning behaviors. Presenting with an “action imperative,” increasing desperation or distress and sees action as a last resort, perceives no alternative other than violence, consequences of actions are judged to be justified, and feels trapped
Energy burst. Increase in frequency or variety of behavior directed at the target
Leakage. Communication to a third party of intent to harm
Directly communicated threat. Makes a direct threat, written or oral, and implicitly or explicitly states wish to harm

Adapted from Meloy et al. (2011, 2014, 2015). Italicized behaviors differentiate students who actually committed a school shooting from those who were thought to be at-risk for such behavior

from perfect predictors, when present, they signal the need to increase vigilance for warning signs. Warning signs are verbalizations, behaviors, emotions, and physical presentations that indicate a person of concern is actually considering an act of violence. Research conducted by Amman et al. (2017), Dwyer et al. (1998), Meloy et al. (2011, 2014, 2015), and Vossekuil et al. (2002) have identified multiple risk factors (also referred to as “early warning signs” and “distal warning signs”). Table 3 summarizes some of these risk factors.

Warning signs in isolation are concerning, but warning signs combined with a number of risk factors are especially worrisome. It is important to direct special attention to the student who has suicidal thoughts, as such are often paired with homicidal thoughts. de Becker (n.d.) states that the absence of violent behavior in one’s past might be irrelevant to the assessment as many of these individuals do not display outward signs of violent behavior before carrying out an act of violence. Table 4 summarizes multiple factors associated with potential warning signs, which in turn indicate the need for BTAM team action. It is important to note that none of these factors alone are sufficient when it comes to predicting aggression and violence. Consequently, it is inappropriate, and potentially harmful, to use the risk factors and warning signs in simple checklist fashion.

Behavioral Assessment Tools and Models

Various experts have developed mnemonics to facilitate behavioral threat assessment. For example, Deisinger and Randazzo (2017) recognize that violence is the product of an interaction among four factors. To help remember these factors they offer the acronym *STEP*, which stands for (a) the Subject who may take violent action; (b) vulnerabilities of the Target of such actions; (c); an Environment that facilitates or permits violence or does not discourage it; and (d) Precipitating events that may trigger reactions. In addition, Deisinger and Randazzo offer that one needs to assess for MMOP, which prompts the assessment of (a) Means of threatened violence, (b) Method of the attack, (c) Opportunity to commit the threatened violence, and (d) Proximity to target(s). Another mnemonic is offered by Nicoletti and Spencer-Thomas (2002) who uses the acronym TOAD, which stands for (a) Time, (b) Opportunity, (c) Ability, and (d) Desire and stimulus. Its use prompts the following questions:

1. Does the person have the time and opportunity to complete the act of violence?
2. Do they have the ability to compete the attack (access to the means) and how strong is their desire to carry out the act?

Table 3 Risk factors for targeted school violence

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socially withdrawn • Isolated and alienated • Feels rejected • Violence/bullying victim • Feels persecuted/having been picked on • Low school interest and performance • Intolerance and prejudice • Drug and alcohol use • Affiliation with gangs • Expresses personal grievance/moral outrage • Thinking framed by ideology • Failure to affiliate with prosocial groups • Dependent on virtual community(ies) • Creative and innovative freedom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupational goals thwarted • Failure of sexual pair bonding • Mental disorder • Access to, and possession of, firearms • History of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent expressions in writings and drawings • Serious threats of violence • Uncontrolled anger • Impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, bullying • Discipline problems violence • Criminal violence
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Adapted from Amman et al. (2017), Dwyer et al. (1998), Meloy et al. (2011, 2014, 2015), Fein et al. (2004)

3. Is there a precipitating stimulus that would trigger an act of violence?
4. Does the person believe they can successfully carry out the act of violence?

Finally, de Becker (1997) discusses how being a danger to others is not a permanent state nor solely an attribute of a person; it is situational and based on JACA, which stands for (a) Justification, (b) Alternatives, (c) Consequences, and (d) Ability. Use of this acronym prompts the following questions:

1. Does the person feel justified in using violence?
2. Does the person perceive there are alternatives to violence that will obtain their desired outcome?
3. How does the person view the consequences associated with violent behavior?

Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth

In addition to good clinical interviews and identification of patterns, and supplementing the mnemonic devices just reviewed, there are published assessment tools that can guide the BTAM process. The Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY; Borum et al. 2006) is designed to be useful in intervention planning and ongoing progress monitoring. It is useful for youth ages 12 to 18 years, takes approximately 10 to 15 min to administer, and 10 min to score. It is comprised of 24 items in three

Table 4 Factors associated with warning signs of violent behavior

Targets	Increasing intensity of violence related	Emotional state
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persons • Places • Programs • Processes • Philosophies • Proxies of the above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts • Desires • Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hopelessness • Desperation • Despair • Suicidal thinking
Articulates motives	Direct and/or indirect communications about violence	– Increasing capacity to carry out threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Political • Religious • Racial/ethnic • Environmental • Special interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Words consistent with actions • Sees violence as acceptable/only solution Access to weapons or methods of planned harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engagement with social media facilitating or promoting violence – Intimate partner problems – Interpersonal conflicts

Amman et al. (2017), de Becker (n.d.), Fein et al. (2004), Langman (2009, 2015), Lyons et al. (2016), Meloy et al. (2011, 2014, 2015), Nicoletti and Spencer-Thomas (2002)

risk domains (Historical Risk Factors, Social/Contextual Risk Factors, and Individual/Clinical Factors) drawn from existing research and the professional literature on adolescent development and violence and aggression in youth. It is not a formal test or scale (there are no assigned numerical values or specified cutoff scores) and is based on using a model of structured professional judgment. Each risk item has a three-level rating structure (i.e., low, moderate, high) with specific rating guidelines and there are six protective factor items rated as either present or absent. It assesses both reactive and proactive aggression and can be used to guide risk reduction treatment interventions. It includes dynamic and changeable risk factors, which are important for assessing risk and determining the effectiveness of treatment and risk management interventions. The SAVRY asserts that risk is not necessarily simply the presence of risk factors. Thus, it also assesses for the presence of protective factors (e.g., strong social support or a strong bond with a positive authority figure; Borum et al. 2006).

Two validity studies have found the SAVRY helpful in predicting future serious delinquent acts (McGowan et al. 2011; Singh et al. 2011). The SAVRY has high predictive validity and in one study was found to correctly classified 82% of those adolescents who were nonviolent and 45% of those who were violent (McGowan et al. 2011).

The University of Virginia Model

The University of Virginia Model developed by Cornell and Sheras (2006) provides interview guidelines for responding to student threats of violence, advocates for a team approach, makes use of the U.S. Secret Service recommendations, and is listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (<https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/national-registry-evidence-based-programs>). It is a seven-step process that assesses for transient threats (not serious and readily resolved, often expressions of frustration or anger) for which the full involvement of the team is not needed and substantive threats (which are a serious intent to harm). A randomized control study (Cornell et al. 2012) indicated that, relative to a control group, students who were assessed using this model were more likely to receive counseling services and a parent conference and less likely to receive long-term suspension or an alternative placement. However, we feel that when using this model school administrators should consult with school-employed mental health professionals before deciding if the threat is transient or substantive. Our experience has found that there are often mental illness, risk factors, and/or warning signs of which administrators are often unaware.

Dallas Violence Risk Assessment Model

The Dallas Model assesses the viability and feasibility of a plan; prior academic, social, behavioral, and mental health histories; group affiliation; empathy; remorse; interpersonal skills; alcohol and drug use; and exposure to violence and abuse. While the reliability and validity was never rigorously tested, the authors suggest it to be a good, informal guide to supplement interviews and other data collection (Ryan-Arrendondo et al. 2001).

U.S. Secret Service Model

The Secret Service Model focuses on the facts of a specific case, examines the progression of ideas and planning behaviors over time, and corroborates information through multiple sources. It uses the following guiding principles: (a) targeted violence or threat to self is end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior; (b) targeted violence stems from an interaction between individual, situation, setting, and target; (c) risk assessment requires an investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset; (d) risk assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or traits; (e) an integrated systems approach is best; and (f) risk assessment strives to identify if a student poses a threat, not whether the student had made a threat (Vossekuil et al. 2002). Use of this model requires that when conducting interviews and gathering data, multiple variables are considered and include data regarding the perpetrator, target, setting, and situation.

BTAM Data Collection

Once a student has been identified as potentially having risk factors and warning signs of violence, constant adult supervision should be provided until the student of concern can be evaluated by a member of the BTAM team (ideally a school psychologist). It is from the data collected that a plan for addressing the risk is based. However, because threat assessment is not a frequently occurring school psychologist responsibility, it is essential that consultation takes place. In addition to reviewing the data with another school-employed mental health professional and a school administrator, consultation with law enforcement and more clinically oriented mental health professionals may also be warranted (Amman et al. 2017; Deisinger and Randazzo 2017).

An important data source is interviews, which are conducted with the student of concern, any intended victims, and others who may have knowledge related to the concern. The goals of the student interview are to (a) gather information about the grievance, motivations, and any plans; (b) identify additional interview contacts; (c) redirect person of concern away from known targets and violence; (d) offer appropriate

assistance; (e) deliver admonishments against future negative behaviors; and (f) serve as an effective deterrent by letting persons know their behavior has been noticed (Amman et al. 2017). Our experiences have suggested that a BTAM assessment should always begin with direct, matter of fact, and non-judgmental inquiry about the presence of violent thoughts. From the work of Borum et al. (1999), Fein et al. (2004), and Vossekuil et al. (2002), Table 5 offers additional key areas to assess and questions to ask when conducting risk assessments. It is important to recognize that less than 25% of cases included direct threats to the intended victims (Vossekuil et al. 2002). Thus, the risk factors and warning signs discussed earlier in this article need to be considered. Behavioral threat assessment requires a centralized data collection process that values multi-method and multi-source data collection as a person of concern can present differently in different settings. From our experiences, Table 6 summarizes the various data sources that should be reviewed.

Table 5 Threat assessment interview areas and questions

Interview areas for the student of concern:

1. Identify possible stressors.
2. Identify thoughts of revenge.
3. Identify experiences with and attitudes towards weapons.
4. Explore history of, attitudes, and interest towards violence; engagement in attack-related behaviors
5. Identify signs of depression, helplessness, and hopelessness.
6. Identify suicidal ideation.
7. Identify homicidal ideation.
8. Explore motivations for violence; communications of intent to others, capability of carrying out the plan; recent stressors
9. Identify additional psychiatric disorders.
10. Identify possible helping resources.

Question for family and/or friends include:

1. Has the student at risk told you of any ideas or plans to commit a violent act against the school? Against any specific person(s)? If so, describe these ideas or plans.
2. Has he or she taken any steps to act on these ideas or plans?

For school staff members, family and friends:

1. How organized is the student at risk?
2. How capable do you think he or she is of acting on his/her ideas?
3. How concerned do you think school staff members and family should be about the safety of the target(s)?

Questions to ask identified target:

1. How well do you know the student at risk of violence?
2. How well does this person know your work and personal lifestyle patterns?
3. What changes could make an attack less likely?
4. How seriously do you take this threat?
5. How concerned are you about your safety?

Adapted from Borum et al. (1999), Fein et al. (2004), Vossekuil et al. (2002)

Table 6 Behavioral threat assessment data sources

• Attendance records	• History of interventions or assessments: academic, behavioral, mental health, etc.
• Discipline referrals—types and history	• History of parent involvement
• Academic records and history	• History of frequent moves
• Special education records	• Interviews with subject and targets
• Medical records	• Comments from teachers
• Mental health evaluations	• Knowledge of current life circumstances
• Law enforcement records	

The availability of prosocial resources should also be evaluated. Helpful caregivers (Crepeau-Hobson 2013; Hall-Lande et al. 2007) and prosocial relationships, especially family relationships, are important to the mitigation of risk factors (Adrian et al. 2016). Thus, threat assessment must also include questioning regarding the degree to which the student is connected to significant others. Meloy and White (2016) use the mnemonic PROTECT to facilitate assessment of resources and resiliency. This acronym stands for (a) *Positive personal attachments*, (b) *Remorse is genuine*, (c) *Obeys limits*, (d) *Takes sanctioned actions to address grievances*, (e) *Enjoys life and freedom*, (f) *Coping skills are positive*, and (g) *Treatment compliance*.

Evaluating the Risk

Once the assessment is complete, the BTAM team determines level of concern, which in turn informs interventions. Amman et al. (2017) recommended that BTAM teams think and write in terms of “level of concern,” rather than level of risk as this better reflects the dynamic nature of warning behaviors, changing circumstances, and the effects of intervention. Depending on the approach or model being used, the classification can range from uncertain or low risk to imminent risk of carrying out the act of violence.

The school-based BTAM protocol has the goal of immediate prevention of harmful behaviors to others (and possibly self) and establishment of linkages between the student and long-term caregiving, safety, and mental health treatment resources. While the school should be a part of the long-term response, in moderate to high and imminent risk situations it cannot do so independently; school resource officers (or other law enforcement officials) will need to be engaged. In addition, mobilizing necessary resources (especially the student’s primary caregiver) and making referrals to qualified mental health professionals may also be warranted. As discussed below (and consistent with Amman et al. 2017), we suggest that level of concern be categorized into one of five different levels: (a) low, (b) moderate, (c) elevated, (d) high, and (e) imminent.

Low Concern The student with low risk has no current identified risk and no identifiable threat of violence or disruption. While a communication was received that caused concern, it may be confusing, unrealistic, or make no allusions to violence at all (Amman et al. 2017) and there is also no identifiable grievance or precipitants on horizon (Deisinger and Randazzo 2017). Often the communication appears to be more venting about an issue as a way to communicate frustration or an attempt to resolve a conflict, but no actual intent to harm is conveyed. Consequently, a BTAM intervention is not indicated, as there is no intention to harm others. However, given there were likely significant stressors and symptoms that lead to the referral in the first place and the possibility the student is lying or minimizing having harmful thoughts, referral for additional support and monitoring (informal or formal) may be indicated. Assuming that the student's distress was not associated with abuse, the student's primary caregivers are notified and informed about the reasons for concern. If abuse is associated with the student's distress, then a referral to child protective services is made instead of the caregiver notification.

Moderate Concern The student with a moderate risk of harming others is one who while acknowledging the presence of violent thoughts does not represent the intent to follow-through on their thoughts. Further, the student is unable to offer any specific details about a plan, they do not view their situation as hopeless or themselves as helpless, and they do not appear energized to act upon any fixations they might have or a need to get revenge. The communicated threat may explain an understandable grievance and the person may still be pursuing peaceful alternatives (Amman et al. 2017), particularly when supports in doing so are provided. In addition, the student of concern does not report feeling completely isolated or alone (they acknowledge that there is a significant other that they can turn to for support) and there are minimal risk factors and warning signs. There may be some ongoing precipitants that require minimal case management; thus, intervention supports and referrals should be provided, and passive monitoring for a time should also be initiated. Assuming there is no escalation of threats or violence-related behavior, these supports and monitoring can be terminated (Deisinger and Randazzo 2017). Again, assuming that the student's distress was not associated with abuse, primary caregivers are immediately notified. If abuse is associated with the student's distress, then a referral to child protective services is made instead of the caregiver notification. Before the student is released from adult supervision at school, a face-to-face meeting with primary caregivers (or protective services work as indicated) is held and recommendations given regarding needed supports (including mental health treatment) and monitoring.

Elevated Concern The communication of a student with elevated concern reflects an increase in intensity or severity in tone and content (Amman et al. 2017). Further, the student of concern acknowledges having relatively frequent and severe thoughts of violence and appears to pose a threat for violent behavior (often coupled with a risk for self-harm). The communication may also be directed or fixated on a cause or person and while the individual lacks immediacy or a specific and detailed plan (Deisinger and Randazzo 2017), escalation is noted and communication may reference a time imperative that suggest the student is losing patience (Amman et al. 2017). Thus, such cases require consultation with the school resource officer (or other appropriate law enforcement professional) and the development of a case management plan that includes active monitoring, supervision, and intervention supports, including mental health supports. Assuming that the student's distress was not associated with abuse, primary caregiver(s) are immediately notified. Before the student is released from adult supervision at school, a face-to-face meeting with caregivers is held to discuss supervision, monitoring, and interventions. If abuse is associated with the student's distress, then a referral to child protective services is made instead of the caregiver notification.

High Concern High concern exists when a student's language is less emotionally driven and more action-oriented. The student of concern is operating in more of a predatory mode. There is more of a terminal theme that the situation or relationship will soon be over and that action will be taken to achieve resolution or end a grievance. The person may also have the means, desire, and ability to carry out threatened violence and is accepting of the negative consequences resulting from any such act. While this is of high concern, in this risk category, violent behavior is not necessarily imminent as the exact time, place, or target is not identified in advance. However, violence is possible and could occur in the near future, particularly if there is a precipitating event (Amman et al. 2017) and interventions and supports are not provided. This situation is a potential psychiatric emergency, especially if there are mental health concerns and suicidal ideation. As indicated, the school may ask for the caregiver's consent to obtain and exchange confidential medical and mental health information to allow the risk assessor to confirm that the student has received the immediate care and to share the available risk assessment data to better ensure supervision, monitoring, and intervention supports. Assuming that the student's distress was not associated with abuse, primary caregivers are immediately notified. Before the student is released from adult supervision at school, a face-to-face meeting with caregivers is held to discuss the need for consistent supervision, monitoring, and intervention (including mental health treatment). If abuse is associated with the student's distress, then a referral to

child protective services is made instead of the caregiver notification.

Imminent Concern The student with an imminent risk for violent behavior is one who acknowledges having frequent and severe homicidal (and possibly suicidal) thoughts and has multiple risk factors and imminent warning signs with clear pathways to escalating violence. Differentiating this student from the one placed in the moderate to high-risk categories is the immediacy of a plan to harm others. This student not only has a plan but also has the means and desire to implement the plan within a short timeframe. Inhibitors to violence may be decreasing and life circumstances could be rapidly changing to force action within a shorter time frame. Communication also suggests the implementation of the plan has already begun, they have contemplated the death of others (and possibly their own suicide), and there is a stated desire to claim credit or leave a legacy (Amman et al. 2017). Pathway, energy burst, last resort, fixation, and novel aggression warning behaviors (see Table 2) are most likely present (Meloy et al. 2011, 2014). This situation is clearly a law enforcement emergency and requires law enforcement notification, immediate containment, target protection, a case management plan, and active monitoring (Deisinger and Randazzo 2017). Assuming that doing so does not put the any other students or school staff member in danger, it would also be appropriate to try to calm the student and prevent the student from leaving school until emergency responders arrive. Once the immediate emergency has been addressed, and assuming there are no concerns regarding abuse, the next step would be for the school to call the student's primary caregivers and inform them of the situation and the actions that had been taken.

Intervention Planning

Appropriate case management and intervention plans must address both the physical and psychological safety needs of the student(s) of concern and also the school community. There are often school climate issues (e.g., bullying or social isolation) and academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and underlying mental health challenges that need to be addressed. To mitigate the risk of violence, it is critical that interventions address all of these issues and challenges. Ongoing follow-up and support is critical to effective case management and a positive outcome.

Interventions may include skill building (e.g., teaching anger management, conflict resolution, social skills, problem solving, emotional regulation), direct academic support, and functional assessment and positive behavioral interventions. Sometimes a change of school may be indicated. Support in

and out of school should include monitoring and mental health treatment. Participation in school activities or clubs to increase connectedness, mentoring, family supports, wraparound services, and special education may also prove to be valuable interventions.

There are many monitoring measures that can be implemented. These include the Behavior Education Program, Check-in/Check-out (Crone et al. 2010), random checks, tracking attendance, and modifying the student's schedule (e.g., reducing the student's free and unsupervised time, minimize contact with other students contributing to stress or who were targeted). "No contact" agreements (also known as restraining orders) with intended targets maybe helpful but by themselves insufficient (Strand 2012), and there is even some evidence that they may actually increase the risk of gun violence (Kernsmith and Craun 2008). Additional interventions should include community agency involvement (e.g., wraparound services) and regular communication and collaboration between school staff and parents. It is critical that student monitoring is conducted to assess the effectiveness of interventions and the reduction of risk. Such helps to determine if and when monitoring can be faded.

There are various discipline considerations that may be relevant to BTAM. These range from apologies, implementing behavior contracts, and removing privileges to more intensive consequences such as detention, suspension, and expulsion. Regarding imminent risk situations, law enforcement may implement tracking (e.g., ankle monitors), ticketing, filing of criminal charges, probation, or even incarceration. de Becker et al. (2017) emphasize that intrusive strategies can escalate a situation. Thus, more intensive and intrusive consequences (e.g., school expulsion) need to be implemented only after careful thought and consideration by the BTAM team.

Cornell et al. (2012) report that more extreme consequences, such as suspension, can have negative effects such as sending the message that the student of concern is not wanted, promoting school disengagement, and depriving the student of instructional time. In other words, some of the more extreme consequences that may follow behavioral threat assessments could inadvertently make the situation worse. In addition, removing a student from the limits and supervision provided at school (i.e., suspending or expelling the student) can increase feelings of being out-of-control and contribute to the impulse to act out violently. In addition, when youth are not in school, they are *more* likely to become involved in a physical fight and to carry a weapon, smoke, and use alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine. Thus, adults need to be coached in how to approach discipline in a calm manner and to ensure the provision of supports that minimize escalation and disengagement. Supportive interventions are more effective in addressing the factors associated with violence than are extreme disciplinary consequences, such as school expulsion, alone.

Concluding Comments

A critical component to the successful establishment and implementation of a BTAM process is communication with, and support from, key stakeholders. This includes (a) training students, staff, and parents on risk factors and warning signs and how to recognize and confidentially report concerning behaviors; (b) educating the school board and parents about BTAM procedures and protocols to establish the authority to conduct assessments when needed; (c) collaborating with school resource officers (or other law enforcement professionals) in advance to clarify roles and responsibilities and to help develop procedures and protocols; (d) educating the community about prevention and response efforts; and (e) connecting with community agencies to identify community resources and supports for parents and students.

Fidelity of implementation is also critical. BTAM teams need to develop and review protocols and flow charts to ensure fidelity and that there are clearly defined roles and expectations for all team members. It is important to assign one person to manage the documents associated with BTAM efforts. Implementation fidelity is also facilitated by scheduling regular follow-up meetings, during which both reviews of students of concern and the BTAM process are discussed (Amman et al. 2017; Deisinger and Randazzo 2017; Goodrum and Woodward 2016; Kanan et al. 2016; Safe Havens International 2016).

In conclusion, the implementation and continuation of BTAM teams require that schools have a process that:

1. Utilizes an effective and relevant multidisciplinary approach
2. Is capable of addressing *all* threats
3. Enables centralized awareness of developing concerns through active outreach programs and consultations
4. Facilitates a thorough and contextual assessment
5. Implements proactive and integrated case management
6. Monitors and re-assesses cases on a longitudinal basis
7. Conducts all practices in accordance with relevant laws, policies, and standards of practice
8. Adapts to challenges and changing needs

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of both authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Dr. Melissa Reeves Ph.D., NCSP, LPC recently served as President of the National Association of School Psychologists (2016-17). She is currently an Associate Professor at Winthrop University, SC in the psychology department and school psychology graduate program and a senior consultant with Sigma Threat Management Associates. Dr. Reeves is a nationally certified school psychologist, licensed special education teacher, licensed professional counselor, and former district coordinator of social/emotional/behavioral services. She has over 20 years' experience working in public schools and a private school, in addition to providing mental health services in day and residential treatment settings. Dr. Reeves is a co-author of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention curriculum and former Chair of the NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee. She travels both nationally and internationally training professionals in the areas of school crisis prevention through recovery, threat and suicide assessment, the impact of trauma on academic achievement, and works with schools on establishing a positive and safe school climate. She has conducted more than 250 workshops and presentations and has also provided consultation and staff development to professionals in the United States Department of Defense Educational Activity Schools located on various military installations. Dr. Reeves is co-author of four books and multiple publications.