For administrators at the secondary level, not many school days go according to plan or script, but few things are more disruptive than a student threat of violence. When threats are made—or if there is a rumor of a serious student threat—it can take both time and resources to investigate, interview, and analyze multiple pieces of information in a quest for answers and appropriate solutions.

A threat may be a voiced intention to hurt or seriously injure another student or a staff member. Sometimes it is indirect and made against the educational institution. Whatever the threat may be, these incidents are usually multidimensional and must be reviewed and understood from a variety of perspectives. And principals must not only investigate the threat as rumors are spread and information is shared, but they must also convince staff members, students, parents, and even themselves that the school is still a safe and orderly place to educate children. Such is the case with the following event.

The Scenario
Several male students approach you, the principal of a secondary school, after school to ask what you know about the rumor that there will be a shooting during the assembly at school tomorrow. You tell them that you know nothing about the rumor, and they seem surprised and agree to come to the office to discuss what they know. When you question the students further, you learn that a freshman was recently talking to others at an off-campus party about getting friends together to “shoot up” students and staff members at a school assembly. You know that the student has a history of truancy and failing grades, but no major disciplinary problems.

The following questions may arise and influence how you proceed as you begin to process this limited information:
- Has a threat actually been made or is this just an unfounded rumor?
- Are there immediate steps that need to be taken to ensure safety before investigating the threat?
Principals must be prepared to take all threats and rumors of student violence seriously.

A threat assessment team and a written protocol enable a deliberate and thorough response that keeps the school calm and also swiftly reduces the threat.

Resources from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Education can help principals and schools develop a threat assessment protocol.
What do you know about the alleged perpetrator, his peer group and family, and the students providing the original information?

Does the student or his friends actually pose a threat or did they just make a threat?

How should the investigation begin and who should be investigated?

What questions should be asked?

Will the investigation cause undue apprehension and fear for parents, students, and staff members? If so, how can concerns be minimized?

Could this type of thing really happen at my school?

The Research
Fortunately for school administrators, research is available on student threats of violence that provides guidance for how to proceed as well as how to analyze what is learned during the investigation. Since 1998, the U.S. Department of Education, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Secret Service have collaborated and provided educators with research about and recommendations for systematically investigating these types of disruptive incidents. In May 2008, the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education published Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack about why a bystander provided—or chose not to provide—essential information to school personnel before an act of school violence was committed. All of these documents are in the public domain and can be ordered free of charge from the publishing agency.

Assessing and Categorizing Threats
When a threat of violence is made, it is necessary to establish, on the basis of the known facts, its level of seriousness. The principal is usually the gatekeeper during this initial assessment, during which a threat assessment team attempts to reach some answers about how the investigation will begin and who will be investigated. Using a team approach at the beginning of the inquiry can give principals additional support as they filter through the data to make an informed decision.
Although school personnel must take all threats seriously, some will garner a higher level of response because of what is known about them. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1999), threats may be categorized by three levels—low, medium, and high:

- **Low level threats** are generally vague and may lack realism. Information may be inconsistent, and there may be little indication that the student would actually carry through with the threat.

- **Medium level threats** are usually more direct, seem plausible, and indicate that the student has taken preliminary steps to prepare for an attack. The threat in the example scenario might be placed at this level.

- **High level threats** appear to pose a more imminent danger to an individual or an institution because they contain direct language about a specific target. There may even be an indication the attack has been planned or practiced.

If the principal and the threat assessment team determine that the threat level is low, they may handle it as a disciplinary matter only, with the investigation conducted by one or two members of the team. If, on the other hand, the principal and the threat assessment team determine that the threat level is medium or high, the team should begin the process of investigating the situation in more detail. It also may be advisable to use a preestablished threat protocol: an agreement between a law enforcement agency, juvenile authorities, and a school district that outlines the expectation of response for each agency. Its use may result in taking a student into protective police custody while further investigation is conducted.

### The Threat Assessment Team

The threat assessment team should be selected on the basis of expertise, position, or knowledge of the threatener. The team should consist of an administrator, a nurse, a counselor, a social worker, a school resource officer, and at least one of the student’s teachers. Other personnel can be added as needed. If the student receives special education services, the team should also include at least one special education teacher, either the case manager or the chairperson of the special education department. The team should systematically gather information from a variety of sources and then convene as a group to discuss the totality of the information. At the first meeting, the team should review the student’s grade history and discipline records, contact with the school counselor or the social worker, and so forth. Though formal debriefings may be scheduled, the principal should be continually assessing incoming information for any need to change the threat level.

### Who Should Be Interviewed?

Just as it is advantageous to have a number of individuals with different areas of expertise as part of the team, it is beneficial to gather additional data by interviewing a variety of people. Suggested interviewees include the threatener and his or her parents, teachers, friends, and counselors; anyone who witnessed the student making the threat; selected individuals from previous schools that the threatener attended; juvenile authorities (if applicable); and the victim.

### What Should Be Asked?

The team’s investigation should attempt to uncover information about the student’s family dynamics, peer groups, perceptions of the school environment, and personality traits. Some of the information solicited should include:

- **Family dynamics:** What is the relationship between the student and his or her parents? Are there weapons in the home? Have the parents set limits on the student’s access to the media and the Internet?

- **Peer groups:** Are drugs or alcohol a factor? Is the student fascinated with violent behavior? Could the student be copying another incident of school violence?

- **Perceptions of school environment:** Does the student perceive that the school has an inflexible culture or inequitable discipline? Does the student believe that school personnel tolerate such disrespectful behavior as bullying, harassment, and intimidation? Is the student connected to school in any positive way?
Personality traits: Does the student exhibit signs of anger management issues? Does the student socialize with a closed social group? Does the student have any behaviors that lead team members to think that he or she will actually follow through with the threat?

Team Collaboration
After initially questioning school personnel, witnesses, victims, and so forth, team members should reconvene to discuss what they discovered and to determine whether or not the student made a threat and, if so, whether the student actually poses a threat. Determining whether the student poses a threat is important to the future direction of the investigation. There is a difference between making a threat and posing a threat. Not every student who verbalizes a threat actually intends to carry out an act of extreme violence. Although team members should realize that they must work quickly, they must also take care to be thorough and comprehensive. The team must have adequate time to gather appropriate documentation, which then should guide the process.

On the basis of the information that was uncovered during the investigation, the threat assessment team determines the threat level, which may be the same as the level that was originally determined by the principal and the team or may be altered on the basis of data and facts that were gathered during the investigation. If the team determines that the threat is not credible, it can be handled as a disciplinary investigation only and the police can be notified at the discretion of the administrator. If the threat is credible, a district protocol can be used, and if law enforcement officials are not already involved, they should be notified immediately. It is important to remember that at any time during the investigation, principals may decide that it is prudent to involve local law enforcement officials. When it comes to school safety, it is always wise to err on the side of caution.

Conclusion
Principals know that for students to achieve at optimum levels, the school environment must be safe and orderly, and they also know that rumors and innuendo about threats of violence can have a detrimental effect on safety and order. Parents and community members expect school personnel to have a plan to maintain a safe environment for students and to follow that plan during a crisis. When threats of violence occur, everyone in the school community feels comfort in knowing that there is a process in place to systematically and methodically investigate the facts surrounding the threat.

REFERENCE


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Threat reported to the principal

The principal pulls the team together; the team determines the initial threat level

Low level threat
- Handled as discipline investigation
- Police called at the discretion of the principal
  - If the threatener is a special education student, consider convening the IEP team to review or develop a behavior intervention plan

Medium level threat
- Noncredible: handled as discipline investigations
- Police called at the discretion of the principal
  - If the threatener is a special education student, consider convening the IEP team to review or develop a behavior intervention plan

High level threat
- Credible: handled using the district’s threat protocol
- Police and juvenile and mental health services notified
  - If the threatener is a special education student, consider convening the IEP team to review or develop a behavior intervention plan

Noncredible: handled as discipline investigations
- Noncredible: handled as discipline investigations
- Police called at the discretion of the principal
  - If the threatener is a special education student, consider convening the IEP team to review or develop a behavior intervention plan

Credible: handled using the district’s threat protocol
- Credible: handled using the district’s threat protocol
- Police and juvenile and mental health services notified
  - If the threatener is a special education student, consider convening the IEP team to review or develop a behavior intervention plan