Chapter 4
Threat Assessment in School Violence

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Every time a high profile act of violence occurs at school, attention turns to the prevention of school violence. School violence affected 37 communities across the United States between 1974 and June 2000. The Columbine incident that took place in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999, imprinted the most violent of school attacks on American minds when 14 students and a teacher lost their lives. According to the U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice (1999), over 60 million students attend over 100,000 schools and most will not fall prey to serious violence in schools, but Americans would like to know if they could have known about any attack planning and if they could have done anything to prevent such school violence.

Coie and Jacobs (1993) and Elias and Tobias (1996) have documented that prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce violence and other troubling behaviors in schools. Cornell (1998) and Quinn et al. (1998) indicate that research-based practices can help school communities recognize the warning signs early and that promising prevention and intervention strategies that involve the entire educational community, administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members can make school safer. However, not all schools provide comprehensive violence prevention plans.

Some schools opt for solutions like installing metal detectors or hiring a security guard, while others recognize that violence prevention calls for a comprehensive approach that infuses every aspect of school life. Bus and playground safety, Internet use policies, gang prevention, classroom management, anti-bullying policies, and identification and early intervention with students who are struggling psychologically encompass important areas of school safety. Effective efforts both protect the physical safety of students and staff and promote positive learning and social development.

The proven fundamentals of violence prevention include strategies that are child focused and support learning. Schools must balance building security with efforts that foster student resiliency, connectedness, and social competency. Specifically schools should create welcoming, nurturing school climates; enforce positive behavior and discipline for all students; support student mental health and wellness; develop and regularly review crisis and threat assessment plans; train staff in crisis
procedures and risk factors for violence; maintain appropriate building security; develop collaborative relationships with local law enforcement and community services providers; and strengthen home–school connections. School safe plans in which students, teachers, and administrators pay attention to students’ social and emotional needs as well as academic needs will promote a climate of school safety.

Staying focused on student needs and outcomes also makes violence prevention efforts more effective at one extreme end of the violence spectrum: threat assessment. Threat assessment is perhaps one of the most difficult areas in violence prevention because there is no single profile of a student who may pose a real threat and no assured way to predict if a student will become violent. As noted in Columbine and Springfield, troubled students can commit an act of violence without making a direct threat. Those in school settings need to learn to do two things—assess threats and work with at-risk students.

Trained school mental health professionals can help assess the multiple factors that put a student at risk and work with other members of crisis teams and professionals in the community to provide appropriate interventions. A process that focuses solely on identification, without intervention, will neither help the potential offender nor necessarily improve safety. A major problem that schools face is that most counselors, psychologists, and administrators in schools are not trained specifically in threat assessment or in violence prevention. School personnel can be involved in a threat assessment inquiry while most threat assessment investigations are left to law enforcement officials. Threat assessment inquiries can help school personnel make critical decisions about responding to situations involving the threat of targeted school violence and the assessment of threats themselves can help establish the need for immediate intervention if a threat has been received by a school. Too many children come to school in pain, feeling lonely, and face desperation and despair.

When adults and students respect each other, when students have a positive connection to at least one adult, and when students feel free to help friends and openly share concerns about students who are in distress, a good school climate for safety is created. A key element is teaching students how to share concerns about others. The U.S. Department of Education published a booklet, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. This booklet lists signs of at-risk students. At-risk signs can be taught to teachers, staff members, parents, and school student bodies. Everyone, including students, should be encouraged to watch for students exhibiting those signs and report to adults. When these signs are reported, a counselor, psychologist, or social worker should investigate the child to determine if there are serious problems lurking that need attention. This document came with a strong warning that warning signs should not be used to label students, but the warning signs can be a talking point to help students realize when one of their classmates may need adult assistance. This is not intended to be a PROFILE for violent students. Rather it is an at-risk list that should prompt officials to provide counseling and other services to students who may be having problems. Table 4.1 lists many characteristics of at-risk students.