Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is a multidisciplinary, fact-based, systematic process designed to identify, assess, and manage potentially dangerous or violent situations. The purpose of the BTAM team is to identify, evaluate, and address potential threats to help schools distinguish between incidents where a student made a threat that is not actually legitimate (with no intent to harm) and other incidents in which the student does pose an actual threat of targeted violence. In all cases, the goal is to pair the student with proper school and community-based intervention and supports. The systematic and proper implementation of BTAM helps avoid impulsive and potentially harmful decisions that can lead to over management (i.e., unnecessary suspension and expulsion) and requires teams to take into account the context and disability rather than using a zero-tolerance approach.

BTAM is not a substitute for school teams and processes that address nonviolent behaviors of concern, nor is it a disciplinary process or a mechanism to allow schools to remove children from school because they have behaviors that are difficult to manage. In fact, BTAM is most effective when it is embedded within a comprehensive multitiered system of support (MTSS) and other efforts to promote a positive school climate and effective and positive discipline practices. When not done properly, or when the process is not used in the context of threatening behavior, students may be misidentified or labeled, not provided with necessary interventions and supports, unnecessarily suspended or expelled, or unnecessarily referred to the juvenile justice system. As such, it is imperative that BTAM processes are followed with fidelity and in accordance with IDEA, Section 504, FERPA, and other civil rights and privacy laws. (For more detailed information see: Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management: Best Practice Considerations for K–12 Schools and Upholding Student Civil Rights and Preventing Disproportionality in Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management.)

ESTABLISH PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES

To facilitate data-based and objective decisions and minimize the risk of erroneous decisions based on profiling characteristics, personal biases, or misperceptions, school boards should adopt BTAM policy and procedures that contain the following elements: (a) established authority for school professionals to act on reported threats or concerning behaviors and provide guidance on the establishment of a best practice model; (b) establishment of a well-trained, multidisciplinary school or district-level BTAM team with clear expectations of roles and duties of all members; (c) establishment of integrated and interagency systems, relationships, and partnerships; (d) awareness training for staff, students, parents, and community partners; and (e) proactive and preventive social and emotional initiatives and mechanisms for providing comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services; (f) confidential reporting procedures; (g) clear guidelines for information sharing; and (h) procedures for determining disciplinary action when warranted.

ESTABLISHING AND IMPLEMENTING THE BTAM PROCESS

The eight steps below outline the critical components to be included in a high-quality BTAM process.

Step 1. Establish a Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team

The BTAM team must be carefully selected, be appropriately trained, and have collective expertise in school administration, mental health, academic instruction, and law enforcement. The core BTAM team must include an administrator, *at least* one school mental health professional (e.g., school psychologist), and a school resource officer (SRO)/law enforcement officer. Roles and responsibilities must be explicitly defined and understood by all involved. Back up team members also need to be trained and accessible to fill in when primary team members are unavailable. When the student of concern or potential target has a disability or speaks a language other than English, the BTAM team must include members who understand working with individuals with disabilities and those who speak a language other than English. The school administrator maintains ultimate responsibility for ensuring team members carry out their assigned roles.

Step 2. Define Prohibited and Concerning Behaviors

The school community needs to be educated on behaviors that are unacceptable and how to recognize and report when someone is struggling and is at risk for potential harm to self or others, such as possessing a weapon, making violent verbal threats or concerning social media posts, or showing sharp changes in behavior.

Step 3. Develop a Central Reporting Mechanism

Various methods for reporting can include directly reporting to a trusted adult, a tip line, a reporting app, email, voice mail, link on the school/district website, or 911 call. It is important to have more than one confidential method to report, and students, staff, and families need to be explicitly trained on how and what to report and what is not appropriate to report via these methods. The BTAM teams also need to be aware of any cultural implications that may affect willingness to report because of past community traumas or historical incidents that make it feel acceptable to disclose serious incidents to those in authority.

Step 4. Determine the Threshold for Law Enforcement Intervention

While law enforcement should be part of the BTAM team, they do not necessarily need to participate in every BTAM case. However, if the threat is legitimate and mitigation actions need to be taken, an SRO/law enforcement officer may become engaged in a consultative or direct role. SROs and other law enforcement officers must be properly selected and trained to work in schools. If the law enforcement officer is not a district staff member, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) may need to be developed that outlines the relationship between school staff and law enforcement and outlines what law enforcement responsibilities will be in the BTAM process.

Step 5. Establish Assessment Procedures

An effective BTAM process is designed to identify, inquire, assess, and manage. Clear and confidential reporting mechanisms help to *identify* the subject/situation whose behavior or impact has raised concern. The BTAM team then conducts an *inquiry* to gather additional data in a lawful and ethical manner and *assesses* information regarding situation, context, and developmental or disability factors to determine if the subject/situation *poses* a threat of violence or harm to self or others. The situation is then *managed* by implementing problem solving supports and, if warranted, an intervention and monitoring plan to prevent harm where possible and to reduce/mitigate impact of the situation. It is critical that the BTAM team stay objective when reviewing the facts of the case, as fear and emotions frequently affect why a person considers a threat an actual threat. The BTAM team also needs to take into consideration their own biases to ensure this process does not contribute to the disproportionality that exists within disciplinary practices.

Step 6. Develop Risk Management Options

The BTAM team should consider all data, including risk and protective factors, and identify the level of concern (low, moderate, high, imminent), which will guide the team in directive actions and supports to be taken. *It is important*

to note that levels of concern are **not** to be used to predict human behavior or to automatically determine a change of educational placement but are to be used to design interventions and supports. There is no magic or mathematical formula or a specific number of risk factors and warning signs that determine any specific level.

Interventions and Management

The BTAM team should develop a written plan that assists the individual of concern who engaged in threatening behaviors. Interventions, which could include school and community-based supports, should focus on building resiliency and protective factors for the student while also addressing safety concerns. Punitive measures, such as suspension and expulsion, can *increase* risk. Disconnecting the student of concern from monitoring and supports can further escalate emotions and isolate the person from the school and social environment. Thus, these types of consequences should be implemented only after careful team consideration, and they should always be paired with supportive interventions.

It is important for BTAM teams to document the actions taken to support their good faith efforts to identify, inquire/investigate, assess, and manage threatening situations. Each district should obtain guidance from their own legal counsel regarding the management of threat assessment records. Decisions on record keeping are important, as maintaining records establishes a legal and behavioral justification for intervention.

Monitor Progress and Stay Engaged

For situations determined to be of low risk, informal monitoring may be sufficient. For those subjects determined to be of moderate, high, or imminent risk, more formalized progress monitoring will need to be implemented, and it is highly recommended that follow-up meetings are scheduled to review progress and responsiveness to interventions and supports. It is important to reevaluate the plan and make adjustments as needed.

Step 7. Create and Promote Safe School Climates

Prevention and mitigation rely on relationships and connectedness amongst students, staff members, and the community. Individuals must respect, trust, and empower one another to report concerns, and all must feel as if they belong. Schools should incorporate wellness promotion and social–emotional learning curricula, and they should routinely analyze academic, behavioral, and social–emotional data in order to make data-based decisions regarding prevention and intervention programs needed.

Step 8. Conduct Training for All Stakeholders

School safety is the responsibility of all. All stakeholders (students, teachers, support staff, coaches, mentors, parents, community members) must receive explicit training so they know how and when to report threats. BTAM team members needs high-quality training that equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement the pre-K–12 BTAM process with fidelity. It is imperative that the selected BTAM model is validated, uses a multidisciplinary approach, and is standardized yet flexible enough to meet varying resources. At minimum, administrators, school mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors, social workers), and SROs should all be trained, preferably together in teams.

An effective and appropriate BTAM process integrates these best practice guidelines and is critical to saving lives, enhancing school safety, and ensuring legal and ethical guidelines are followed.

KEY RESOURCES

Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates
- https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Plans
- https://www.rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf

National Association of School Psychologists

- A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools
  https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-framework
- School Safety and Crisis Resources
  http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis
- PREPaRE School Safety and Crisis Response Training Curriculum
  http://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

- https://www.pbis.org/

U.S. Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center

- https:/rems.ed.gov/

School Safety https://www.schoolsafety.gov/

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