

# Threat assessment teams are making a positive impact in Virginia schools, says study

May 13 2015, by Audrey Breen

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The presence of threat assessment teams in Virginia's public schools is making a positive impact, according to a [report](#) released today that analyzed the teams during the first year they were required by state law.

"A threat assessment team is a multi-disciplinary team of [school](#) staff available to help students involved in a crisis or in a conflict that includes a threat of violence," said Dewey Cornell, professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project. "The team usually includes administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, school resource officers and other staff who work toward the goal of helping students solve conflicts or concerns before they escalate into violence."

State legislation required local school boards to establish threat assessment teams for each public school, effective July 1, 2013.

The Virginia model of threat assessment is an approach to violence prevention that emphasizes early attention to problems such as bullying, teasing and other forms of student conflict.

"Many schools in Virginia have been using threat assessment for as long as a decade, and we have good evidence that it works," Cornell said. "Schools using this approach have seen substantial reductions in school suspensions and other indications of improved student behavior."

According to today's report, produced by the Curry School's Virginia Youth Violence Project in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services and the Virginia Department of Education, a sample of 810 schools reported a total of 3,283 threat assessment cases processed during the 2013-14 school year. In 96 percent of the cases reported, there was no known attempt to carry out the threat. In the remaining cases, there was a fight or assault, but no serious injuries.

One goal of the assessment teams is to appropriately respond to students who are making threats, as opposed to so-called "zero-tolerance" policies, which typically treat all threats equally and often result in a student's removal from school. In contrast to zero-tolerance policies, "threat assessment gives school authorities a safe, practical and effective way to address threatening behavior by students," Cornell said.

The report reveals that the majority of threats were identified by faculty members, though others identifying threats included students, administrators, other school staff members and even parents.

High schools had a lower prevalence of threats than both elementary and middle schools.

The report includes information on the characteristics of threats made and the schools' responses them. The majority of students making threats received disciplinary consequences and support services that permitted them to return to school.

According to Cornell, the report reveals a successful start to the implementation of the 2013 legislation.

"Our results show that many schools are using threat assessment with good results," he said. "Schools are continuing to receive training and refine their procedures."

Cornell is leading a project funded by a research grant from the National Institute of Justice, the scientific research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, to evaluate the statewide implementation of threat assessment. This work is part of a nationwide effort to develop comprehensive strategies, practices and policies to make the nation's students and schools safer. In future years, the grant will provide for additional training and technical assistance to Virginia's threat assessment teams.

"The commonwealth of Virginia is leading the nation in this work around threat assessment," said Donna Michaelis, manager of the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety in the Department of Criminal Justice Services. State legislation mandated threat assessment teams in Virginia's public institutions of higher education following the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech.

According to the Huffington Post, Virginia is the only state in the U.S. that requires its public schools to implement threat assessment teams.

The findings in this report are preliminary, based only on the first year of data collected from the school-based teams. The researchers will continue to collect data and report on school safety outcomes through the duration of the National Institute of Justice-supported project.

**More information:** "Threat Assessment in Virginia Schools: Technical Report of the Threat Assessment Survey for 2013-2014"  
[www.dcjs.virginia.gov/vcscs/documentSurvey5-12-15.pdf](http://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/vcscs/documentSurvey5-12-15.pdf)

Provided by University of Virginia

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