

K-12 threat assessment teams prove effective, without racial bias

March 18 2016, by Audrey Breen



A [report released today](#) examining the 2014-15 school-year implementation of Virginia public schools' threat assessment teams shows, in addition to continued success in keeping schools safe, the

teams' disciplinary actions revealed no racial disparities.

"This finding confirms on a statewide level what we have seen in smaller studies, which is that schools using a threat assessment approach are not making disciplinary decisions that punish minority [students](#) at a disproportionate rate," said Dewey Cornell, professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project.

In [a 2013 report](#), Virginia schools were found to suspend black male students at twice the rate of white males.

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.

"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," Cornell said.

The team usually includes administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, school resource officers and other staff members who work toward the goal of helping students solve conflicts or concerns before they escalate into violence.

"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, the

state's 1,958 public schools reported a total of 3,172 student threats to harm others during 2014-15 school year. Examination of a sample of 1,985 cases found that 99 percent of the threats were resolved without a violent incident. About 1 percent of the cases resulted in a fight or physical assault, but no serious injuries were reported.

The report contains a new analysis of racial differences in disciplinary consequences for students. A comparison of white, black and Hispanic students whose behavior prompted threat assessments revealed no [racial disparities](#) in disciplinary outcomes including suspension, expulsion rates, school transfer, arrests by law enforcement or incarceration in juvenile detention.

"These findings are important because racial disparities in school discipline are a concern nationwide and in Virginia, where black students are often suspended at twice the rate of white students," Cornell said.

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.

Consistent with this goal, the report found that fewer than half of the students making threats received a short-term suspension from school.

Overall, approximately 84 percent of students were able to return to their original school, with most of the others transferred to a different school or assigned to receive instruction at home. Approximately 1 percent of students were expelled and 1 percent were arrested.

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.

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.

The findings in this report confirm and extend [a previous report](#) based on results from the 2013-14 school year. The researchers will continue to collect data and report on school safety outcomes through the duration of the National Institute of Justice-supported project.

Provided by University of Virginia

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