

The Bill Blackwood
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Threat Management and Assessment in an Educational Setting

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ABSTRACT

At issue are the ability of school districts to correctly assess and management threats to the school. Recent events of school violence indicate that there are several methods that have been developed for utilization by school districts. Included are methods to assess threats and management to maximize safety of all.

The purpose of the research is to develop and understanding of the problem and to see if larger school districts have taken advantage of these methods. Additionally the research focuses on if recent events have prompted school districts to address the issue.

Research indicated that most large school districts have not developed plans to address threat issues as a result of school violence reports. This research was done at annual US Department of Education meetings of top school security officials. The additional research showed that after September 11, 2001, most large school districts now have modern plans to address a variety of threat issues. The research leads the author to conclude that while school violence issues were not addressed by school districts, the terrorist acts of "9-11" motivated them to design plans to address these and other issues.

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Introduction

Recent tragedies of school violence place a burdensome responsibility on school administrators as well as law enforcement officials. Community expectations to have crime-free schools as well as the troubling concept of possible multiple murders occurring in a school place a demand on officials who are either not prepared nor trained in proper methods of handling these situations. Threats have existed for years in schools, however the recent events dictate that they be responded to and neutralized to the fullest extent possible.

This project aims to identify and give understanding of proper procedural issues that impact the management and proper assessment of handling threats at a school. First an examination of methods used by various officials will be conducted to determine if there are common issues throughout the country. This examination will be conducted by use of surveys of the largest school districts in the country as well as reading selected texts from experts in the area. Additionally, this research will look at the various models that are available to understand the difference in thinking among officials. The relationship

between law enforcement officials and school administrators will be addressed to determine different facets of the approach and dual or overlapping roles will be identified.

Further, establishing training for officials will be addressed. While there is no mandate for training or special units in this area, public expectations are that these issues will be appropriately handled those charged with the responsibility (*Salas v Carpenter* 980 F.2d 299 (5th Cir. 1992)).

Lastly this project will address the issues of a multi-disciplinary approach to handling these situations and a careful examination of one school districts approach to addressing these issues. It will look at the pitfalls of over-aggressive implementation of a zero-tolerance approach of school districts.

Implications of this research are far reaching. This research will show that while many agencies are doing a good job of evaluating threats, there is no standard used by authorities. Additionally, research will show that authorities are spending resources on subjects that do not present a clear danger to schools. Officials have a responsibility to keep schools safe yet not trample on the rights of students who express themselves.

Expected strategies can be developed to address the safety needs of particular schools. Furthermore it is expected that citizens of the community will embrace the use of these findings as schools become more secure.

Review of Literature

School violence is not a new issue of current times. The third largest mass murder situation in recorded U.S history occurred on May 18th, 1927. In this event, 43 persons were killed and 58 people were injured. It occurred at a small 250-student school in Bath, Michigan. It is the largest violent event on schools grounds and the third largest mass murder in U.S. history. It is only surpassed by the horrific terrorist acts of September 11th 2001 at the World Trade Center and Washington D.C. and the Oklahoma City Alfred Murrah Federal Building bombing in 1995 (Mahondie, 2000).

School violence has actually decreased considerably since 1993(U.S. Department of Education, 1999). However there is an increased fear among parents, students and staff as a result of recent school shootings. As a result of these fears, many school districts have adopted a "zero tolerance" approach to supposedly approach the issue. This approach is so flawed, that school administrators are

suspending six-year-old kindergarten students for playing "cops and robbers"(Mohondie, 2000).

Types of threats that impact our society range from specific uttered threats (F.B.I., 2000) to warning signs that are exhibited that clearly indicate a threat exists (Mohandie, 2000). This failure among experts to agree on common terms may lead to persons responsible for school security to overlook key issues. Those charged with protecting our students have a difficult challenge ahead, which is further compounded by the events of September 11th, 2001. While concerns prior to that day were somewhat limited to events similar to recent school shootings, consideration must now include possible foreign terrorist acts.

Regarding acts limited to school violence of the type experienced in tragic school shootings, careful analysis is given to possible planned attacks. In over half of recent school shootings analyzed by the National Threat Assessment Center, attacks by these offenders were planned at least two days prior to the attack (U.S. Secret Service, 2000). Additional planning must be given to the possibility that school security resources are being funneled towards shooting situations and overlooking far more prevalent threats. According to Bill Modzelski, Director Safe and

Drug Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, "The trauma of school shootings is clear, but you can't ignore the other things that go on in schools -- fighting, theft, harassment, bullying," (Modzelski, W. as cited in CNNfyi.com, 2001).

Methodology

At issue is the seemingly haphazard way official's responsible for school security address needs of the community. These officials include law enforcement, local government and school officials. Questions need to be answered on standardization of terminology as well and standards of evaluation.

Proposed is the thought provoking analysis that many officials are not approaching the problem from an adequate perspective. While there are many individual thoughts on the problem, special focus will be given to those publications authored by experts in the industry. Special emphasis will be placed on documents published by federal agencies as well as those experts who have been recognized as experts in a court of law. Surveys of the U.S. Department of Education will be evaluated to see what various large school districts are doing regarding threats. This survey was sent to 37 of the largest school districts.

Of the 37 districts surveyed, 14 did not respond. This document will be analyzed from the perspective of those that reported violent incidents and how many have a formal program that addressed threats.

A specific survey addressing criteria pertinent to this research will be distributed to school security and police chiefs. Contained in this instrument will be specific programs that address threat assessment and threat management. Additionally it will determine levels of involvement of the various components that are thought to be involved in this task.

Findings

Of the 23 survey returns conducted by the Department of Education research is reflected in Chart 1. These school districts had no plans at all to address threats to a school. Of the school districts that did have plans, most do not address the need of involvement of local law enforcement officers. Additionally, these districts use school discipline as a method of managing threats.

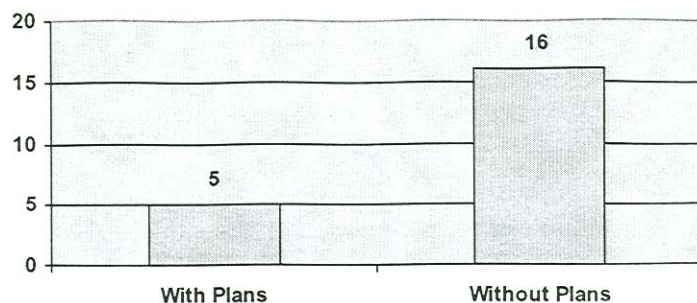


Chart 1. Departments with and without formal threat Assessment/Management plans (Oct 2000)

Additional research was performed after terrorist events of September 11, 2001 that significantly changed the finding of the earlier survey. Now most of the largest school districts have adopted plans that address events that pose a threat to students. These plans include addressing the original focus of this paper (school violence), and now include terrorist acts.

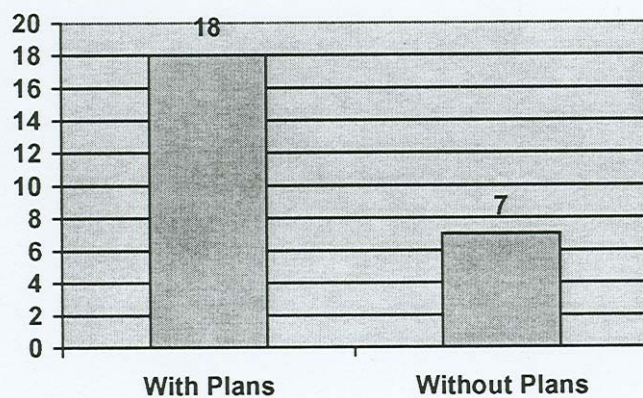


Chart 2 Departments with and without formal threat Assessment/Management plans (Oct 2001)

CONCLUSIONS

The change in finding from surveys conducted one-year apart question the motivation of change exhibited of the various school districts. It appears that these events showed school districts that major events could have an impact on a school. The later research shows clearly schools are becoming more aware of events in the world that could possibly affect schools. While standards are still not in place to provide a common response to violence in schools, most school districts have adopted policies and procedures to address a wide range of topics.

Issues that have been addressed by school districts now include such items as response to potential biological threats, chemical threats etc. A review of local law enforcement agencies shows that most issues of the potential school shooter have been addressed. However most school districts still not have a plan to address students that may pose a risk. They merely have a plan with dealing with the aftermath, not the prevention.

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