Prevention of School Violence:
Student Threat Assessment and Related Approaches

Gaps, Opportunities and Recommendations

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for

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Introduction

Early in 2017, Calgary and Area RCSD initiated a project to gather information on student threat assessment (STA) from the literature and existing approaches used by regional partners. The goal of the project was to inform planning and decision-making around the possibility and feasibility of developing a regional approach to STA as one of several approaches being taken by schools and their partners for prevention of student-perpetrated violence. The project had three information gathering components:

a) Synthesis of information on approaches and related research from the research and grey literatures;
b) Description of existing approaches in the region and comparison with selected external approaches; and,
c) Collection of the views on STA and STA options for Calgary and Area RCSD from representatives of key partner sectors.

This set of gaps, opportunities and recommendations was developed from scientific evidence and expert views about progressive practice as extracted from the scientific and grey literature, the comparison of existing approaches of partners with external, including evidence-based approaches, as well as from frequently expressed views and values of Working Group members and Key Informants. There was not a formal process for documenting consensus on the items, but there was an encouraging level of consistency among sources of information and agreement among Working Group members on key issues. The comprehensiveness and validity of the gaps, opportunities and recommendations are limited by the data available to the project.

Calgary & Area RCSD Student Threat Assessment and Related Approaches: Gaps

- There is significant disparity in STA capacity/expertise across partner organizations.
- Currently the process is only available to some organizations; and can only be initiated by school districts.
- Physical security approaches appear to be more developed than psychological security approaches, which reflects the state of many other jurisdictions, although the policy direction now places more emphasis on the latter.
- The connection between STA approaches that are in place to broader violence prevention initiatives in their organizations, in the community and with current government policies are not well articulated.
- There is innovation in STA and broader approaches that does not appear to be well tapped.
- Strategies to ensure diversity and disability issues are addressed are underdeveloped.
- There is under-use of evidence/evaluation/reflective review across organizations.
- There is lack of a shared/common/consistent language related to STA and violence prevention among partners.
- There is a lack of consistently collected and shared data on threat incidents and their outcomes/processes among and across partners; as such neither intended nor unintended outcomes are known.
- The role of law enforcement is critical but sensitive; there is room for more discussion and greater clarity on this aspect to ensure maximum benefit of partnerships with police.
- There is disparity/variation in understanding of and practice associated with information-sharing across organizations despite enabling legislation.
- Youth justice partners did not take up our invitation to be interviewed; as such their perspectives may be insufficiently represented.
- There is a great need for clear communication in post-incident follow-up, especially when students have been seen and/or transferred across multiple organizations.

Calgary & Area RCSD Student Threat Assessment and Related Approaches: Opportunities

- Partners with greater capacity and expertise are ready and willing to share knowledge and skills with others.
- The RCSD provides a structure and process to develop a multi-organizational approach; and there is expertise in RCSD leadership in the necessary effective networking processes to achieve a successful approach.
- There is consensus that school violence is an important, concerning issue; and a shared vision for safe students, schools and communities.
- The current provincial policy environment supports advancement of programs and practices related to safe and caring schools.

- Legislation (the Children First Act) is in place which enables effective information-sharing among partners for STA.
- The project has generated an extensive set of information/resources/tools about best practices and innovation to inform next steps.
- A region-wide approach does not necessarily require a single team or process, especially given the large and complex Calgary and Area region; there could be more emphasis on shared values and coordinated approaches within a common Framework.
- There are very experienced, knowledgeable and supportive individuals at the table from law enforcement, education, child and family, and health sectors.
- Key informants were supportive of further development of a regional approach.
- Partners did not identify many barriers to working together on a regional approach.

Calgary & Area RCSD Student Threat Assessment and Related Approaches:
Recommendations

- Revisit recommendations from experts extracted from the literature (Section 6, pp. 20-21) to confirm a common starting point for further regional development of STA.
- Initiate the development of a regional process with open and stated commitment to the process by leaders of partner organizations and an identified lead organization/structure to be the responsible steward of the regional process.
- Develop a common Framework and Protocol for STA that is based in evidence and more explicitly connects to provincial policy, to a broader community and school violence prevention concepts and includes, at a minimum, the following priority components:
    - A shared language for STA
    - Clear objectives and scope
    - Clear articulation of the composition and roles of team members
    - Well operationalized definitions of key terms, such as 'threat'
    - Clear steps defined for all members in response to threats
    - Clear intervention and follow-up plans with defined responsibilities for follow-up
    - A process for evaluation/review
- Include a thorough discussion and definition of the role of law enforcement partners in STA and in broader violence prevention in Calgary & Area RCSD school districts.
- Set up school-level teams in district schools where they don't currently exist.
- Develop a second-level regional STA resource team for smaller districts and other partners to access.
- Connect existing STA teams with the new teams for training and tap the expertise of existing teams as a resource for that training.
- Develop a training plan based on priority learning needs, and tap experts according to those needs, rather than pre-packaged training approaches.
- Among other priority topics for training, ensure inclusion of cultural and disability issues and culturally safe STA approaches.

- Develop a rationalized training plan with levels of training (higher level concepts for a broad group of stakeholders and more intensive/focused training for direct STA members) and that ensures training for key point people in partner agencies but avoids over-training.
- Set up a regular connection points for all STA teams in the region for shared and continued learning/training. Model, where possible, processes that have worked well for other cross-partner/regional groups.
- Collect common information on outcomes and share data at least annually.
- Include regular evaluation, case review/debrief and reflective review and improvement for STA processes across partner organizations.
- When Framework/Protocol development is nearly complete, conduct a quick review of neighbouring regional protocols for partners whose jurisdictions overlap with other regions to inform a discussion of the implications of any inconsistencies.