



Prevention of School Violence: Student Threat Assessment in the Calgary and Area RCSD

Project Highlights and Key Findings

October 12, 2017

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Outline

- **Purpose of the Project**
- **Components and Key Findings**
 - Literature Review
 - Crossmap of Current Practices
 - Gaps and Opportunities Analysis
- **Discussion**



Purpose

- To inform decisions related to the development of a regional student threat assessment (TA) protocol.
 - 1) What is the state of the science in STA approaches?
 - 2) Do they work?
 - 3) Are there defined best practices/essential components in the area of STA in the context of school violence prevention?
 - 4) What are C & A RCSD partners doing around STA, and how do the approaches compare with approaches from elsewhere?
 - 5) What are key C & A RCSD stakeholder organizations views on STA and options for further development?
 - 6) What are some gaps and opportunities for advancing STA?



Project Components

- **Three parts:**
 - 1) Information from research and grey literatures
 - 2) Comparison of regional partner and external STA approaches
 - 3) Views of key sector stakeholders
- Information from all combined to formulate Gaps and Opportunities, and Recommendations



Literature Review Highlights

- **History of TA**

- Origins: law enforcement strategies for threats against public officials
- Application to school context based on recognition of:
 1. Attempts to identify characteristics of students to predict violent acts was futile
 2. In tragic events, most times clear expressions of threat were present
- First adaptation of TA for the school setting by D. Cornell at the University of Virginia

- **TA Key Principles**

- Attends to manifest behaviors rather than personal characteristics
- Rationale:
 - Making sure all *are* safe and *feel* safe
 - Responding to needs of troubled students
 - Avoid disciplinary approaches that can exacerbate risk
- Tiers 2 and 3 of three-tiered model; situated in whole school approach



Findings

Threat Assessment (TA)

- **TA Approaches/Models Described in the Scientific Literature**
 - The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG)
 - Dallas Threat of Violence Risk Assessment (DVTRA)
 - Networks Against School Shootings Program (NETWASS) [Germany]
- **Assessment Tools**
 - Risk Assessment is quite different than threat assessment
 - If need be – first a broader mental health assessment followed by referral for full risk assessment if necessary
 - Evidence for validity of tools *for students in a school context* documented
- **Evidence for the Effectiveness of STA**
 - Review found supporting evidence *only* for the VSTAG model
 - Clear, step-wise approach that shows (in strong studies): fewer acts of aggression, fewer suspensions, discipline perceived to be fairer, students who made threats more likely to receive therapeutic interventions vs. punitive measures
 - listed as an evidence-based practice in National Registry of Evidence-based Programs & Practices (SAMHSA)



Findings

Threat Assessment (TA)

- **Challenges**

- Information sharing among agencies (we have enabling legislation)
- STA provides guidance for good team judgment; allows for flexibility and local adaptation
- The role of law enforcement is seen as both critical to TA yet challenging to define
- Lack of attention paid to cultural and/or diversity issues

- **Examples of Recent Innovations**

- Potential for STA to be used for identifying students at risk of suicide & other issues, not just threats of violence
- Well defined connections between STA and broader violence prevention approaches in schools
- Development of standard model of school safety measurement



Crossmap of Current Practices

- **Calgary & Area RCSD Member Approaches:**
 - Rocky View
 - CCSD
 - CBE
 - Palliser
- **External Approaches**
 - VSTAG – Dr. Dewey Cornell, U. of Virginia
 - Leduc and Area RCSD (VTRA*)
 - SW RCSD Alberta (VTRA*)
 - Saskatoon and Area Community Protocol (VTRA*)

* Based on the work of Kevin Cameron and the Canadian Centre for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (CCTATR)



Mapping Methods

- **Comparison Characteristics:**
 - from grey and research literature
 - 9 items on context and 31 items on STA itself
 - WG weighed the items for importance
- **Follow-up survey** of organizational contacts for the 4 partner approaches for contextual information
- **Caveat:**
 - Documents produced for *different purposes*
 - (Training vs. protocol vs. policy/procedures vs. framework)
 - But even so, enough info to map most characteristics for most docs



Summary of Crossmap Findings

Contextual Items (2 of 9 items)

- **Overall Approach**

- VTRA: more detail about structure, environment and applicable local legislation
- Not complete consistency across VTRA protocols in several aspects including terms, scope, assessment steps etc.

- **Connection to broader VP**

- variation in degree of connection to broader VP approaches; VSTAG and CBE very strong on this
- VSTAG concepts and process are well researched; it is a school-district-based model
 - with connections to other players.
- Little reflection on, the **limitations** of TA in all approaches reviewed, except VSTAG.



Summary of Crossmap Findings

STA Main Items (31 items grouped into 9 categories)

Approach – VSTAG/VTRA fully operationalized; others less so

Structure and Oversight – 2 - 3 levels of STA teams; school/regional

Conceptualization (Goals/Principles) – nearly all include these, but very different

Scope – wide variability in types of students and behaviors and articulation

Practical Steps and Tools – well developed VSTAG/VTRA

Attention to Issues of Diversity – Special ed but not cultural issues exc. VSTAG

Intervention and follow-up – well developed VSTAG/VTRA

Training – VSTAG and VTRA – varied in length, intensity and cost

Evidence-base/Review/Evaluation – VSTAG only model with direct evidence of effectiveness and evaluation, VTRA recommends review and continued training but details vary across protocols



Sector Stakeholder Interviews

- **Purpose:** to improve understanding of the experiences of specific sector partner organizations with STA, their views on STA generally and on a possible regional approach
- Sectors: policy level (Dept. ED), law enforcement (2), child and family services, rep from STA expertise serving CCSD, youth justice
- Methods: 8 open-ended questions
- 6 interviews 30-45 minutes
- content analysis
- circulated back to respondents for validation



Findings

Sector Stakeholder Interviews

- ***The Provincial Policy Context for Student Threat Assessment (STA)*** – not just the School Act (2015) but policy developments/positions from other Depts.
- ***The Importance of the issue of Student Violence in Schools*** – consensus on importance
- ***The Role of STA and Related Violence Prevention and Response Approaches*** – discussion of its value in context of other VP approaches esp. physical security
- ***Barriers to Effective Multi-Agency Approaches to School Violence Prevention***



Findings

Sector Stakeholder Interviews

- ***Important Aspects of a Regional Student Threat Assessment Approach*** – several valued aspects articulated incl. the need for multi-system commitment for effectiveness
- ***Views on a Calgary and Area Regional Approach to STA*** – supportive, the only concern was a single region-wide process might be too complex/unwieldy
- ***What Their Organization Would Need in Order to Work Effectively as a Partner*** – surprisingly little – just direction from their senior management (incl. policy level), authorization for person-time to participate, and to be considered a valuable partner



Gaps, Opportunities and Recommendations



Gaps

- Substantial disparity in STA capacity/expertise across partner organizations.
- Current process 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; policy direction now places more emphasis on the latter.
- The connection between STA approaches that are in place to broader VP initiatives in their organizations, in the community and with current government policies are not well articulated.
- Innovation in STA and broader approaches that may not be sufficiently tapped.
- Strategies to ensure diversity and disability issues are addressed are underdeveloped.
- Under-use of evidence/evaluation/reflective review across organizations.
- Lack of a shared/common/consistent language related to STA and VP among partners.
- 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.
- Disparity and variation in understanding of and practice associated with information-sharing across organizations despite enabling legislation.
- Youth justice partners' 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.



Opportunities

- Partners with greater capacity/expertise are ready and willing to share knowledge and skills.
- RCSD provides a structure and process to develop a multi-organizational approach; and there is expertise in the necessary effective networking processes to achieve success.
- Consensus that SV is an issue of concern; and a shared vision for safe students, schools and communities.
- Current provincial policy supports advancement of programs/practices related to safe and caring schools.
- Enabling legislation (the Children First Act) is in place for information-sharing among partners for STA.
- An extensive set of information/resources/tools is available 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.



Recommendations (1)

- Revisit recommendations from experts extracted from the literature 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 (WG priorities):
 - 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.



Recommendations (2)

- 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, process 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 neighboring regional protocols for partners whose jurisdictions overlap with other regions to inform a discussion of the implications of any inconsistencies



Discussion



Expert Recs from the Literature

- **RAND Corporation (2002)**
 - Importance of evidence-based approaches to make informed decisions; which are more easily made based on availability, cost, ease of implementation and visibility
- **Cornell (2007)**
 - Achieving a school-wide climate which balances structure and support
- **Lenhardt (2010)**
 - Recommendations include adoption of an ongoing TA model, sufficient staff and resources, trusting mechanisms for anonymous reporting, collaboration with families, broad prevention programs, social and emotional learning approaches embedded in curriculum



Expert Recs from the Literature

- **Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence (2012)**
 - Research supports a thoughtful approach to safer schools, emphasizing four elements: balance, communications, connectedness and support.
 - Strengthening attention to mental health needs, structured TA, but broader attention to media violence, and gun safety policies
- **Skiba (2014)**
 - Advocates for preventive discipline and three levels of intervention:
1. School-wide 2. TA to support at-risk students 3. School-wide discipline plans, individual behavior plans and collaboration across systems
- **Cornell & Limber (2015)**
 - Recommends strategy that combines education, school-based interventions and policy reform. Mechanisms that encourage reporting, rapid investigation, progressive discipline. School authorities should be leery of programs/strategies with no supporting evidence of effectiveness



Expert Recs from the Literature

- **American Psychological Association (2017)**
 - Use of TA approaches, implement violence prevention and positive behavioral interventions at three levels: universal, targeted and intensive assessment
 - Foster positive school climates, enhance partnerships between schools, law enforcement, public health and community to coordinate and integrate efforts
 - Program implementation through training and research, use of evidence-based and best practices in violence prevention programs



Barriers

From Sector Stakeholder Interviews

- 'Passing the buck' – i.e. a lack of taking responsibility for violence prevention
- Poorly defined roles
- Inadequate attention to relationships with partners
- Inadequate attention to relationships with students generally, and those at risk as well as parents/families
- Unwillingness of some partners to share information including the erroneous use of privacy legislation to refuse to share
- Rotation of staff in some agencies makes relationship-based processes harder
- Absence of consistent protocols
- Lack of a defined lead agency to lead the process
- Lack of support at the highest levels in all partners or lack of participation of one key partner
- That the protocol will simply be a 'piece of paper' and not change practice
- The cost of training
- Lack of mechanism for reflective debriefing/review of incidents and tracking of outcomes
- Lots of confusion about difference between 'threat assessment' and 'risk assessment' concepts – they are often mixed/used interchangeably
- Lack of consistency across jurisdictions when an agency's territory crosses multiple regional protocols
- Lack of understanding of the latitude for local development in a context of copywritten models



Enabling Mechanisms

From Sector Stakeholder Interviews

- High level commitment and leadership
- A defined lead agency
- Clear definition of roles
- An operational plan including accountability for each partner
- A commitment from all agencies to support any one agency's role/actions
- Enabling legislation and understanding that legislation does allow sharing
- Clarification of language, shared definitions
- Open and stated commitment from senior leaders of organizations
- Cross-agency training at operational levels
- Communication across sectors at a high level
- A cross-system/agency process for debriefing and learning from incidents
- Person-time resources for participation
- Ability of any partner agency to trigger the STA
- Connection to Violence Prevention more broadly