



Threat Assessment in Our Public Schools

Committed to Keeping Our Children Safe

Summary

In June 2017, the 2016-17 Santa Cruz County Grand Jury issued a report entitled “Assessing the Threat of Violence in our Public Schools: Is enough being done?”^[1] The report analyzed the capacity of local law enforcement and school districts to respond effectively to threats of [targeted school violence](#) before violence actually occurs. The report recommended, among other things, that the County Office of Education (COE) and the County Sheriff’s Office (CSO) work together to develop a comprehensive threat assessment plan.^[2] Both the COE and CSO responded that a countywide plan was being developed and would be completed by December 2017.^[3] This follow-up was undertaken to determine the status of this plan and its implementation.

Background

The threat of violence in our schools is a tragic modern reality. Since 2013, there have been more than 300 school shootings in the United States.^[4] In addition to carrying out the fire and earthquake drills that have long been part and parcel of the school experience, today's school children also participate in "[active shooter](#)" drills^[5] and are familiar with concepts such as "[lockdown](#)"^[6] and "[code red](#)."^[7] We can no longer assume that our schools are safe havens for the most innocent members of our society.

Following an incident of threatened violence in a local school district at the end of the 2015-16 school year, the 2016-17 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury investigated the readiness of our local public schools and law enforcement agencies to respond to threats of targeted school violence. The investigation found that, although all local school districts have the [comprehensive school safety plans](#) mandated by law,^[8] there is a lack of consistency in those plans and little focus on the type of comprehensive and sophisticated [threat assessment](#) that today's world requires.^[9] This shortfall led to the June 2017 report "*Assessing the Threat of Violence in our Public Schools: Is enough being done?*" The report contained a number of recommendations including:

- better communication between school districts and parents
- communication and collaboration between school districts and law enforcement with respect to threat situations and preparation
- placement of [School Resource Officers](#) in all school districts
- training in threat assessment both for school districts and law enforcement^[10]

The report also contained the following recommendation: "The COE and the CSO should collaborate to develop a plan in which all school districts are prepared and capable of assessing a threat of targeted school violence."^[11]

In response to the recommendations of that report, both the COE and CSO indicated that a collaborative and multi-agency process would be undertaken to create a countywide threat assessment plan by December 2017.

The Grand Jury received responses from the COE, the CSO, and the Chiefs of Police of the cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Capitola, and Watsonville. This report follows up on the COE and CSO responses.

Scope

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury reviewed the following documents:

- the 2016-17 Grand Jury report
- the responses of the COE, CSO, and Chiefs of Police
- the Santa Cruz Countywide Threat Assessment Plan revised December 2017
- agendas for the threat assessment planning meetings held in July, September, November, and December 2017
- the agenda for the School Safety Partnership meeting held February 9, 2018
- the Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety

Additional information about the Plan and the training was provided by the COE.

This investigation only looked at the COE and CSO's compliance with their responses and the development of the threat assessment plan. It did not analyze or evaluate the agencies' plans or preparations for physically securing school sites in a threat situation.

Investigation

In July 2017, the COE and CSO convened a planning group of representatives of local school districts and law enforcement agencies to evaluate the Grand Jury's report and recommendations and to begin the development of the Countywide Threat Assessment Plan (the Plan). This initial meeting looked at elements of the Plan, a timeline for its implementation, and next steps.^[12]

This group met again in September, November, and December to discuss the key components of the Plan, to form assessment teams for every district, to create a plan for professional development in threat assessment and school safety, and to plan for ongoing future meetings and cooperation.^[13]

The result of this collaborative effort is a thorough and well-written threat assessment plan, based largely on the model developed by the Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia ("the Virginia Model"),^[14] and discussed in the 2016-17 Grand Jury report.^[15]

While much of the Plan is for internal use only, the publicly available summary^[16] states that the Plan is designed to "provide practical guidelines for school-based teams within Santa Cruz County to conduct threat assessments of students who threaten to commit an act of violence."^[17] The Plan also notes that the "goals of threat assessment are twofold:

- To maintain a safe environment by preventing an act of violence from taking place.
- To resolve student conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior."^[18]

The summary discusses the makeup of a threat assessment team, which should include a school administrator, a law enforcement liaison, a mental health professional, and certificated and classified staff members.^[19] It also includes the flow chart shown in [Appendix A](#) of this Report.^[20]

The working version of the Plan, which the Grand Jury reviewed but which is not publicly available, includes a thorough discussion of each step of the model and practical tools to streamline the process of evaluating and documenting threats.

In support of the Plan, the COE and CSO have formed a [School Safety Partnership Team](#) that will meet quarterly to ensure the ongoing implementation and evolution of the Plan.^[21] They have also created a Professional Development Plan for School Safety, which will identify and provide the necessary training. All districts will use these resources to train their own personnel.^[22]

Neither the Plan, nor the professional development materials shared with the Grand Jury, explicitly call for rehearsals of the threat assessment protocol. Taking the

additional step of running through the flow chart in a practice situation would help ensure that all parties are able to mobilize the appropriate teams, utilize the tools at their disposal, and be well prepared to continue to keep our children safe.

Findings

- F1.** As promised in their responses to the 2016-17 Grand Jury report, the COE and CSO collaborated with local law enforcement agencies to produce a thorough and well-written Countywide Threat Assessment Plan.
- F2.** The Plan's detailed flow chart, assessment protocol, and related documents will be valuable resources for school districts to use in threat situations.
- F3.** The Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety demonstrates the COE and CSO's commitment to adequately preparing school staff and local law enforcement to respond to future threats in our schools.
- F4.** Neither the Countywide Threat Assessment Plan nor the Professional Development Plan for School Safety explicitly call for rehearsing the threat assessment protocol in a non-threat situation, which may compromise the responders' readiness in a threat situation.

Recommendations

- R1.** The COE and CSO should continue to work together to ensure that our schools and law enforcement agencies have up-to-date resources and training in threat response, assessment, and management. (F3, F4)
- R2.** The COE should mandate rehearsals of the threat assessment process in every school district to improve the schools' ability to determine the existence of a credible threat before violence actually occurs. (F4)

Commendations

- C1.** The COE and CSO responded quickly and comprehensively to the recommendations of the 2016-17 Grand Jury report and drafted a plan that creates a firm foundation to address the safety of our students in the context of targeted school violence.
- C2.** The COE and CSO have demonstrated clear commitment to providing ongoing training so that school staff and law enforcement can function collaboratively and respond effectively to threats of violence in our schools.

Required Responses

Respondent	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within/ Respond By
County Superintendent of Schools	F2, F3, F4	R1, R2	60 Days June 11, 2018
County Sheriff	F2, F3	R1	60 Days June 11, 2018

Definitions

- **Active shooter:** An Active Shooter is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use firearms(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims.^[23]
- **Code Red:** In a code red situation, teachers and their students will assume a protective position in their classrooms. They will stay in this position until more instructions are given.^[24]
- **Comprehensive School Safety Plan:** Comprehensive School Safety Plan defined in California Education Code Article 5, §§ 32280-32289.^[25]
- **Lockdown:** a procedure to isolate students, faculty, and staff from danger by:
 - Removing students and faculty from the threat;
 - Isolating the dangerous situation from much of the school;
 - Allowing for an accurate accounting of students within each room; and
 - Depending on the situation, facilitating an organized evacuation away from the dangerous area.^[26]
- **School Resource Officer:** A law enforcement officer with specialized training, deployed in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.
- **School Safety Partnership Team:** A group of educators and law enforcement personnel who will work together to plan an expanded safety plan at each school in the county and identify or create professional development for each area of that plan.^[27]
- **Targeted School Violence:** Any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at their school with lethal means (e.g., a gun or knife); and, (ii) where the student attacker purposefully chose their school as the location of the attack.^[28] The target may be a specific individual, such as a particular classmate or teacher, or a group or category of individuals. The target may even be the school itself.^[29]

- **Threat Assessment:** A threat assessment is conducted when a person (or persons) threatens to commit a violent act or engages in behavior that appears to threaten what is termed “targeted violence.” Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat, and the circumstances surrounding the threat, to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out.^[30]

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Site Visits

None

Appendix A – Threat Assessment Flow Chart

