

# Effective Responses to Students who Threaten Harm to Others

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., L.E.P.  
[www.pent.ca.gov](http://www.pent.ca.gov)  
[dianawright@earthlink.net](mailto:dianawright@earthlink.net)  
 (626) 487 9455

*developed in collaboration with:*

Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D.  
 University of Virginia  
[dcornell@virginia.edu](mailto:dcornell@virginia.edu)  
<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

## Objectives

Participants will:

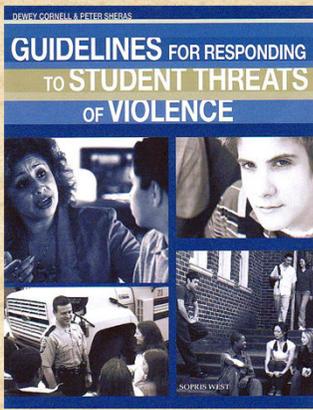
- Review the Virginia Model of Threat Assessment, recently identified as evidence based at the **National Registry of Evidence Based Practices (NREPP)** at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)
- Identify steps for administrators, school psychologist/social workers, counselors, law enforcement to follow that provide legal protections and effectively reduce risk.

## Crisis Response Is Not Prevention



A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

## Prevention Must Start Before The Gunman Is At Your Door

- School-based teams assess student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Most threats resolved with counseling
- Reductions in school suspensions and transfers
- 6 studies of its positive impact

Available from [sopriswest.com](http://sopriswest.com)



<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/Index.aspx>

## A 2013 NREPP Addition!

**Intervention Summary** Back to Results Start New Search

### Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (V-STAG) is a school-based manualized process designed to help school administrators, mental health staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threat incidents involving students in kindergarten through 12th grade and prevent student violence. V-STAG is also designed to provide students involved in threat incidents with appropriate mental health counseling services, with parental involvement, and reduce the numbers of long-term school suspensions or expulsions and alternative school setting placements. V-STAG also aims to reduce in-school bullying infractions and provide a supportive school climate. The program requires each participating school to establish a threat assessment team, whose members resolve student threat incidents through the use of a context-sensitive, problem-solving approach instead of the more traditional, punitive approach of zero tolerance.

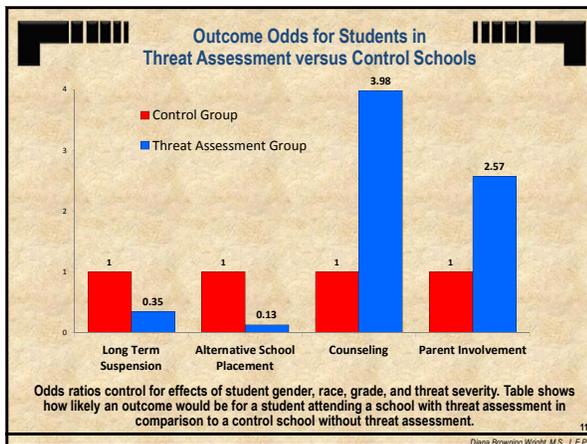
<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=263>

## Threat Studies

1. Initial field trial
2. Memphis field trial
3. Virginia High school climate study
4. High school discipline study in Fairfax
5. Randomized controlled trial in Newport News

## Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students



<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

## School Violence Theories: An Overview

- No single cause
- No single profile
- No single remedy

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 13

**For every problem  
there is a solution that  
is simple, neat, and  
wrong.**

H.L. Mencken  
Threat Assessment Report, www.fbi.gov  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 14

## Violence is a Learned Behavior

- family
- peers
- community
- media (TV, video games, internet)

 Threats of violence to self or others are a symptom of underlying problems.

Early Warning Signs (1998), Cornell, D. (2001)  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 15

## School Violence Theories: School Shootings – Like other Violent Crimes, Involves :

- Motive** for the violence
- Method** of committing violence
- Means** of carrying out the violent act

Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D. School Violence: Fears vs. Facts  
www.youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 16

## School Violence Factors

-  Bullying, cliques, rivalries –  
**motivate** angry depressed youth
-  Entertainment violence – teaches  
**method** of violence
-  Unsupervised access to firearms – provides  
**means** of violence

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 17

**Threat Assessment –  
Model for Prediction**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.F.P. 18

## Threat Assessment

**Threat Assessment IS NOT to Predict**

- Predictions do not work based on profiles
- Profiles make false predictions, generate stereotypes

FBI Report: School Shooters 19

## What To Do?

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., L.F.P. 20

### Assess for Intensity & Diversity of Service Needs

A threat of violent Action to self or others

**Reaction Error:**  
A sole focus on punishing

**Assessment Error:**  
A sole focus on the nature & severity of threat

**History of Sexual Abuse**

**History of Physical Abuse**

**Eating Disorder**

**Depression**

**Alienation**

**Poor Anger Control**

**Psychotic Features**

**Poor Coping Skills**

**Drug Alcohol Problems**

**Peer groups encouraging violence**

**Code of Silence**

Although found in both genders, especially associated in females with physical violence patterns 21

## Public Fear of School Violence

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., L.F.P. 22

June 2002 23

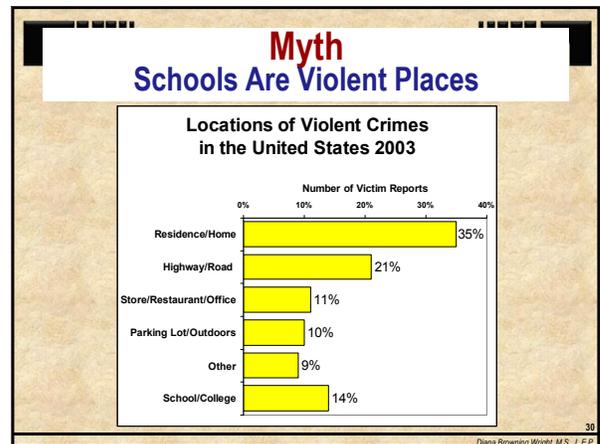
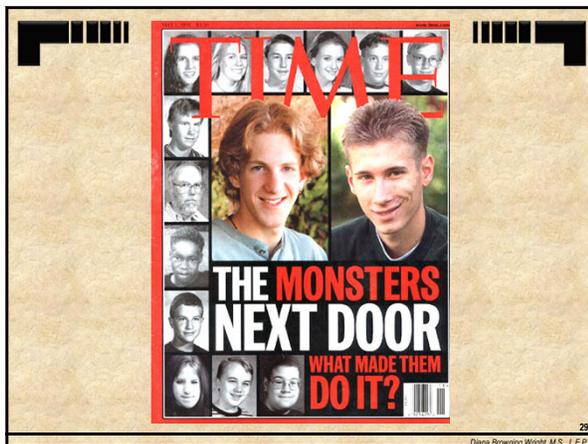
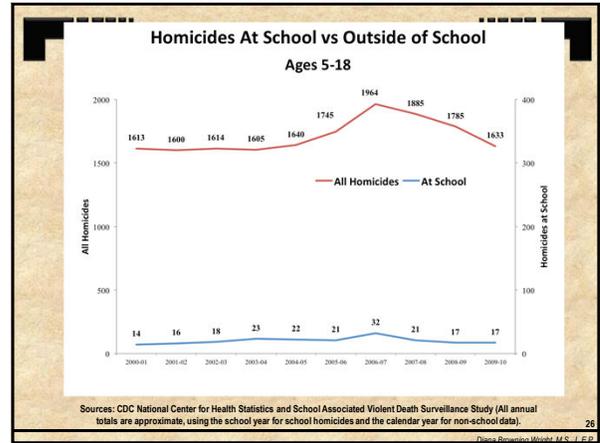
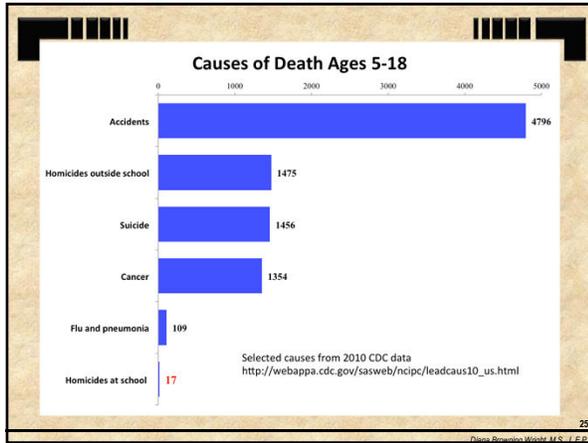
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., L.F.P.

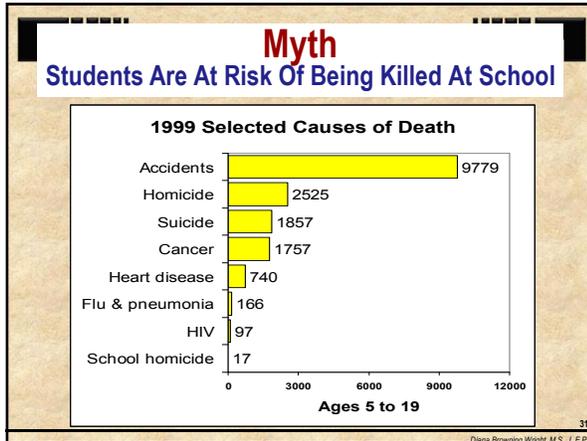
## School Violence Is Not Increasing

Year	Crimes per 1,000 students
1994	13
1995	9
1996	9
1997	8
1998	9
1999	7
2000	5
2001	6
2002	3
2003	6
2004	4
2005	5
2006	6
2007	4
2008	5
2009	4
2010	4

Source: Indicators of school crime and safety; 2011. Table 2.1. National Crime Victimization Study data reported by National Center for Education Statistics 24

Diana Browning Wright, M.S., L.F.P.





### What Is The Likelihood Of A Student Committing A Homicide At Your School?

- 93 student homicides cases in 10 years = 9.3/year (1992-93 to 2001-02)
- 119,000 schools
- $9.3/\text{year} \div 119,000 = .0000781$
- 1 case every 12,800 years

### FBI Recommendations On School Violence

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

Download at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)

### Profiling Does Not Work

- School shootings are too rare
- Profiles make false predictions
- Profiles generate stereotypes
- Profiles don't solve problems

### Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program
- Identify roles for school personnel
- Clarify role of law enforcement
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence

Download at: [www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)

### Threat Assessment

1. Identification of threats made by students.
2. Evaluation of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. Intervention to reduce risk of violence.
4. Follow-up to assess intervention results.

## 6 Principles Of The Threat Assessment Process (abridged from Secret Service/DOE Guide)

1. Targeted violence is the result of an understandable process, not a random or spontaneous act.
2. Consider person, situation, setting, & target.
3. Maintain an investigative, skeptical mindset.
4. Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits.
5. Use information from all possible sources.
6. *Making* a threat is not the same as *posing* a threat. Ask "Is this student on a path toward an attack?"

37  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

38  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## Use of the Guidelines

1. Decision-tree process and team model
2. Transient threats of violence
3. Serious Substantive threats of violence
4. Very Serious Substantive threats of violence

39  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

**Key Point**

**A primary goal of threat assessment is to prevent violence.**

40  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

**Key Point**

**Just screaming or having a tantrum is not a threat. The question is whether the student expresses intent to harm someone.**

41  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

**Key Point**

**Students DO NOT have to be suspended for making a threatening statement. Many threats can be resolved without suspension.**

42  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

 **Key Point**

**Threat assessment and discipline are separate processes.**

**A threat that requires serious disciplinary consequences (such as a bomb threat) might not be a serious (substantive) threat.**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### **Valuable Functions of School Resource Officers**

- Provide assistance in emergencies and difficult situations
- Help maintain an orderly school climate
- Expand the range of options in dealing with student threats of violence
- Counsel students about the consequences of breaking the law
- Serve as a resource for students with fears, concerns, and information to share



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

 **Key Point**

**Our mental health assessments AKA extended threat inquiries are not designed to PREDICT violence, but to find ways to PREVENT violence.**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

 **Key Point**

**Threat assessments do NOT require referral to a mental health professional outside the school. Outside referrals are optional. Inside professionals have essential inside knowledge.**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

 **Key Point**

**Interviews conducted as part of a threat assessment are NOT confidential.**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

 **Key Point**

**Threat assessments are appropriate for students receiving special education services. Safety comes first with all student threats.**



Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## Development of Guidelines

**Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence**

**Purpose and Goals of these Guidelines**

The purpose of these guidelines is to help school personnel and staff respond to threats of violence in a consistent, safe, and respectful manner. These guidelines are intended to provide a framework for the development of a school's response to student threats of violence.

**Practical risk of violence**

There is a risk of violence if a student has threatened to harm another student, staff member, or the community. This risk is based on the student's words, actions, and the context of the threat. The risk is higher if the student has a history of violence, if the threat is specific, and if the student has access to weapons.

**WHAT IS A THREAT?**

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone. It can be spoken, written, or gestured. Threats can be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## Initial Field-Test Schools

- 22 Elementary schools
- 6 Middle schools
- 4 High schools
- 3 Alternative schools
- 35 Total

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## Team Roles

Principal or Assistant Principal	Leads team, conducts Step 1.
School Resource Officer	Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.
School Psychologist	Team member, conducts mental health assessments.
School Counselor	Team member, lead role in follow-up interventions.
Teachers, aides, other staff	Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

**School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.**

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## No Magic Formula Or Crystal Ball

There is no formula, prescription, or checklist that will predict or prevent all violent acts. School authorities must make reasoned judgments based on the facts of each individual situation, and monitor situations over time.

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## What Is A Threat?

**A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.**

Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

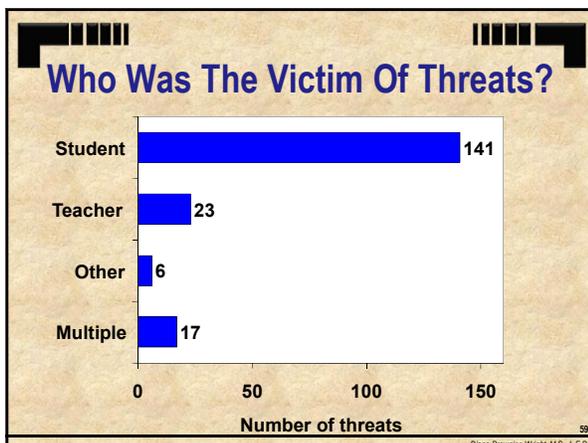
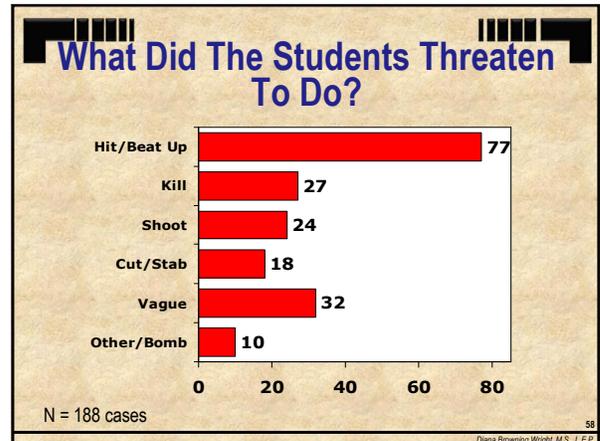
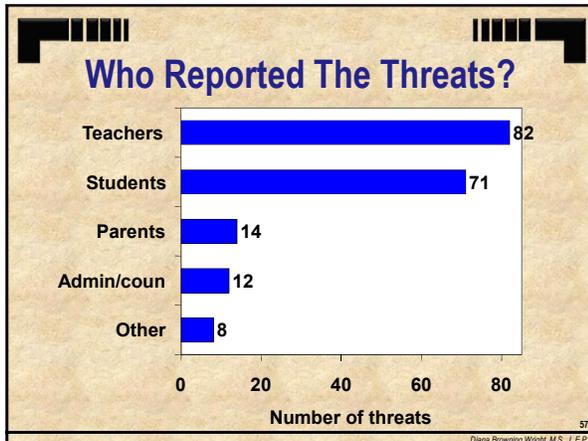
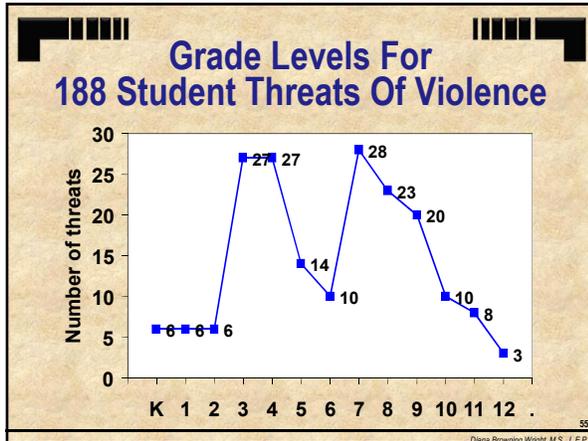
When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

## Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

Diane Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.



### Student And Victim Gender

	Male Victim	Female Victim	
Boy Made Threat	51%	27%	78%
Girl Made Threat	10%	13%	23%

### Student And Victim Special Education Status

	Not Spec Ed Victim	Spec Ed Victim	
Regular Ed Threat	52%	3%	55%
Spec Ed Threat	32%	13%	45%

N = 155.

### Not Covered By Guidelines



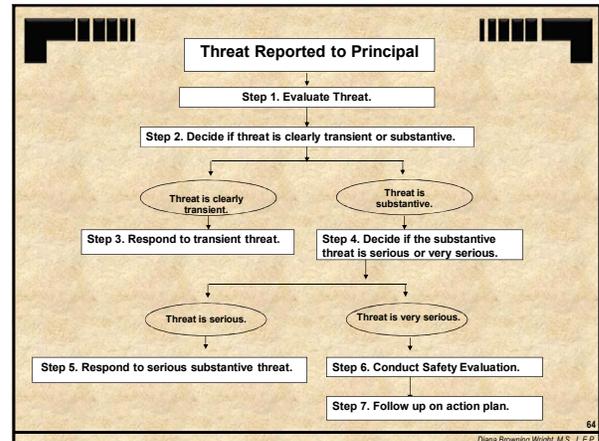
**The Guidelines do NOT cover:**

- Threats to damage property
- Threats made by non-students
- Fights or misbehavior that does not involve a threat
- Slurs, insults, verbal abuse that does not involve a threat to physically harm someone

Other school policies apply to these situations.

### Do Not Include Misbehavior That Quickly Resolves

Teachers and administrators frequently deal with minor arguments or rough, playful behavior in which one student might threaten to strike or push another. **Do not include misbehavior that can be resolved in seconds**, such as 2 students arguing over who cut in line. If an incident requires more prolonged intervention such as a trip to the office, then evaluate for a possible threat.



### Step 1. Evaluate The Threat

- Obtain an account of the threat and the context from the student and witnesses
- Write down the exact threat
- Obtain student's explanation of the threat's meaning and his/her intentions
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat's meaning

Document your evaluation.



### Typical Questions

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say and do?
4. What did you mean when you said/did that?
5. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
6. What was the reason you said that?
7. What you going to do now?



### Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?



67  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### All Threats Are Not The Same

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)  
“I’m gonna kick your butt.”  
“There’s a bomb in the school.”  
“Wait until I get my gun!”  
“Let’s really make them they did.”



Context matters...

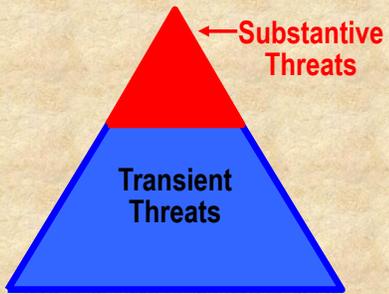
68  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Step 2. Transient or Substantive?

- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive

69  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Transient vs. Substantive Threats



70  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Transient Threats



- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists
- Usually end with an apology or clarification

71  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Substantive Threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents
- May be legal violations and require police consultation
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive

72  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Substantive Threats: Factors To Consider

- Age of student
- Capability of student to carry out the threat
- Student's discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- Credibility of witness accounts
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive

73  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Presumptive Indicators Of Substantive Threats

- Specific, plausible details. ("I am going to blast Mr. Johnson with my pistol.")
- Threat has been repeated over time. ("He's been telling everyone he is going to get you.")
- Threat reported as a plan ("Wait until you see what happens next Tuesday in the library.")
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices.
- Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)

74  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Case Examples: Transient Or Substantive Threat?

1. Two elementary students to throw paper wads pretending to bomb one another.
2. Two middle school students get in a shoving match. One says, "I'm gonna bust you up."
3. A boy turns in an English essay that describes an especially violent scene from a war.
4. Two students get into a fight. After they are separated, both are sullen and quiet.
5. A student says he is being bullied. He was warned that if he told anyone, they would beat him up.

75  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Step 3. Responses To A Transient Threat

- No need to take safety precautions
- See that threat is resolved through explanation, apology, making amends
- Provide counseling and education where appropriate
- Administer discipline if appropriate



76  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Transient Case Example

- 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Jake threatens to kill his classmates after being excluded.
- Apologizes, denies intent. Tearful and distressed.
- Inconsistent with previous behavior
- Recently removed from home for neglect; lonely and depressed
- Referral for counseling

77  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.

### Threat Assessment Is Distinct From Discipline

- Threat assessment is concerned with future danger to others, discipline is concerned with consequences for behavior
- A threat may pose little danger, yet merit serious disciplinary consequences

78  
Diana Browning Wright, M.S., J.E.P.