

**How to Prevent Another School Shooting**  
Submission for Educational Leadership

Dr. Amy Murphy  
Assistant Professor  
Angelo State University

ASU Station #10921  
San Angelo, Texas 76909-0921  
(325) 486-6951 phone  
[amy.murphy@angelo.edu](mailto:amy.murphy@angelo.edu)

Dr. Brian Van Brunt  
Executive Director  
National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA)  
[www.brianvanbrunt.com](http://www.brianvanbrunt.com)

Number of words: 2577

**About the Authors**

Dr. Amy Murphy is currently an Assistant Professor teaching graduate courses related to college student development and leadership in higher education at Angelo State University. She was formerly the Dean of Students at Texas Tech University. Dr. Murphy also writes and presents regularly on managing disruptive and dangerous students, sexual violence prevention, and other topics related to college student affairs.

Dr. Brian Van Brunt teaches threat assessment at the University of Toledo and serves as the executive director the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA). Brian is a regular speaker for academic conferences and training events around the world on topics of threat assessment, mental health and sexual violence prevention.  
[www.brianvanbrunt.com](http://www.brianvanbrunt.com)

### **How to Prevent Another School Shooting**

Caleb has trouble making friends. He is frequently teased by other classmates to the point that he thinks about killing himself. With the recent increase in school shootings, the teasing just gets worse. They call him “Columbine” and talk about him snapping one day. Other students write on his locker slurs like “crazy kid” and “loner boy.” Teachers address the bullying behavior when they see it, but so much goes on behind their backs. Caleb has a particularly hard day and uses the library computer to write, “I’m going to turn this school into another Florida.”

Students see this post on social media and report Caleb. Parents call the school and demand action. Some keep their teenagers from going to school out of fear of what Caleb might do. Caleb is reported to the police by the school for making terrorist threats and given a week out-of-school suspension for making these threats. He is required to complete a counseling evaluation before he can come back to school. Caleb meets with a psychologist and is given a mental health diagnosis, started on medication and a letter is written to allow him to come back to school. The psychologist doesn’t feel he needs to be forced into an inpatient hospital and Caleb agrees to outpatient therapy once a week. He is given a court date in a month related to the criminal threatening charges.

This scenario, or versions of it, repeats everyday across the U.S. As schools across the nation struggle with how to prevent and respond to issues of threats and violence, school administrators, school safety officers, teachers and counselors wrestle with the best way to prevent another shooting. There are calls for increased access to mental health care, protests and impassioned pleas to reduce gun access and arguments to

arm teachers, increase school resource officers and find ways to better harden the target through the use of metal detectors, locked doors and armed staff.

The problem here is that none of these approaches fix the problem. The solution is adapting Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs) from the college and university setting into the K-12 realm.

### **A Bit about BIT**

Following the Columbine shooting on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999, we looked for ways to prevent this kind of tragedy from happening again. The FBI, Department of Education and Secret Service authorized studies and reports to provide a template to better understand this violence and give professionals an approach to keep this kind of violence from happening again (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum & Modzeleski, 2000, 2002). This approach was further researched and expanded upon after April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006 following the Virginia Tech shooting (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). The National Behavioral Intervention Team Association ([www.NaBITA.org](http://www.NaBITA.org)) was formed in 2007 to train and implement teams grounded in these recommendations and the long history of literature and research developed to prevent workplace violence such as the U.S. Post Office shootings that occurred in the 1980s.

BITs work in three stages: they identify, assess and manage threat and dangerousness in school communities. These multidisciplinary teams solicit reports of concern from throughout the school community. These teams typically include 7-10 individuals from counseling services, school resource officers, law enforcement, student discipline and disability services to meet each week, process this information, apply a research-based, objective risk rubric, and develop interventions designed to mitigate the

risk over time and keep the individual and community safe. These teams offer something different from a “one and done” approach to threat and violence risk management by instead focusing on longer term, collaborative interventions that remain in place until the risk has been reduced. BITs are not punitive in their approach, but rather preventative and focused on connecting those at risk to resources and moving them from the pathway of violence to social integration and support.

Schools that rely only on threat management efforts risk the silo effect where “different domains of behavior are never linked together or synthesized to develop a comprehensive picture of the subject of concern, conduct further investigation, identify other warning behaviors, and actively risk-manage the case” (Meloy, Hoffman, Guldemann & James, 2011, p.19). This keeps information compartmentalized within various departments and prevents the school from adopting a wider, more expansive view of data collection, analysis and interventions. A better approach is making use of multi-disciplinary BITs that can provide a 360-degree view of at-risk situations and develop better-informed, collaborative strategies for intervention. A team-based approach reduces isolated communication and combines efforts and experience to make the school a safer place. This is similar to the development of law enforcement FUSION centers that mix law enforcement expertise or the creation of the Homeland Security department with its focus on collaborative information sharing among various law enforcement entities.

### **Threat Assessment and Violence**

Violence risk and threat assessments are not about the prediction of school violence or the profiling of students based on a list of characteristics. Violence risk and

threat assessment techniques examine the individual to determine their risk to the greater community by asking contextual questions about the nature of the threat and risk, uses computer-aided models and assesses risk factors used to determine a level of potential dangerousness. As a point of clarification, a threat assessment seeks to assess dangerousness of an individual following a vague, conditional or direct threat. This is the case with Caleb when he posts on social media “I’m going to turn this school into another Florida.” A violence risk assessment is a broader term for an assessment that can be used when there is a concern for violence, regardless of the presences of vague, conditional or direct threat. Again, in the case of Caleb, this could be an assessment that occurred prior to the threat based on his social isolation, being bullied and suicidality.

Mistakes are made when only one perspective is taken into account—when those conducting the threat assessment neglect the contextual information essential to understanding potentially escalating behavior of a person on the pathway to violence. O’Toole wrote in 2000, “In general, people do not switch instantly from nonviolence to violence. Nonviolent people do not ‘snap’ or decide on the spur of the moment to meet a problem by using violence. Instead, the path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way (O’Toole, 2000, p. 7).” Preventing violence requires careful questioning and analysis of how the subject behaves in their environment and if there is an action imperative which drives the subject to take personal action to address their frustration, anger and dissatisfaction (Turner & Gelles, 2003).

A common mistake schools make is confusing a mental health assessment with a violence risk assessment. A mental health assessment is primarily about giving a diagnosis, assessing the level of care (does the student need to be hospitalized) and

developing a treatment plan such as taking medications, continuing therapy and reducing mental illness symptoms. A violence risk or threat assessment is informed by workplace violence literature and primarily focused on assessing the likelihood of the subject behaving violently in the future. While a violence risk or threat assessment does not have to be performed by clinical mental health staff, the mental health expertise of this professional could very well be useful in informing the violence risk or threat assessment.

### **Ten Risk Factors for Targeted Violence**

Based on research of over 90 incidents of violence on high school and college campuses, we offer ten general concepts to attend to when it comes to what kind of behaviors or situations most commonly lead to violence (Van Brunt, 2012; 2015). While not an exhaustive list, this is a helpful starting place to better understand the nature of more extreme violence. These can be classified as warning signs or red flags for further investigation.

1. ***Attend to potential leakage*** related to a planned campus attack. This leakage may be overheard conversations, shared comments on social media postings, or a directly communicated threat through a class journal, blog, webpage, e-portfolio, etc. Teachers and other school staff are in a unique position to “overhear” students who may be planning an attack. This is a heightened concern when a student mentions a person, location or time of an attack.
2. ***Attend to school conflicts and dismissals***. These events should be seen as potential contextual tipping points for violence. These times of separation from

- the resources and structure of the school environment can be a catalyst for a desperate student who sees no other way out but to kill or take revenge on those they deem responsible.
3. Investigate and closely monitor *unrequited romantic relationships* that lead to isolated, irrational behavior. Several cases involve violence that either began with or were driven by the frustrated passions of unstable individuals. These situations can trigger explosive bursts of anger or methodical and carefully detailed plots of revenge.
  4. *Look for manifestos* or large societal messages that indicate a deeper, entrenched worldview or call to action. Many of those who plan violence do so under the rationalization of some greater cause or message they are trying to communicate. Their attacks are in some way designed to release their larger message or call others to action for their hardened point of view.
  5. *Identify those who feel hopeless or are irrational in their logic.* Many of those lost down the path toward violence fall out of connection with others who have the potential to refute their pessimistic logic and offer alternative views of the world outside of violence as an escape from pain. Identify students who are isolated and out of connection with others as well as those who are marginalized and discriminated against.

6. ***Watch for all bullying behavior*** (perpetrator and victim) and attend specifically to bullying behavior that creates isolation and an environment where a smoldering individual grows more dangerous in his thinking. While all those who are bullied (or who bully) are not destined to become the next school shooter, some who are bullied carry these scars and wounds with them and eventually seek revenge.
7. Look for gaps in ***students who need mental health services***. While those with mental illness are not more likely to commit violence (in fact, those with mental illness are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime) (Desmarais, Van Dorn, Johnson, Grimm, Douglas & Swartz, 2014; Teplin, McClelland, Abram & Weiner, 2005; Choe, Teplin & Abram, 2008) a protective factor to prevent this violence can be found by ensuring proper treatment. This involves timely access to the appropriate care in a quantity that can have an ongoing positive impact.
8. Though rare, be concerned about the sociopath and those that ***take pleasure in harming others and expressing obsession-filled hate and threats of violence*** towards individuals or groups. These behaviors may manifest in teasing behaviors in the hallways and classroom, practical jokes that are taken too far, and a lack of remorse when caught hurting others.
9. ***Pay attention to small hints and dropped information***. Those who engage in violence rarely just snap; violence is often the end product of months (if not

years) of planning. Extreme violence is rarely an impulsive decision, rather it is the culmination of much thought and planning.

10. ***Watch for the hopelessness and desperation*** to escape pain that occurs in suicidal individuals. This is also present in most who engage in extreme violence. While all suicidal people do not kill others when they attempt to kill themselves, most who engage in extreme violence end up taking their own life in the process. The isolation and distorted thinking about escaping pain and, perhaps, a romanticized escape from this world accompanies many of the attacks.

### **Moving Forward**

Caleb's is a good example of where a BIT would approach things differently than many current approaches in K-12. The BIT would be in a position to have received reports early and could have engaged in prevention efforts related to the suicidality, bullying behavior and Caleb's growing frustration. If the case escalated to social media threat, the BIT would understand that a mental health assessment is not sufficient and would have Caleb assessed by a threat or violence risk professional trained to identify risk factors and develop an on-going intervention plan for the violence. Mental health would be seen as part of the supportive intervention, rather than predicting future violence. Off-campus law enforcement may still move forward with criminal charges, but it would be in a more informed manner with the data from a research-based threat assessment. Other members of the BIT would look at accommodations, an IEP, involving Caleb's parents in the process and look for ways to develop positive social interactions, rather than the ones he is currently experiencing. Caleb would remain on the BIT "radar"

until the risk level was mitigated rather than being given over to a mental health counselor or student discipline/law enforcement for corrective action.

Preventing violence is about early identification, research-informed assessments with a clearly defined purpose, and building connection and increasing resiliency, social connections and positive influences in the student's life. Behavioral Intervention Teams have been successful in this work and preventing violence in the higher education setting. It is time to move this process more formally into the K-12 arena.

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