


# Why Our Schools Need Behavioral Threat Assessment and How It Works


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Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines.



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## Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D.

- Virgil Ward Chair as Professor of Education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia.
- Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project


Dr. Cornell's work as a forensic clinical psychologist evaluating and treating violent offenders convinced him that violence could be prevented and led him to join the Virginia faculty in 1986.

Dr. Cornell has authored more than 300 publications in psychology and education, including studies of bullying, juvenile homicide, school safety, and threat assessment. He led the development of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) in 2001 and has been actively engaged in research, training, and advocacy of school threat assessment. He is currently directing a national study of CSTAG with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice. Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in CSTAG training. Training is provided independently of the University through School Threat Assessment Consultants, LLC. [www.schoolta.com](http://www.schoolta.com)

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# Behavioral Threat Assessment

1. What is it?
2. Why do we need it?
3. How does it work?
4. How do we *know* it works?




<https://www.cbsnews.com/minneapolis/news/health-minneapolis-shooting-27-2020/>

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## How often do our schools conduct threat assessments?


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**When a student seems angry, everyone engages in some form of threat assessment.**


*The question is whether staff rely on their intuition or use a systematic process.*

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**In the absence of a formal threat assessment process, many schools rely on zero tolerance, automatically removing a student from school, regardless of the seriousness or context of the behavior.**

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**Removing a student from school does not increase safety.**

**We want to supervise, teach, and support a student in school.**

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**Zero Tolerance Leads to a Disproportionate Response**

School Suspends Second Grader for Eating His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun



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**Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)**

**1. Identification:** friends, family members, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress/threatening violence.


**2. Evaluation:** Threat assessment team gathers information to evaluate the seriousness of the threat.

**3. Intervention:** The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

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**Behavioral Threat Assessment**


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**Traumatic impact of school shootings**

School shootings are so traumatic that they skew perceptions of school safety and convince the public and policymakers that there are dramatic needs for safety and security measures.



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**All school shooting homicides must be prevented, but they are not as pervasive as it seems.**



In 2024, 22 schools had a shooting homicide, but in a country with 130,000 schools, *the average school can expect a homicide every 5,909 years.* (130,000 ÷ 22)

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**Although school shootings are rare, students often make threats.**

*As School Threats Proliferate, More Than 700 Students Are Arrested*

The number of threats after a Georgia school shooting this month is much higher than usual, many officials said. In response, some have cracked down with arrests and detention for children as young as 10.

**12-year-old girl arrested for social media threats against a middle school in Virginia**

**10-year-old Texas student charged with 'terrorist threat' over hoax school shooting threat, police said**

Mugshot of 10-year-old who threatened to shoot up school released by police



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**Two groups of students who make threats**




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**Many reasons why students make threats**




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**Threat Assessment Steers Between 2 Errors**



**Overreaction**  
Excessive punishment for a threat that is not serious

**Underreaction**  
Failing to prevent a serious threat.



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**States requiring school threat assessment**

**Most states require or encourage school threat assessment**  
(Nat. Assoc. of State Boards of Education)

STATE POLICY DATABASE

Threat Assessment

States with Policies	Encouraged	Required
Alabama	California	Connecticut
Arkansas	Colorado	Delaware
California	Florida	Georgia
Colorado	Illinois	Idaho
Connecticut	Indiana	Iowa
Delaware	Kansas	Kentucky
District of Columbia	Michigan	Louisiana
Florida	Minnesota	Maine
Georgia	Mississippi	Maryland
Idaho	Montana	Massachusetts
Illinois	Nebraska	Mayotte
Indiana	Nevada	Michigan
Iowa	New Hampshire	Minnesota
Kansas	New Jersey	Mississippi
Kentucky	New Mexico	Montana
Louisiana	New York	Nebraska
Maine	North Carolina	Nevada
Maryland	North Dakota	New Hampshire
Massachusetts	Ohio	New Jersey
Mayotte	Oklahoma	New Mexico
Michigan	Oregon	New York
Minnesota	Rhode Island	North Carolina
Mississippi	South Carolina	North Dakota
Montana	South Dakota	Oklahoma
Nebraska	Tennessee	Oregon
Nevada	Texas	Rhode Island
New Hampshire	Utah	South Carolina
New Jersey	Vermont	South Dakota
New Mexico	Washington	Tennessee
New York	West Virginia	Texas
North Carolina	Wisconsin	Utah
North Dakota	Wyoming	Vermont
Oklahoma		Washington
Oregon		West Virginia
Rhode Island		Wisconsin
South Carolina		Wyoming
South Dakota		
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**85% of US schools report using threat assessment teams**

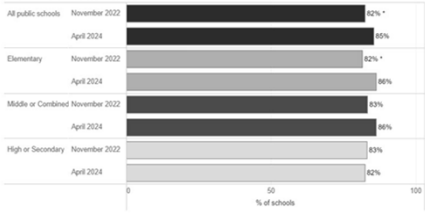
IES:NCES National Center for Education Statistics

Do schools have a behavioral threat assessment team and have any students been found to be a potential risk for violent or harmful behavior?

Percentage of public schools by whether they have a behavioral threat assessment team or any other formal group of persons to identify students who might be a potential risk for violent or harmful behavior and by school level: November 2022 and April 2024


Select a reporting category

- Region
- School Location
- School Level
- School Size
- Students of Color
- Poverty



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### National Center for School Safety School Threat Assessment Toolkit



Free resource with generic guidance:

- Training
- Implementation
- Evaluation

<https://www.nc2s.org/resource/school-threat-assessment-toolkit/>

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### ASIS Technical Standards for School Security


- School Security Program Standards
- Physical Protection
- Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management
- Emergency Operations

*Approved by the American National Standards Institute August 2025*

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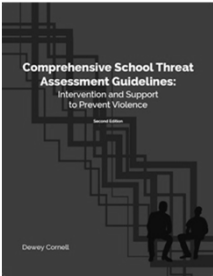
### Behavioral Threat Assessment

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### Virginia Model of School Threat Assessment



2024 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

- Developed 2001 at University of Virginia
- School-based teams gather information
- Follow decision-tree to determine whether threat is transient or substantive
- Take protective action if substantive
- Attempt to resolve the problem underlying the threat

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### Use a multidisciplinary team.

1. Multiple perspectives and resources
2. School-based team can handle most cases.
3. District or community team if needed.

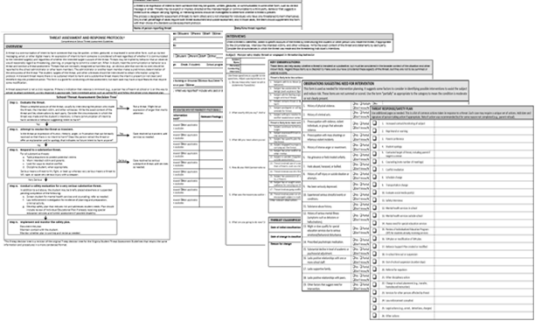
**No Lone Rangers!**



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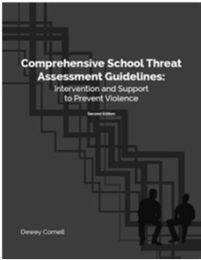
### Forms Available

<https://www.schoolta.com/>



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## 2nd Edition of CSTAG Manual



- Step-by-step guide
- Case examples
- Legal requirements
- Guidance on interventions
- 180 pages

<https://www.schoolta.com>

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**Step 1. Evaluate the threat.**  
Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student's intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

**Yes** ↓  
**Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.**  
Attempt to resolve conflict or threat. Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be resolved so that there is no intent to harm?

**No** ↓  
**Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.**  
For all substantive threats:  
a. Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims.  
b. Warn intended victim and parents.  
c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.  
d. Discipline student, when time is appropriate.  
Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas Very serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.  
**Very Serious** ↓  
**Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.**  
In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:  
e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.  
f. Law enforcement investigation.  
g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan or "child find" procedures if appropriate.  
↓  
**Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.**  
Document the plan.  
Maintain contact with the student.  
Revise plan as needed.


**No** → Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.

**Yes** → Case resolved as transient. Add services as needed.

**Serious** → Case resolved as serious substantive threat. Add services as needed.

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## Standard Questions



1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?

2. What exactly did you say and do?

3. What did you mean when you said/did that?

4. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?

5. What was the reason you said that?

6. What are you going to do now?


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## 4 Categories

## Criteria

No threat	False rumor
Transient threat	Expression of anger or frustration easily resolved, no intent to attack
Serious Substantive Threat	Intent to fight
Very Serious Substantive Threat	Intent to shoot, stab, kill, or severely injure

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## Ben

Two students reported to a teacher that a student in the library named Ben said that he is going to kill another student named Caleb.

You interview Ben in your office.

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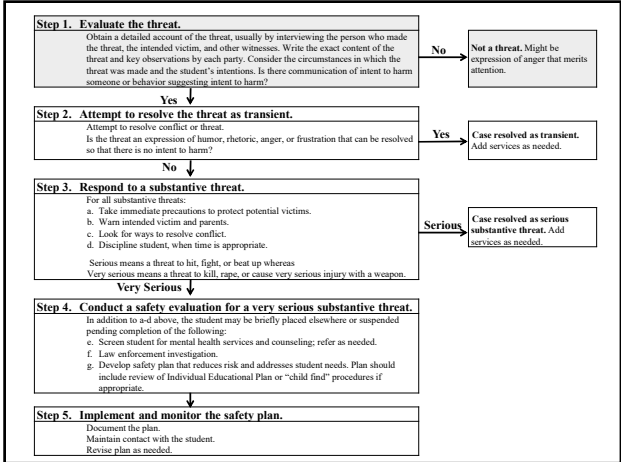
## Ben – Version 1

The two students reporting a threat misunderstood what Ben said. Ben was just talking about a popular online video game called Fortnite where he and his friends can fight one another. Caleb confirmed that they were only talking about a game. Ben didn't threaten anyone.


How would you classify this threat?

- a) Not a threat
- b) Transient threat
- c) Serious substantive threat
- d) Very serious substantive threat

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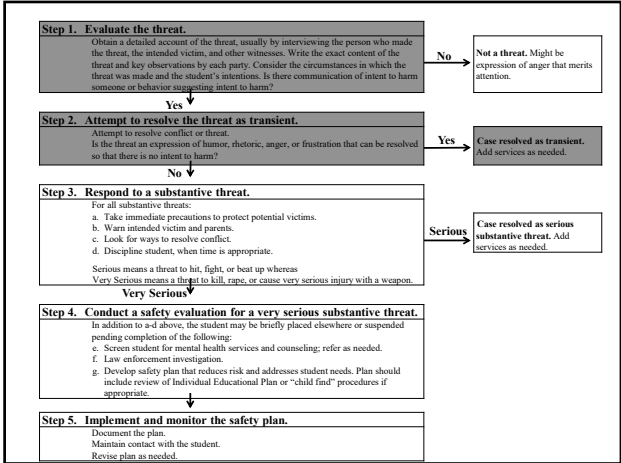


### Ben – Version 2

Ben was angry at Caleb for trash talking about a basketball game. When Ben said he wanted to kill Caleb, he was just expressing his anger and frustration, and his desire to beat them next week when they play again. He has no interest in killing anyone and he is sorry he said that. The witnesses corroborate Ben's account. If there is no other information to contradict this explanation, how would you classify this threat?

a) Not a threat  
b) Transient threat  
c) Serious substantive threat  
d) Very serious substantive threat

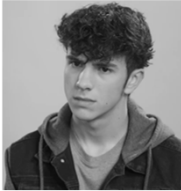
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Two Types of Threats	
Transient	Substantive
Not serious	Serious
Joke or exaggeration	Intent to harm someone
Easily resolved	Not easily resolved
No need for protective action	Protective action needed Comprehensive assessment and safety plan if very serious

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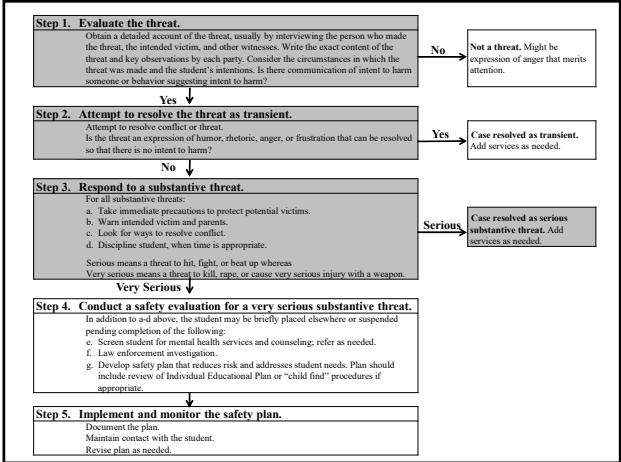


### Ben – Version 3

Ben is angry and frustrated that he lost a basketball game to Caleb. He says he isn't going to kill anyone, but he expects a fight if Caleb keeps up the trash talking. If there is no other information to contradict this explanation, how would you classify this threat?

a) Not a threat  
b) Transient threat  
c) Serious substantive threat  
d) Very serious substantive threat

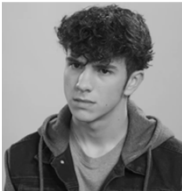
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Serious Substantive	Very Serious Substantive
Threat to fight	Threat to shoot, stab, kill
Simple assault	Aggravated assault
Protective action	Protective action
Mediate conflict	Comprehensive assessment and safety plan

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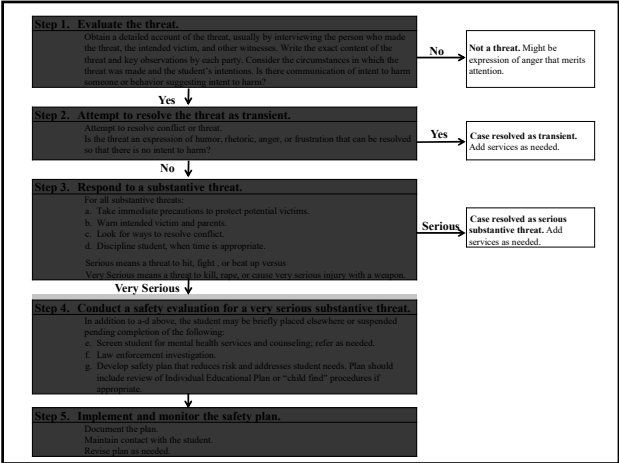


### Ben – Version 4

Ben denies saying anything about Caleb. However, when your SRO advises you that Ben and Caleb belong to rival gangs and that Ben is rumored to have a gun.

- a) Not a threat
- b) Transient threat
- c) Serious substantive threat
- d) Very serious substantive threat

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### In very serious substantive cases, the team conducts a safety evaluation leading to a safety plan.

1. Safety interviews with:


- Student
- Intended victim/witnesses
- Student’s parent
- School staff who know student (including SRO, school counselor, teachers)
- Outside professionals who know student

2. Law Enforcement investigation

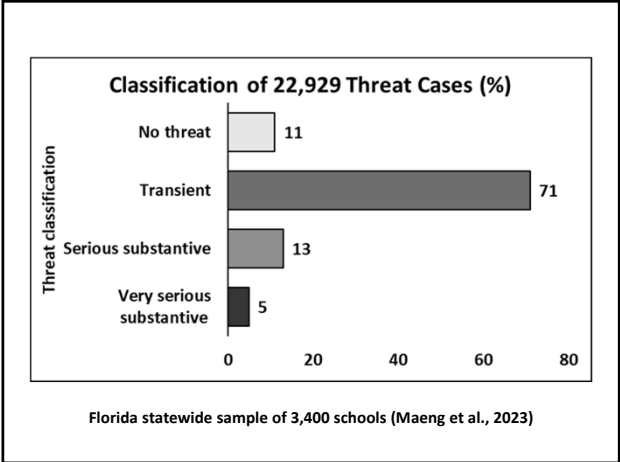
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### Step 5. Implement and Monitor Safety Plan.

- Plan is designed to reduce risk of violence and meet student needs.
- Document the plan.
- Maintain contact with student.
- Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed.



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# Behavioral Threat Assessment

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# How do we know that CSTAG works?

An evidence-based practice is one that has been tested with scientific studies demonstrating that it works.

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# Research on Threat Assessment

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# CSTAG Research

- 1. **Field-tests** - Virginia and Memphis
- 2. **Training evaluations** - Virginia, Florida, National
- 3. **Controlled studies** - 6 in Virginia
- 4. **Large-scale implementation** - Virginia and Florida
- 5. **Fidelity, consistency, long-term outcomes** - Current 3-year study of about 500 schools in 6 states

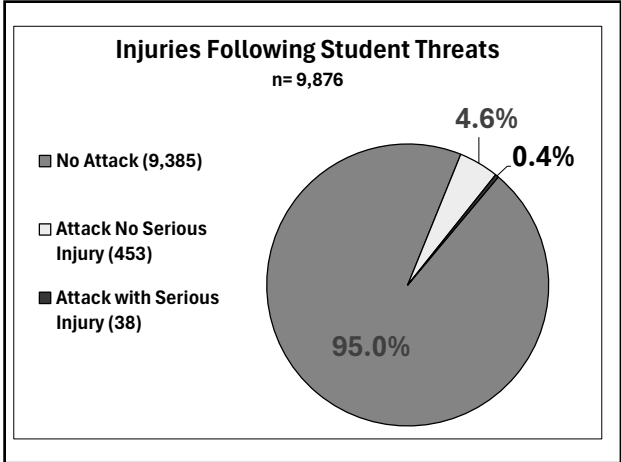
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# Safety Outcomes

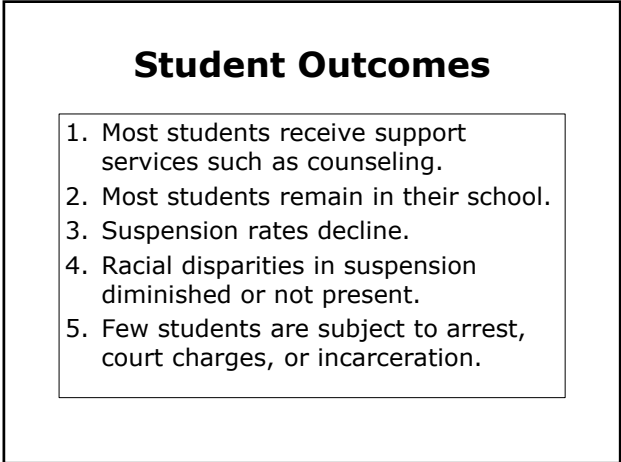
- 1. Thousands of threats resolved without violence. Few threats attempted. Mostly fights.
- 2. 99% no serious injuries.
- 3. No shootings or fatalities.
- 4. Less bullying and peer aggression.
- 5. Students and teachers report more positive school climate.

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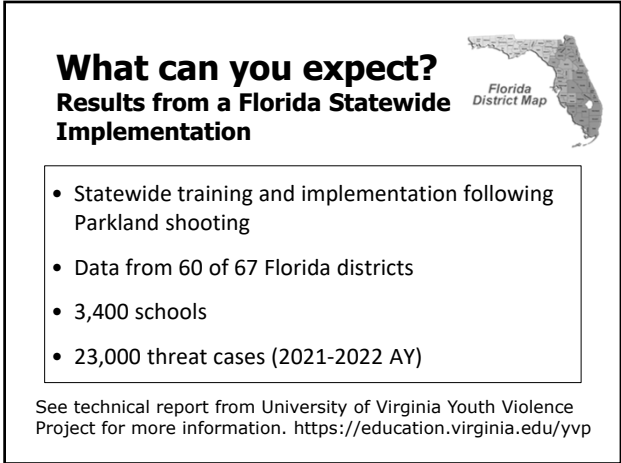




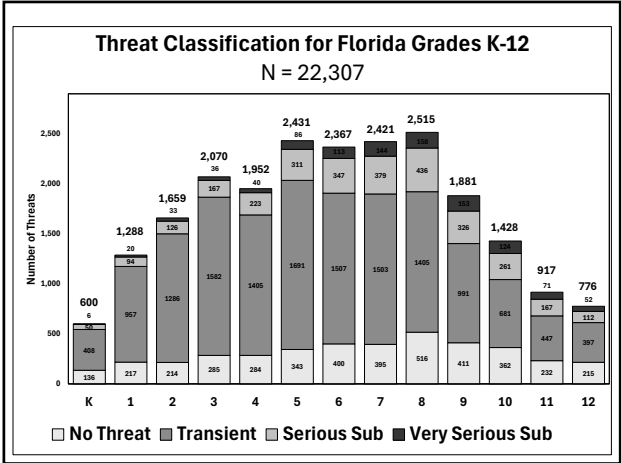
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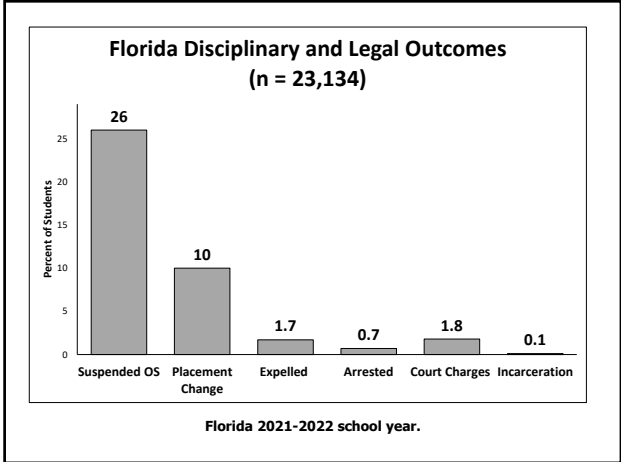
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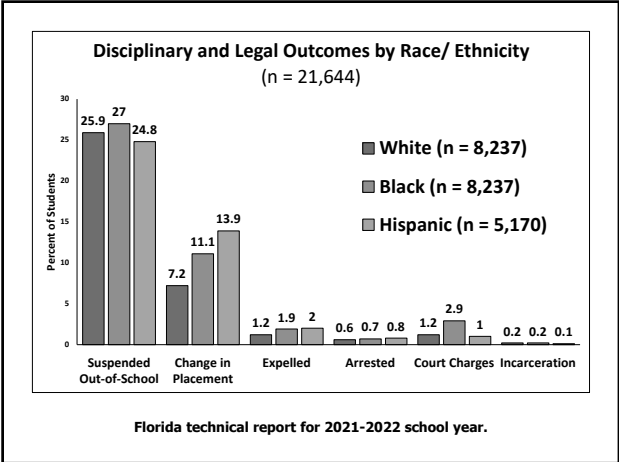
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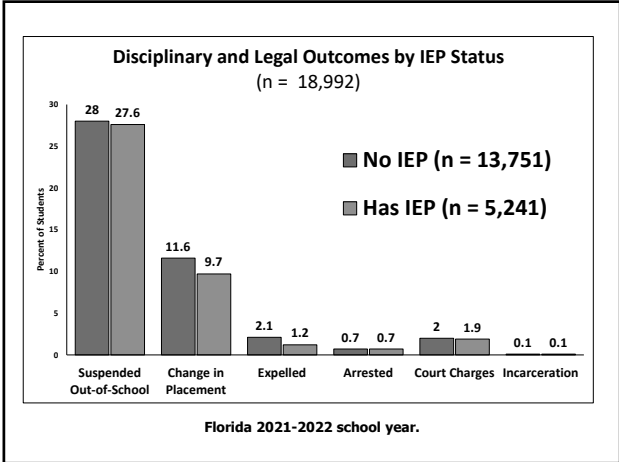
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**Research Team**

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***School Threat Assessment and How It Works***

1. BTA is a violence prevention strategy.
2. BTA gives us a proportional response instead of over-reacting or underreacting
3. Teams can use it efficiently.
4. We have scientific evidence that it works.

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