

**BYSTANDERS TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE /UPSTANDERS FOR SAFETY  
& WHAT THEY CAN TEACH US AS SCHOOLS REOPEN  
DURING/AFTER THE PANDEMIC**

The gold standard in North America and beyond, for understanding the targeted violence that resulted in & results in school violence/ school shootings was the work of the joint Task Force of the National Threat Assessment Center [NTAC] of the US Secret Service [USSS] & The US Department of Education [ED], and the Safe Schools Initiative [SSI] that resulted in the publications in two studies: *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Vossekuil, , et al 2002;) and *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Fein et al., 2002)

Since that period the USSS has continued to elaborate on the findings and models first laid out in that report & J. Kevin Cameron who worked with us created his own evolving VTRA models in Canada and now also in the US through NACTATR. The NACTATR guidelines continue to evolve as do follow-up studies conducted by NTAC / USSS, based primarily upon our original findings which remain in place.

One very important set of findings in those original studies and replicated since were the facts, that; First, the perpetrators exhibited concerning behavior prior to the attack in 93% of the incidents. This suggested that attacks might have been avoided with proper observation techniques and more open sharing of information. Second, and more significant, at least one other person had some type of prior knowledge of the attacker's plan in 81% of the incidents and more than one person had such knowledge in 59% of the incidents. Of those individuals who had prior knowledge, 93% were peers of the perpetrators – friends, schoolmates, or siblings (Vossekuil, et al., 2002).

Understanding this “bystander” phenomenon became the focus of a derivative study by this author and his collaborators at NTAC and ED, *Prior knowledge of potential school-based violence: information students learn may prevent a targeted attack* (Pollack, et.al, 2008). That study yielded much significant knowledge about what made for the difference between passive “bystanders’ who allowed their knowledge to go undetected and thereby inadvertently enhance the possibility of school violence, and their “upstander” counterparts who when informed of potentially troubling information had the courage to come forward and forestall heinous outcomes. In regard to the results gleaned for the purposes of forestalling school shootings, the study itself would be importantly illuminating. As schools and communities prepare to re-open during the ongoing pandemic and even in the immediate periods post viral infections; there are lessons we learned that may be of great significance in planning for the least traumatic and safest planning in regards

to the re-entry of staff and students.

Significantly many student bystanders felt that the information they heard either wasn't really serious or was unlikely to lead to a more immediate consequence and therefore felt disinclined to come forward with such potentially "explosive information". So, as schools re-open, we might suggest that there are students who are not necessarily so distraught they are planning an attack (though that is always, of course, a possibility in these stressful times) but who are feeling extremely anxious, depressed and potentially even suicidal who may share that information with their peers, who would unfortunately not come forward to a trusted adult, so as to forestall their friend's pain or even potential suicide attempt.

Most important, bystanders remained silent or turned into upstanders based strongly upon their sense of safety and inclusion in an inclusive, connected, emotionally supportive, school climate:

*"School climate affected whether bystanders came forward with information related to the threats".*

*Some bystanders reported that the school climate influenced their decisions to share information with the school staff regarding the threats. Bystanders who came forward with information commented that they were influenced by positive relations with one or more adults, teachers, or staff, and/or a feeling within the school that the information would be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. Similarly, students who displayed a reluctance to come forward indicated that they anticipated a negative response from the school had they shared information".*

In addition, supporting our understanding that school system's do not exist in a vacuum apart from the larger community, especially, students' parents, the study found that:

*"In some situations, parents and parental figures influenced whether the bystander reported the information related to the potential attack to school staff or other adults in positions of authority".*

In addition our summary recommendations, based upon our findings could be of great use in this present period of school re-openings, and are shared below (with further) explanation toward that end. We recommended, based on our study three key suggestions:

1. *Schools should ensure a climate in which students feel comfortable sharing information they have regarding a potentially threatening situation with a*

*responsible adult.*

2. *School districts are encouraged to develop policies that address the many aspects of reporting threats.*
3. *Teachers, administrators, and other faculty should be trained on how to properly respond to students who provide them with information about a threatening or disturbing situation, as well as how to deal with actual threats.*

In conjunction with the NACTATR Guidelines for Re-entry our findings from the “Bystander Study” can be very helpful for school administrators and faculty, alike, in creating the type of school environment or *climate*, not only where students and faculty both feel and are safe, but to create structures for enhancing & sustaining such safety and avoiding, needless harm.

Certainly, for those trained in threat assessment of targeted school violence, VTRA or TES references to threats already echo with the most extreme issues of school violence, which, of course, should always be on our minds. But if we expand the term “threat” in our recommendations to include threats to emotional well being, including, but not exclusively, increased social stress, evidence of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation or planning for self-harm, these models can be of great use in providing both a safe “holding environment” in our re-opened schools and in early identification of emotional and academic stressors (threats) that students will feel freer to report for themselves as well as their classmates and faculty will feel empowered to intervene, so as to create greater safety and genuine emotional calm. If not now, then when? If not we, then who?

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Partial Bibliography of articles noted:

Fein RA, Vossekuil B, **Pollack WS**, Borum R, Modzeleski W, Reddy M. Threat Assessment in schools—A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates. Washington: United States Department of Education; 2002.

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