When a Student Threatens Harm

Tips for private-independent school administrators

Disclaimer: The content of this document is a general summary of information for school administrators. It is not intended to take the place of the written law, local regulations, or legal counsel.
In this day and age, when a student makes a threatening statement of any kind, school administrators must take it seriously. This can be a challenge, however, since individuals make “threatening” comments all the time without ever intending to act upon them.

For example, Sally might say, "I could just strangle Mrs. Jones! She gave us homework on homecoming weekend!" You understand that Sally is merely annoyed and has no intention of strangling anyone. Or Jake might complain, "I'm so mad at my parents! I wish they were dead!" You know that Jake has a good relationship with his parents, so you conclude that he is merely upset.

You might worry, on the other hand, that brushing off comments (even those made by the "good kids") could be dangerous. "Am I missing any important warning signs?" you might ask yourself.

ISM recognizes that this is a real challenge for administrators and faculty members. Therefore, we have compiled various suggestions from the Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) that Heads and Trustees should carefully consider while reviewing (or creating for the first time) policies and procedures that could help prevent a tragedy from striking in their schools.
Know your students

Child and adolescent psychiatrists and other mental health professionals agree that it is very difficult to predict a child’s future behavior with complete accuracy, the AACAP reports. However, closely paying attention to students’ behavior can go a very long way.

The AACAP states that “a person’s past behavior is one of the best predictors of future behavior.” Therefore, administrators and all members of the faculty and staff in your school should learn to:

- carefully listen to students when they speak
- carefully listen to parents when they speak of any past or ongoing problems in the family or with the student
- keep their ears open when walking through the halls
- truly get to know the person behind the desk – knowing your student’s name and GPA isn’t enough

Watch for red flags

Carefully watch for any of the following risk factors. The AACAP reports that the presence of one or more increases the risk of violent or dangerous behavior:

- past violent or aggressive behavior (including uncontrollable angry outbursts)
- access to guns or other weapons
- bringing a weapon to school
- past suicide attempts or threats
- family history of violent behavior or suicide attempts
- blaming others and/or unwilling to accept responsibility for one’s own actions
- recent experience of humiliation, shame, loss, or rejection
- bullying or intimidating peers or younger children
- a pattern of threats
- being a victim of abuse or neglect (physical, sexual, or emotional)
- witnessing abuse or violence in the home
- themes of death or depression repeatedly evident in conversation, written expressions, reading selections, or artwork
- preoccupation with themes and acts of violence in TV shows, movies, music, magazines, comics, books, video games, and Internet sites
- mental illness, such as depression, mania, psychosis, or bipolar disorder
- use of alcohol or illicit drugs
- disciplinary problems at school or in the community (delinquent behavior)
- past destruction of property or vandalism
- cruelty to animals
- firesetting behavior
- poor peer relationships and/or social isolation
- involvement with cults or gangs
- little or no supervision or support from parents or other caring adult
What threats should **always** be taken seriously?

The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry offers the following (non-exclusive list) of examples of potentially dangerous or emergency situations with a child or adolescent in your school:

- threats or warnings about hurting or killing someone
- threats or warnings about hurting or killing oneself
- threats to run away from home
- threats to damage or destroy property

When a child makes a serious threat, the AACAP says, it should never be dismissed as just idle talk. A qualified individual in your school (e.g., guidance counselor, school nurse, division head – or whomever you have designated to handle such situations) should immediately talk with the child; parents should promptly be notified.

If it is determined that he or she is at risk, but the child refuses to talk, is argumentative, responds defensively, or continues to express violent or dangerous thoughts or plans, parents should be encouraged to make immediate arrangements for an evaluation by a qualified mental health professional who has experience evaluating children and adolescents, the AACAP advises. In an emergency situation or if the child or family refuses help, it may be necessary to contact local police for assistance.

Every school should have a policy on what behaviors constitute a “threat” and how the situation will be handled. Does your school? Every teacher and administrator should know exactly what to do if a fellow student/administrator acts in a threatening or alarming way. **Your student handbook should clearly outline how such situations will be handled.**

Do parents understand your school’s policies on “threatening” behavior? Sharing such information can help validate a parent’s decision to send his or her child to your school. Parents feel “safer” knowing that the school is working to create a safe haven for their children. On the other hand, if any parent feels that your precautionary measures are “overkill” or “too strict,” gently remind him or her that the safety of every student is paramount – that’s no doubt one of the reasons many parents choose to pay tuition rather than send their children to public schools.
Of course, private-independent schools have an advantage over their public school counterparts: you’re not required to continue to work with a student if he or she fails to live up to your school policies. Therefore, blatant and outright bad behavior (frequent violent outbursts, vandalism, etc.) should not be tolerated.

**However, note that many of the warning signs listed on the previous pages are not necessarily manifested through overtly "bad" behavior.**

Social isolation; a past history of sexual abuse; witnessing abuse of others in the home; a preoccupation with violent themes from movies, TV shows, or video games; and an unwillingness to accept responsibility for one’s own actions are all listed as “warning signs.” Is your faculty and staff on the alert for such signs? Is there a system in place for noting such behavior so that any existing or developing behavioral patterns can be identified?

It’s been said of many of the recent school shootings that were carried out by students that the shooter was “a quiet person who never got into trouble.” Individuals also note that, looking back, the warning signs were there. It’s just that nobody paid attention to that “quiet kid.”

**Creating a safe haven for students in an unsafe world is possible.** It just takes work. The links listed on the next page provide further information from which you and your entire faculty and staff will benefit.
Further Information:

Children's Threats: When Are They Serious? – from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

Understanding Violent Behavior In Children and Adolescents – from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center – Information for professionals and educators

Safe Schools Fact Sheets – from the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence

School Violence Warning Signs and Remedies – audio news clips from the U.S. Department of Education

Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools – 34-page PDF published by the National Association of School Psychologists