

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF TEXAS SCHOOLS IMPLEMENTING BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS

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Beginning in 2021, WestEd's Justice & Prevention Research Center (JPRC) has partnered with the Texas State School Safety Center (TxSSC) to examine Texas high schools' implementation of behavioral threat assessment (BTA) as a school safety strategy. The study explores school experiences with implementation of campus-based BTA programs as well as the strategy's short-term outcomes, including perceptions of school safety, school climate, and student achievement. **The goal of this study is to increase the body of rigorous evidence on the use of BTA in schools and to better understand the contextual factors and processes that facilitate successful implementation of school-based BTA programming.**

As part of this study, the JPRC team conducted a thorough review of peer-reviewed studies and gray literature focused on school-based threat assessment procedures. The review identified models that school threat assessment teams across the United States have adopted and methods used in their implementation. The existing literature also addresses the relative effectiveness of various BTA strategies, the role of BTA in suicide intervention, challenges to BTA implementation in urban versus rural schools, shortcomings of the strategy, and outcomes that schools have reported following BTA implementation.

Background

Although BTA practices vary across contexts, common definitions of BTA recognize it as a systematic process that involves

- identifying persons or situations of concern;
- investigating and gathering information about those persons or situations;

- assessing the persons or situations to determine the presence of a threat and its nature; and
- intervening with the persons or situations to prevent, mitigate, or resolve potential safety threats.

BTA as it is currently practiced in K–12 schools is characterized by a focus on proactively assessing risk of targeted violence rather than an individual's general violence potential, an approach that views the risk of violence from any given individual as contextual, subject to change, and having a variable probability of occurring (Borum et al., 1999).

Resources for BTA implementation in schools, including the National Threat Assessment Center, typically frame BTA as a strategy for identifying and mitigating all types of serious threats to student safety, including violence, bullying, and student self-harm, with the expectation that BTA implementation will go hand in hand with broader efforts to improve school climate (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018). While models for BTA in schools originally grew out of methods designed for other contexts (notably, the threat assessment model developed by the U.S. Secret

Service), school-based BTA necessarily takes an adapted approach (Borum et al., 1999). Unlike in other contexts where BTA is applied, schools must have systems in place for not only protecting against but also supporting individuals in their communities who threaten or are at risk of committing violence. Schools using BTA to identify and guide their responses to students who may pose a threat to school safety must also do so while protecting students' civil rights as required under IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and FERPA (Reeves & McCarthy, 2021).

The literature on BTA in schools includes a select number of positive findings regarding outcomes for students. For example, prior research on one BTA model, known as the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines and formerly known as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (Cornell, 2020), suggests that there have been meaningful decreases in suspensions and bullying infractions and increases in student help-seeking behaviors in some schools using this model, compared with schools that used other strategies for responding to student threats (Cornell et al., 2009; Cornell et al., 2011).

However, there is the possibility that the use of BTA in schools may replicate widespread and systematic inequities in school discipline, specifically the disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline and legal consequences for minor misbehavior of children of color and children with disabilities. Proponents of BTA in schools emphasize that such inequities are avoidable if the model is implemented with fidelity and attention to the potential for bias (NASP School Safety and Response Committee, 2021; O'Malley et al., 2018). However, the research evidence is mixed on the effects of BTA practices on short- and long-term suspension rates across student subgroups. Specifically, research is mixed on whether specific groups (such as Black and Native American students and students receiving special education services) are disproportionately identified for threat assessment and on whether there are racial

disparities in student disciplinary outcomes following BTA (Cornell et al., 2013; Cornell, Maeng, Burnette et al., 2018; Cornell, Maeng, Huang et al., 2018; Burnette et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2022).

The literature on BTA in schools also highlights a range of challenges facing campuses that choose to adopt BTA as part of their school safety strategies. For example, it can be difficult to measure the fidelity with which schools implement the BTA process, and it remains unclear how closely or consistently BTA training and local BTA practices align with any given model (Ross et al., 2022).

Schools' lack of resources can also be a barrier to BTA implementation. In addition to limiting buy-in from school staff and leaders (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018), shortages of staff time and funding can directly affect access to training and technical assistance for BTA team members. Research suggests that these types of support for school staff may be important conditions for effective BTA implementation (Stohlman et al., 2020).

As of 2023, Texas is one of several states that require the use of BTA in schools (Texas Education Code § 37.115, 2019). As part of this mandate, **all Texas school districts are required to adopt policies, procedures, and training to implement a "safe and supportive school program," and districts must ensure that there is a team to implement the program—including BTA—for each campus.** Staff at Texas schools receive BTA training grounded in the 2018 U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) guidelines and delivered in partnership with a private training provider. The training is intended to assist school campuses across more than 1,000 school districts with BTA implementation, including providing guidance on effective BTA procedures and research-based best practices. This study aims to learn from the BTA implementation experiences of the diverse population of high schools receiving this training and practicing BTA in Texas.

Methods and Sample

The JPRC developed a baseline survey to capture information about BTA training and implementation from Texas schools beginning 2 years after the passage of the legislative mandate. The research team conducted outreach to 509 schools, each of which had at least one staff member who attended a virtual BTA training between September 2020 and August 2021. Survey responses were collected from BTA team members and other school staff at 120 school sites between October and December 2021. Nine schools did not meet the criteria to complete the survey (e.g., they reported they did not have a BTA team). A total of 111 responses were included in the final analysis.

Respondents to the 2021 survey were also asked if they would be willing to share more information about their experiences implementing BTA. The evaluation team followed up with interested survey respondents from a sample of schools with varying levels of BTA implementation. Between January and March 2022, 37 BTA team members across 16 school sites participated in an interview or a focus group with staff of the JPRC and TxSSC. A follow-up survey was administered between October and December 2022. JPRC again conducted outreach to schools, with staff from 60 schools ultimately participating in the follow-up survey. A total of 59 responses were used in the analysis, excluding one school that did not have a BTA team at the time of the survey. A summary of the data collected as part of this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Sources

Protocol	Dates of data collection	Number of participants/responses
Baseline survey	October–December 2021	120 (9 reported no BTA team)
Interviews and focus groups	January–March 2022	37 (16 school sites)
Follow-up survey	October–December 2022	60 (1 reported no BTA team)

Findings

The following section summarizes the findings from the 16 interviews and focus groups, including areas of alignment between the BTA model and reported implementation of BTA in schools, possible barriers affecting BTA implementation, factors facilitating implementation of the model, lessons learned, and additional support needed. Data from the two surveys are used to highlight and further explore specific dimensions of the findings from the interviews and focus groups.

Alignment Between Implementation and the BTA Model

Beginning in 2020, Texas school and district staff began receiving training to support their implementation of BTA in schools across the state. The training, offered by a private provider in partnership with TxSSC, is based on the guidelines for school-based BTA developed by the NTAC (NTAC, 2018). This model is organized around eight practical steps that schools can take to establish a school BTA program. TxSSC provides technical assistance to schools to support implementation of the model.¹ Table 2 outlines NTAC's eight-step model for building a school-based BTA program.

1 For more information about Texas School Safety Center's guidance for Texas schools, see its Threat Assessment Toolkit at <https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/tam-toolkit/>.

Table 2. Eight Steps for Implementing BTA in Schools

Steps to build a BTA program	Number of participants/responses
Establish a multidisciplinary team	Choose team name, identify membership, designate a team lead, establish protocols and procedures, meet on a regular basis and as needed
Define prohibited and concerning behaviors	Establish policies defining prohibited behaviors, identify other behaviors for screening and intervention, define threshold for intervention
Create a central reporting mechanism	Establish one or more reporting mechanisms (e.g., online, dedicated email, phone), provide training, ensure availability to respond, establish trust
Define threshold for law enforcement intervention	Establish which behaviors should be referred for law enforcement
Establish threat assessment procedures	Decide how to document cases, screen reports, gather information, organize information, make assessment, and decide on intervention
Develop risk management options	Identify resources for management plans and resources for targets/victims, establish points of contacts for resources
Create and promote safe school climates	Assess school climate (surveys), ensure school climate findings are addressed, strengthen student connectedness
Conduct training for all interest holders	Train the threat assessment team, train others (e.g., students, parents, staff)

Note. Adapted from guidance published by the NTAC, 2018.

The process relies on an established multidisciplinary team comprising members with different areas of expertise and roles in the school community. Ideally, this team comes together with school and district leadership to develop a process, protocols, and procedures governing the implementation of BTA at a local school. Once established, this team is responsible for collaborating with other school and district staff to complete the remaining steps listed above (Table 2). The evaluation described here used these eight steps as an underlying framework for all interview, focus group, and survey protocols.

Not all participating schools had fully operational BTA teams at the time of data collection, and in many cases, participants described BTA teams that had been newly established since the passage of the legislative mandate. Analysis of interview and focus group data surfaced several aspects of local BTA implementation that commonly align with the BTA model among schools in the sample, including those that were new to the process. In each case, interview and focus group participants perceived these practices to be important parts of

the BTA model. However, their perceptions were more mixed regarding the usefulness and relevance of these components of the model for their school communities.

Most BTA Teams Are Multidisciplinary

Most interviewees and focus group participants with active BTA teams reported that their BTA teams include members with a wide variety of perspectives and roles in the school community. These participants report that BTA teams at their schools include nurses, instructional staff (both general and special education), athletics staff, counselors, psychologists, school safety directors, assistant principals, and principals.

Data from the 2021 and 2022 surveys conducted as part of this study suggest a similar diversity of roles represented on school BTA teams in the larger sample. For example, 69 percent of respondents in 2021 indicated that their BTA teams included members representing at least seven of the nine areas of expertise² recommended as part of the BTA model. Among respondents to the 2022 survey, all reported that their school BTA teams

² The BTA model of interest recommends that school BTA teams include members representing the following nine areas of expertise: counseling, behavior management, mental health/substance use, classroom instruction, special education, school administration, school safety/security, emergency management, and law enforcement.

included school administration and counseling, and 75 percent included at least seven of the nine recommended areas of expertise on their BTA teams. In both 2021 and 2022, the roles that were least often represented on school BTA teams were emergency management and mental health/substance use.

Among interview and focus group participants, several individuals identified the multidisciplinary nature of their BTA teams as a key asset to their work, providing a variety of perspectives, tools, and relationships that can help a team assess threats and support students. Although individuals are often recruited to participate in their schools' BTA teams because of their roles, participants also noted cases in which school staff were asked to join the team because of their familiarity or rapport with students. Interview and focus group participants further reported that police and school resource officers regularly participate in their schools' BTA teams. Staff at one school reported that the BTA teams in their school district were created by the district's police department, which then assigned a principal or assistant principal to lead each campus team.

Central Reporting Mechanisms Are in Place, but Students Often Report Potential Threats to Teachers

In line with the BTA model, **participants in the interviews and focus groups reported the widespread implementation of central threat reporting mechanisms at their schools.** These mechanisms may include but are not limited to physical drop boxes, tip lines, online forms, and apps such as *See Something Say Something*. Similarly, 73 percent of survey respondents in 2021 and 92 percent of respondents in 2022 indicated that their campuses have implemented one or more anonymous reporting tools.

However, the presence of a central reporting mechanism does not guarantee its use. Several interview and focus group participants described relying primarily on students to report potential threats to teachers, who then pass the information on to their schools' BTA teams. **Despite the availability of other (anonymous) reporting mechanisms, participants at some schools stated that most potential threats are reported via word of mouth.** While focus group and interview participants generally attributed this practice to strong relationships between students and teachers, students may have other reasons for not using central reporting mechanisms.

In schools where few threats are reported, it may be difficult to determine how well reporting systems are actually working. The vast majority of survey respondents (76% in 2021 and 64% in 2022) reported that, on average, no more than one threat is reported to their BTA teams each month, meaning that the absolute number of people using any of the available mechanisms to report a potential threat is extremely low. While the low frequency of potential threats at these schools may be a true reflection of the presence of potential threats, it is possible in some schools that infrequent reporting is also related to lack of awareness of the BTA process or reporting tools within the school community.

Threat Assessments Are Conducted in Line With Key Components of the BTA Model

When asked about their process for assessing potential threats, school staff and administrators described practices in line with the key components of the BTA model. Multiple interviewees and focus group participants cited their schools' consistency in practices such as gathering information about a threat, determining when and how to involve law enforcement, calling meetings of the BTA team, notifying parents, and documenting team activities. At the same time, not all interviewees and focus group participants referred specifically to policies at a district or campus level that guide these practices, so it is not clear from the data whether they are fully institutionalized or whether they are the practices of individual team members.

Data from the surveys also suggest relative consistency in how school BTA teams approach the threat assessment process. For example, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents (89% in 2021 and 95% in 2022) reported that their BTA processes include gathering information from multiple sources (e.g., social media, school personnel, school documents, school-issued student accounts, law enforcement). More than half of respondents further reported

- that their teams' BTA processes include case management plans to reduce risk (57% in 2021 and 54% in 2022),
- that they have practices in place to assess school climate (57% in 2021 and 53% in 2022), and
- that their teams have developed policies (i.e., how to screen reports to determine which need a full threat assessment) defining a threshold for assessment (54% in 2021 and 71% in 2022).

Among 2022 survey respondents, 78 percent reported that their schools' BTA teams had adopted a formal, written procedure to guide the BTA process.

Challenges to Implementing the BTA Model

Interview and focus group participants generally expressed commitment to implementing their schools' BTA program effectively and in line with the model. However, several participants reported that their schools' BTA teams were not yet fully operational. Others said that they lacked the resources—at a school, district, or community level—to implement the model fully.

It Is Difficult to Find Time for BTA Team Meetings

One of the challenges most often raised by school staff and administrators was finding time for BTA team meetings. **While the model encourages teams to meet both on a regular basis and as needed, some focus group and interview participants reported that their schools' BTA teams meet less frequently than they would like.** For example, one principal explained that the small size of their school means that they do not have the capacity to meet as a full team more than once per year. Focus group and interview participants from other schools also indicated that it can be logistically difficult to find a time for even a few members of their BTA teams to convene, with one participant indicating that the pandemic had put further strain on staff members' time at the expense of the BTA process.

Of the schools that completed the survey, results are as follows:

- Most respondents indicated that the BTA team members only meet on an as-needed basis (76% in 2021 and 66% in 2022).
- Most of the remaining respondents reported meeting biweekly or monthly (20% in 2021 and 30% in 2022).
- A small minority of respondents (5% in 2021 and 2% in 2022) indicated that their team had yet to meet at the time of the survey.

Findings from the 2022 follow-up survey indicate that finding time to meet as a team was the most common challenge to BTA implementation (46%).

Process Tracking and Data Management Are Often Decentralized, but Software Can Be Prohibitively Expensive

Interview and focus group participants also highlighted process tracking and data management, both during and after the behavioral assessment process, as a challenge for their campuses and an obstacle to consistent, effective threat assessment. **Specifically, some participants indicated that they do not have institutionalized processes in place to handle the data that they collect as part of each threat assessment and that these data and practices reside with an individual team member if they exist at all.**

One consequence of this decentralized approach is that schools may sometimes be unable to refer back to threat assessments that their teams have conducted in the past, whether for the purposes of maintaining consistency in their assessment process across students or to inform the process for a single student who was assessed more than once.

In smaller schools or schools where there are few threats reported and there is little staff turnover, the lack of a centralized, institutionalized system for managing threat assessments and related data may not be a problem because enough staff are familiar with the assessments and with the students involved that they are able to provide consistency and continuity for the process over time. However, data from the 2022 survey suggest that staff turnover may be a widespread issue for schools working to establish and maintain an active BTA team, with 73 percent of respondents reporting changes to BTA team membership during the prior year. Nineteen percent of respondents reported process tracking and data management as the biggest barriers to BTA implementation at their schools.

Among interview and focus group participants, threat assessment software was widely perceived as an effective solution to this challenge. One focus group participant described the software as a tool that has helped their team reduce bias and ensure consistency in their practices over time, and 20 percent of respondents to the 2022 survey indicated that they rely at least in part on a dedicated safety and security platform (e.g., Navigate 360 or CrisisGo) to track BTA processes and results.

At the same time, data from interview, focus group, and survey participants suggest that **the cost of such software remains prohibitive for many schools**. More than half of respondents to the 2022 survey reported relying on paper files to manage BTA processes and data, and 5 percent of respondents identified their schools' inability to purchase dedicated software as a major obstacle to their implementation of a school BTA team. In the absence of universal access to these types of tools, several interview and focus group participants suggested that it would be helpful to receive more guidance on the granular details of how to conduct a threat assessment and manage the data that they collect, as well as low-tech tools like process templates and checklists.

It Can Be Difficult to Connect Students With Community-Based Resources

Another top concern for some interview and focus group participants was their difficulty in supporting students who were not found to be imminent threats but who still need help, such as behavioral health or substance use treatment. In those cases, **participants described challenges in identifying appropriate or accessible community resources and in obtaining buy-in from parents**.

For example, schools in rural areas may be geographically far from community resources, and one interviewee indicated that connecting students with community resources had become even more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents to the 2022 survey also highlighted lack of community resources as a barrier to effective BTA implementation, with 31 percent reporting a need for more local mental health and social service supports.

Although parent involvement was cited by many participants as a valuable asset in their BTA process and school community overall, participants indicated that they are not always able to reach parents when necessary, that some parents choose not to communicate with their children's school, and that other parents, for various reasons, are reluctant to connect their children with supportive services. In such cases, even schools with robust community resources to refer students may be unable to connect students with the help that schools believe they need. Participants at one school described trying to address this issue by creating a resource manual of community organizations available to help students and families and providing this to families when appropriate.

Possible Factors Facilitating Implementation of the BTA Model

Interview and focus group participants indicated several factors they believed had supported the establishment of a BTA program in their schools. As noted above, the multidisciplinary nature of their school BTA teams was one such factor. One interviewee described the diverse perspectives and shared commitment of BTA team members as their BTA program's biggest asset. Other interviewees indicated that their BTA teams benefit from resources outside of the school itself. One reported drawing expertise and support from the district level when it was not available on campus, as in the case of mental health professionals. Other participants described the value of connections with external community resources ranging from faith partners to counseling centers to law enforcement.

School and Community Resources Play a Significant Role in Facilitating BTA Team Success

Given that participants highlighted resource availability as a major factor inhibiting BTA team implementation, it is not surprising that **when resources were present, school staff reported that they played a significant role in facilitating the success of the BTA team and process**.

Interview and focus group participants reported that having adequate staff time for the BTA process, along with the presence of in-school and community-based services for students, enabled them to implement the model as intended. Comments made about resource availability were also often linked to discussions of school and community buy-in. Participants identified the importance of such buy-in, particularly among school and district leadership, as necessary for ensuring that BTA teams had the resources they needed to operate.

A Positive School Culture Contributes to BTA Team Success

Several interview and focus group participants attributed the success of their BTA teams to their school culture and relationships between staff and students. For some participants, their ability to facilitate a positive school culture and to extend the benefits of that school culture to their BTA teams was a direct result of the small sizes of their schools and surrounding communities. **Many of the interview and focus group participants highlighted positive school culture, transparent communication**

with the community, and relationships of trust between students and teachers as key to ensuring that the BTA team is made aware of potential threats. Survey data also indicate that the majority of schools (57% in 2021 and 53% in 2022) have practices in place to assess school climate.

Consistent Communication Is Key to Success

Lastly, strong, consistent communication emerged as an important practice for many of those schools that reported having established successful BTA teams.

Interview and focus group participants described a combination of in-person meetings, formal reporting processes, and informal interactions among team members, including texts. Of the schools that responded to the survey, results are as follows:

- Three quarters or more reported that BTA team members use email (77% in 2021 and 75% in 2022) and in-person conversations (73% in 2021 and 81% in 2022) to communicate with one another regarding student safety issues outside of team meetings.
- Less frequently reported means of communication were
 - phone (45% in 2021 and 58% in 2022),
 - text (38% in 2021 and 34% in 2022), and
 - virtual platforms (3% in 2021 and 2% in 2022).

Among interviewees who described their BTA processes in the greatest detail, most indicated reliance on informal methods of communication such as frequent texting. As one interviewee explained, their BTA team considers it important never to work in isolation from one another, so they are in constant contact. Several focus group and interview participants also highlighted the value of careful, transparent communication both within the BTA team and between the team and the broader school community.

Conclusion

Data collected through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with staff from schools across Texas illustrate some of the challenges that school and district staff face in the course of establishing a BTA program. Common barriers to full implementation of the model include limited staff availability for meetings, lack of infrastructure to support effective data tracking systems and protocols, and a shortage of school and community resources for students whom the BTA process identifies as requiring extra support. The preliminary findings from this study also identified school and community resources that support the BTA process, including multidisciplinary collaboration, positive school culture and relationships, and effective communication practices.

Although several years have passed since the Texas legislature mandated use of BTA in Texas schools, preliminary findings from this study indicate that implementation of BTA continues to vary widely from school to school and is evolving over time. Responses to the 2021 and 2022 surveys highlight some ways in which implementation of BTA processes are changing as schools acquire more experience with the model. For example, more than 70 percent of survey respondents in 2022 reported changes to their schools' BTA teams or processes in the previous school year, including 44 percent who indicated that their schools' BTA processes changed "to a moderate extent" or more. Some of these changes may reflect instability or staff turnover, but they may also be evidence of the increasing institutionalization of the BTA program in schools that have been implementing it for multiple years.

As schools and districts move ahead with their efforts to develop and maintain BTA programs, it will be important to continue to monitor the fidelity with which the BTA model is being implemented and the outcomes of implementation for students. The mandated implementation of BTA as a school safety strategy in a state as large as Texas offers educators, researchers, and policymakers a unique opportunity to explore the application of this model at scale and in a wide range of school and community contexts.

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