



Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

FS-SC25

2011

Information Sharing

An important element in any school violence prevention effort is effective collaboration among schools and stakeholders in the community. An important discovery following most school shootings is that many people often had pieces of information about the perpetrators but that information was never shared. After a careful review of events in Colorado, the Columbine Review Commission recommended that “all agencies that possess specific information regarding threatening behavior of a juvenile, the potential for violent behavior by a juvenile or delinquent acts of a juvenile, should share that information with other agencies dealing with that juvenile to the extent allowed by law.” The following are information sharing guidelines:

Forming an Interagency Social Support Team (ISST)

ISSTs are encouraged by the Colorado legislature to assure a safe school environment. The concept is based on the Colorado Attorney General’s model Interagency Agreement (available at www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools) which was designed to implement House Bill 1119 and Senate Bill 133. An inter-agency agreement can serve as a contract between agencies to specify which information should be shared and by whom. The ISST and the Threat Assessment Team (TAT) may be the same group of people or some part of each team. The ISST focuses more on school climate issues while the TAT focuses on individual threats.

An ISST should be comprised of representatives from the following:

- School (usually the principal and a psychologist, social worker, special education professional and/or counselor—who often make up the TAT)
- Law enforcement
- Mental health
- Social services
- Juvenile justice (probation, parole, diversion, district attorney)

Teachers, parents, students or other agencies may be asked to participate as appropriate.

Implementing Information Sharing

In 2005 an ISST working group from the Colorado Attorney General’s Office created a checklist of questions for each agency to answer and discuss in the process of understanding each others’ policies and procedures, integrating them and developing agreements about how to share information (See www.coloradoattorneygeneral.gov). ISSTs are expected to:

- Manage information sharing with a formal interagency agreement
- Develop protocols and methods for operating and cooperating with each other
- Identify students at risk to themselves and/or others
- Assess the needs of individual students and recommend strategies to meet those needs
- Coordinate resources
- Develop action plans and case management for each student assessed
- Make recommendations to the school regarding prevention and intervention strategies

The ISST collects and reacts to potentially threatening situations by deciding whether the information gathered merits a comprehensive threat assessment inquiry and investigation. The Threat Assessment Team (TAT) will then focus more thoroughly on the individual student in question. The U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education created a guide to assist in the threat assessment process (See references below).

Understanding Legal Issues

- **FERPA**

In 1974 the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was passed to allow parents (of children under 18) the right to access their children's educational records, the right to have the records amended, and the right to have some control over the disclosure of information from the records. FERPA was meant to protect the privacy of students and parents by discouraging unwarranted disclosure of a student's education records. Because FERPA often led to overly restrictive policies it often created significant barriers to effective information sharing between agencies. (HIPAA, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, does not apply to most school districts for information sharing purposes).

- **IASA**

In 1994 the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) amended FERPA to permit educators to disclose information to state and local officials as long as state statutes allow it and the disclosure related to the juvenile justice system. This led the way for states to enact statutes to disclose student information to other agencies as well.

- **Colorado Model Juvenile Information Exchange Laws**

In 2000 the Colorado legislature passed modifications to statutes relevant to the exchange of information concerning juveniles. These modifications specifically encourage "open communication among appropriate agencies, including criminal justice agencies, assessment centers for children, school districts, and schools." One of the most significant portions of the agreement involves information of "public safety concern" which is defined locally. These laws address FERPA concerns. (See www.coloradoattorneygeneral.gov for details).

The formation of ISSTs and TATs are the first steps in gathering all the pieces of information that can lead to a successful intervention for a student who may pose a threat to himself or others or in building a safe school climate. Sharing information, communicating effectively and following through with action plans are fundamental in protecting students and keeping their schools and communities safe.

References:

Erickson, Hon. W. H., (2001). Columbine Review Commission – The Report of Governor Bill Owens, State of Colorado

United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2004) *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, D.C.

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>

<http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/toc.html>