

## Digital threat assessment hinges on education, awareness

It's imperative that school personnel take all threats or suspected threats seriously — regardless if the threat is made through social media or the hallway at school. Many instances of school violence were preceded by social media warnings or threats by the student perpetrators. By ensuring that students, staff, and parents are educated about online threats, you can proactively respond before a tragedy occurs.

### Key points

- School violence often preceded by online threats
- Ensure constituents know importance of threat reporting
- Proactively engage parents about online threat assessment

"A lot of people are still unaware how digital presence influences overall risk," said Theresa Campbell, president of Safer Schools Together in White Rock, British Columbia, Canada. "We're seeing the impact of social media platforms

in student threats of serious violence and suicide."

Given the complexity of student's digital behaviors, it's important that school threat assessment teams are trained on digital threats. "That helps the assessment teams determine the online role and impact of the threat makers," Campbell said.

Campbell provided the following recommendations to enhance school environments:

- **Educate students.** "There's been a lot of research on bystanders and those students who knew about events prior to the occurrence and didn't report it," Campbell said. "We have a lot of kids that are watching rehearsal behavior of either homicide or suicide and they're not reporting." Oftentimes, when someone starts communicating online about thoughts or intentions, they're receiving further justification through the digital world to carry out those thoughts, Campbell said.

- **Encourage student and staff reporting.** Reporting online threats should remain a recurring topic throughout the school year. Administrators and SROs may share information on threats at the start of the school year. "But it really needs to be embedded into school culture about the importance of reporting," Campbell said. "We often have teaching and support staff who've heard student concerns about digital threats." There may be times when staff responds to online threats differently

compared to student behavior in the hallway of school. Make sure the adults in the building understand the steps to take when an online threat is reported. "There should be zero tolerance for not reporting threat-related behaviors," Campbell said. "Ensure that all staff members understand the need to report digital threats and worrisome behavior. Make sure to have that conversation with staff to understand worrisome behavior and the steps to take when it occurs." The primary goal of school personnel is safeguarding student welfare. As such, any threatening social media communication should be reported to school personnel to investigate and, if needed, take action.

- **Ensure parent engagement.** Parent education on social media threats remains an ongoing challenge for school safety personnel. "If we host a parent evening on digital threat issues, we'll have 30-40 parents attend," Campbell said. "But when we're involved in a student suicide or a high-profile sexting incident, we can't get enough chairs in the room." School personnel should be proactive to engage parents prior to traumatic events. For instance, Campbell's organization recently started a peer-to-peer training program where students educate each other and also facilitate the parent education evenings. Ultimately, it's challenging to be the educators in a field where students are the experts, she said. "Every day we're learning about how online platforms are negatively impacting student life."

- **Sidestep common pitfalls.** Campbell said the biggest mistake that schools often make is under-reaction to social media threats. "Students make online threats about wanting to kill themselves as if the virtual world is a lower level of risk," Campbell said. "The ongoing challenge is to change the perception of school threat assessment teams that the level of risk is lower because it's communicated online. Rather, it's the exact opposite." When you're involved in assessing threatening behavior in a school building, you should find out if the threat has been communicated elsewhere. Determine who else knows about it and may be involved. "When we ask about who may be involved, we can find out who is providing support and justification for the person to carry out the shared intent," Campbell said. "Ultimately, when something is posted online, there has to be a different assessment level. That starts by boosting the knowledge of threat assessment teams around digital behaviors."

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