



Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG): Overview & School Psychologists' Role

*Michigan Association of School Psychologists (MASP)
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Presenter:
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Woodhaven-Brownstown Schools




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Mark C. Muscat, MA (Presenter)

- Mark has been working as a school psychologist/behavioral intervention specialist for over 25 years in Southeast Michigan
- Mark specializes in working with students, staff, and parents in addressing challenging behavior, including threats/acts of violence
- Mark has an extensive background in special education, crisis responding, and other multi-tiered systems of support, including PBIS, trauma-informed practices, bully awareness/prevention, and SEL
- Mark has been a leader in bringing awareness of the CSTAG model to both the region and across the country as a National CSTAG Trainer and Coach, and continues to utilize the model to conduct multiple threat assessments across multiple grade levels, in collaboration with local and federal law enforcement
- Mark is also Trauma Specialist, CPI instructor, certified CSTAG trainer, former ALICE instructor, and member of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- Mark also currently lectures at the UM-Dearborn and EMU


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Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.

- Holds the Virgil Ward Chair as Professor of Education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia
- Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project
- Dr. Cornell became interested in the prevention of youth violence based on his experiences as a forensic clinical psychologist evaluating and treating violent offenders in the 1980s. He led the development of threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001 and is considered a national expert in the field!

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Who do we have with us today?





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Safety Quiz #1:

Studies have shown that, in over ??% of major acts of violence, at least one other person was aware of the individual's plans/intent.


- U.S. Department of Justice (2018)



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Safety Quiz #1:


Studies have shown that, in over 80% of major acts of violence, at least one other person was aware of the individual's plans/intent. - U.S. Department of Justice (2018)



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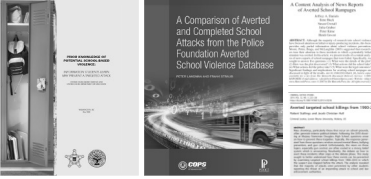
What is the Best Practice Implication of that Fact?

Our schools must continue to encourage others within their community to report when they become aware of potential school violence/threats.



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Violence is averted when students report threats...



Safety Quiz #2
Among the Ok2say anonymous reports of concern received by schools, what percentage of those concerns did the school have no prior knowledge of?

Over 70%!!!


https://www.michigan.gov/ok2say/-/media/Project/Websites/ok2say/2022/PDFs/annual-reports/2021_SinglePage_AnnualReport_MSP_ver9.pdf?rev=c70af9f310e94468b307bee7695deabe&hash=B0037F7A35867FD282CB920C4A9771DA

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What should we do this information once we have it?

Schools must have a comprehensive threat assessment/safety protocol in place to address such reports in order to: (1) prevent potential school violence, and (2) resolve conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior*

*Often referred to as BTAM (Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management)



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What are our Learning Goals for Today?


- Participants will have a stronger understanding of BTAM and specifically the CSTAG model, including the evidence-based research supporting the model's effectiveness, as well as the CSTAG decision tree and categories of threats
- Participants will become more familiar with the National Threat Assessment Center's (NTAC) "Investigative Themes" as part of the threat assessment process
- Participants will have a stronger understanding of the role a school psychologist (and other school mental health staff) may play in the implementation of the CSTAG model

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Relevant NASP Domains of Practice include:

Domain 4: Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions



Domain 6: Services to Promote Safe and Supportive Schools



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So, what really is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to prevention that involves the evaluation and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way toward others.


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Prevention through Problem Solving, not Over-reaction



Prevents violence and repeated threats by...


- ...helping troubled students and addressing underlying causes of threats and in the process...
- ...avoid over-reactions to student misbehavior



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So Why CSTAG?


- CSTAG is user-friendly model that is consistent with best practice recommendations from the Secret Service, FBI, Homeland Security, Department of Education, and the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC)
- CSTAG is the only model of its kind that has research from multiple field studies and controlled studies that provide evidence-based data supporting its effectiveness across multiple variables within the school setting



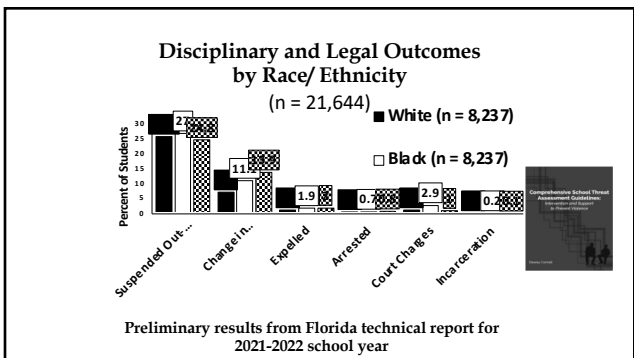
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Safety Outcomes

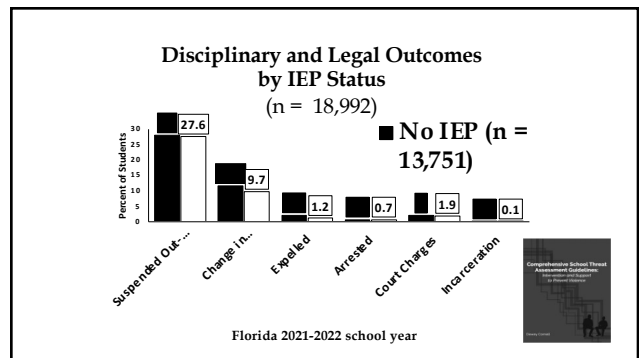
- Thousands of threats resolved without violence. Few threats attempted. Mostly fights
- 99.75% no serious injuries
- No shootings or fatalities
- Less bullying and peer aggression
- Students and teachers report more positive school climate



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Research on Threat Assessments & CSTAG

Cornell, D., Shera, P., Kaplan, S., McCarrill, D., Douglas, J., Elton, A., McKnight, L., Brunson, C., & Cole, J. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Fieldtest findings. *School Psychology Review, 33*, 527-546.

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Burnette, A. G., Huang, F., Maeng, J. L., & Cornell, D. (2018). School threat assessment versus suicide assessment: Statewide prevalence and case characteristics. *Psychology in the Schools, 35*(1), 1-12. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/pss.22984>

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Williams, S., & Cornell, D. (2019). An in-school approach to response student interventions of threat assessment. *Journal of School Violence, 19*, 111-122. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387799.2019.1629292>

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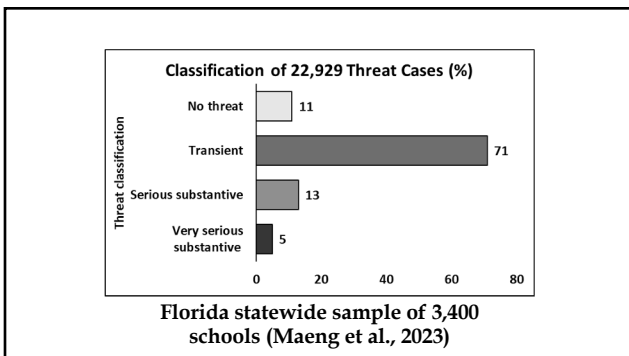
Maeng, J., Cornell, D., Keron, J., Huang, F., Kowalski, T., & Abbitts, K. (2023). School Threat Assessment in Florida: Technical Report of 2021-2022 Case Data. Charlottesville, VA: School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia.

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CSTAG Categories of Threats

No Threat	Transient Threat	Substantive Threat
	At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration, attempt to cause disruption or intimidate, but with no actual intent	Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation
No intent to harm was expressed in any way	But often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm	There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat
	Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office	Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents
	After resolution, the threat no longer exists	Serious Substantive Threat vs. Very Serious Substantive Threat
	Resolution usually involves an apology or reasonable clarification	May be legal violations and require police consultation/investigation
		When in doubt, treat threats as substantive

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Transient vs. Substantive Threats: Some Factors to Consider

- Capacity of student to carry out the threat
- Student's discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- The 5 R's (reasonable, remorse, retraction, restitution, resolve)
- Credibility of accounts
- Denial of threat vs. denial of intent
- Again, when in doubt, treat threats as substantive

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- ### Substantive Threats: Some Presumptive Indicators
- Denial of threat
 - Specific, plausible details. (who, what, how, where, when)
 - Access to weapons
 - Threat has been repeated over time ("He's been telling everyone he is going to get you.")
 - Ongoing, unresolved grievance
 - Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices or an audience
 - Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)
 - NTAC Investigative Themes
-

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Case Examples: What Category of Threat?

1. Two elementary school students throw paper wads pretending to bomb one another. One says, "I'm gonna kill you!"

Which do you choose?

- Transient threat
- Serious Substantive threat
- Very Serious Substantive threat
- No threat


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**Case Examples:
What Category of Threat?**

2. 10th grader writes an essay on the Civil War which includes a drawing of a violent battle.

Which do you choose?

- A. Transient threat
- B. Serious Substantive threat
- C. Very Serious Substantive threat
- D. Not a threat




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**Case Examples:
What Category of Threat?**

3. A student is found with a "kill list" of students who he believes have been bullying him. The list also includes a plan and a timeline for what he referred to as "taking them out!"

Which do you choose?

- A. Transient threat
- B. Serious Substantive threat
- C. Very Serious Substantive threat
- D. Not a threat




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**Case Examples:
What Category of Threat?**

4. A 5th grader tells a classmate that he is sick of Jeff and is going to "kick his butt after school".

Which do you choose?

- A. Transient threat
- B. Serious Substantive threat
- C. Very Serious Substantive threat
- D. Not a threat



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Here's another one...

16-year-old Gregory makes a social media post stating he was going to "blow away the preps" at school. When interviewed, Gregory shows little remorse for his comments. He admits having access to weapons and a search of his locker discovers plans for how/when he was going to do it. The team determines it to be a VERY SERIOUS SUBSTANTIVE THREAT.

Based on the above information, what facts support this threat classification?

- A. Shows little remorse
- B. Has access to weapons
- C. Has a specific plan
- D. All of the above

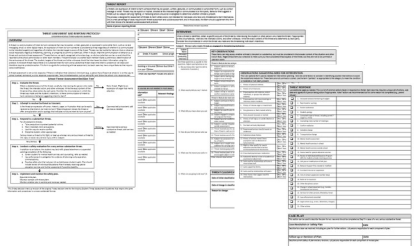

Choose the best answer!!!!



Write your full name and answer on a sticky note and turn in. Correct answers will be put in a drawing for a door prize!

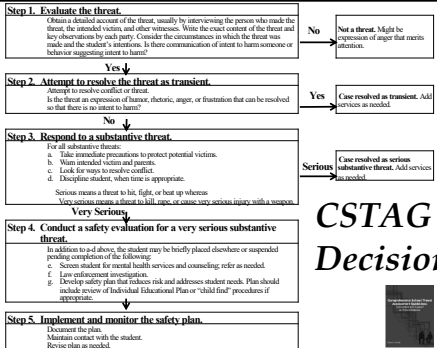
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CSTAG Forms Available
<https://www.schoolta.com/>

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CSTAG Decision Tree



```

    graph TD
      Step1[Step 1. Evaluate the threat.] -- No --> NotThreat[Not a threat. Might be expression of anger that merits attention.]
      Step1 -- Yes --> Step2[Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.]
      Step2 -- No --> Step3[Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.]
      Step2 -- Yes --> ResolvedTransient[Casualty resolved as transient. Add services as needed.]
      Step3 -- Serious --> ResolvedSerious[Casualty resolved as serious substantive threat. Add services as needed.]
      Step3 -- Very Serious --> Step4[Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.]
      Step4 --> Step5[Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.]
      Step5 --> ResolvedPlan[Document the plan. Maintain contact with the student. Re-evaluate as needed.]
    
```


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CSTAG Decision Tree: Step 1

Step 1. Evaluate the Threat:

Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party (use Threat Report form). Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student's intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

- If YES, proceed to Step 2.
- If NO, respond with appropriate educational interventions




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CSTAG Decision Tree: Step 2

Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as Transient

Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be easily resolved so that there is no intent to harm? Does the person retract the threat or offer an explanation and/or apology that indicates no future intent to harm anyone?

- If NO go to Step 3.
- If YES, case is resolved as transient. Add supports/services as needed
- Document using Threat Report Form



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CSTAG Decision Tree: Step 3

Step 3. Respond to a Substantive Threat

- For all substantive threats:
 - a. Take precautions to protect potential victims
 - b. Warn intended victims and parents
 - c. Look for ways to resolve conflict
 - d. Discipline student, when appropriate
- Determine if the threat is "serious" (means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up) OR is categorized as "very serious" (means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon).

Serious Substantive: Use Threat Report form to document resolution of serious substantive threat (including interventions)

Very Serious Substantive: Move to Step 4




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CSTAG Decision Tree (p.3): Step 4

Step 4. Respond to Very Serious Substantive Threat:

In addition to steps 3a-d, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:

- e. Screen the student for mental health services and counseling (Safety Assessment); refer as needed-to be done by designated team of district mental health professions
- f. Law enforcement investigation for evidence of planning, preparation, and/or criminal activity.
- g. Development of Safety Plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of previous assessments and further assessment if necessary.
- h. Document Safety Assessment Findings, Summary, and Recommendation in report-PROCEED TO STEP 5




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School Threat Assessment Decision Tree: Step 5

Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan


- Document the plan
- Maintain contact with the student
- Monitor whether the plan is working and revise as needed
- Be sure plan and records are maintained confidentially, but are shared with necessary parties to ensure implementation.



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What Role could School Psychologists Play in the CSTAG Process?


- **Prevention vs. Prediction**



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MTSS for Violence Prevention

- Bullying prevention/awareness
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Peer Mentoring
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Life Skills Training (LST)
- Social Emotional Learning
- Trauma Informed Practices
- Restorative Practices
- Parenting skills training
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Problem-solving/social competence
- Substance abuse resistance
- Alternatives to Suspension/Restorative Practices




Prevention does not require prediction!

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What Role could School Psychologists Play in the CSTAG Process?


- ***Prevention vs. Prediction***
- ***Development and fidelity of CSTAG Model***



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Assisting in the Development and Ongoing Fidelity of CSTAG Model


How does a school district go from an initial training to the development and implementation of a threat assessment model that is done with consistency and fidelity, and meets the unique needs of said district?



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What Role could School Psychologists Play in the CSTAG Process?


- ***Prevention vs. Prediction***
- ***Development and fidelity of CSTAG Model***
- ***Participate in initial threat assessment***



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Assist with the Initial Threat Assessment


1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did you say and do?
3. What did you mean when you said/did that?
4. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
5. What was the reason you said that?
6. What are you going to do now?



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Assist with the Initial Threat Assessment

- Work in pairs when interviewing a student of concern; administration often is the point person; other person (e.g., school psychologist) is taking notes of question responses and behavioral observations
- Evaluate the threat as quickly as possible—typically, same day if possible
- Interview witnesses prior to interviewing the student of concern
- Gather information from multiple sources
- Keep in mind the context of the threat, including the situation in which the threat was made, student relationships with one another, student’s history/background, and the intent of the potential threat
- What kind of threat? More importantly, what needs to be done to address it?



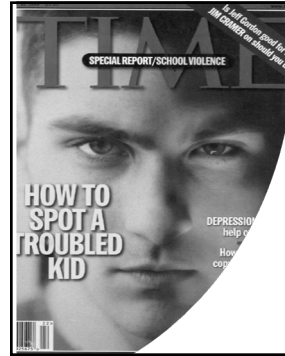
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What Role could School Psychologists Play in the CSTAG Process?

- **Prevention vs. Prediction**
- **Development and fidelity of CSTAG Model**
- **Participate in initial threat assessment**
- **Conduct Mental Health/Safety Assessment**



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Safety Assessment/ Interview

- Completed when a threat is deemed to be **Very Serious Substantive Threat**
- Not a prediction/diagnosis model
- Identify any mental health needs
- Identify reasons why threat was made
- Propose strategies for reducing risk
- Should be completed by school personnel with proper mental health credentials
- NASP relevant Position Statements

<https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/position-statements>

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Safety Assessment/ Interview

- Parent consent
- NOT confidential
- Two-person interview format
- Outside reassurances
- Avoid the mental health stigma, but...
- Report and recommendations
- Information addressed in a Safety Assessment is consistent with the National Threat Assessment Center's (NTAC) Investigative themes

<https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac>

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NTAC Investigative Themes

- Exploring NTAC Investigative Themes helps teams better understand the context and, thus, category of a threat, as well as the need for intervention
- Such themes are incorporated throughout the CSTAG model (in both the initial threat assessment interview, as well as the Safety Interview)
- Not all 13 themes need to be explored in every case

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Let's take a closer at these themes...

- **Student Motives and Goals:** What is the reason or motivation for a student to use violence?
- **Concerning, Unusual, or Threatening Communication:** Has the student of concern had alarming, unusual, bizarre, threatening or violent communications?
- **Inappropriate Interest in Weapons, School Shooters, etc.:** Does the student of concern have an inappropriate or heightened interest in weapons/violence?
- **Access to Weapons:** Does the student of concern have access to weapons?
- **Stressful Events:** Has the student of concern experienced stressors in his/her life that he/she has a difficult time coping with and/or could influence his/her decision regarding carrying out a potential threat?

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence.*

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Let's take a closer at these themes...

- **Emotional and Developmental Issues:** What role (if any) does mental health or developmental issues play within the context of the potential threat?
- **Desperation, Hopelessness, or Suicidal Thoughts:** Does the student of concern appear to have feelings of hopelessness, desperation, or a belief of being "out of options" in terms of dealing with real or perceived stressors? Does the student communicate/demonstrate suicidal ideation?
- **Violence as an Option:** Does the student of concern appear to look at violence as one of the only options to solve a problem or settle a grievance?
- **Concerned Others:** Does the student of concern have others within his/her life who express genuine concern regarding issues of him/her being potentially violent?

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). *Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence.*

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Let's take a closer at these themes...

- **Capacity to Carry out an Attack:** Does the student of concern demonstrate thinking and behavior that is organized enough to plan and execute an act of violence relevant to the initial threat?
- **Planning:** Does the student of concern have a specific plan/timeline/resources to execute an act of violence relevant to the initial threat?
- **Consistency:** Can the team corroborate the statements from the student of concern relevant to a potential threat or are there inconsistencies (e.g., says he's handling the break-up with his ex-girlfriend well, but friends/witnesses say otherwise)
- **Protective Factors:** Does the student of concern have positive, trusting, supportive relationships/connections with peers and adults both in and outside of school?

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). Enhancing school safety using a threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence.

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Time for a Door Prize!!!!

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Choose the best answer!!!!

Write your full name and answer on a sticky note and turn in. Correct answers will be put in a drawing for a door prize!

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What Role could School Psychologists Play in the CSTAG Process?


- *Prevention vs. Prediction*
- *Development and fidelity of CSTAG Model*
- *Participate in initial threat assessments*
- *Conduct Mental Health/Safety Assessments*
- *Assist with Safety Plan recommendations*



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Step 5. Implement and Monitor Safety Plan


- **Plan is designed to reduce risk of violence and meet student needs**
- **Document the plan**
- **Maintain contact with student**
- **Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed**



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Sample Safety Plan Interventions/Supports

- *Active/Structured Supervision*
- *Check-In/Check-Out*
- *Peer Mediation*
- *Student Separation*
- *BIP*
- *Social Skills Training (e.g., responding to bullying behavior, teaching/reinforcing appropriate responses to anger, big problem vs. a little problem, etc.)*
- *Structured Social Worker support*
- *Response Plan*
- *Outside Therapy (with collaboration)*




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Questions & Final Thoughts

Thank you for your time, attention, and participation!

Mark C. Muscat, MA

Take a Pic of QR Code for my Contact Info...



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