

**Questions for the record from Senator Charles E. Grassley
Hearing on “Protecting America’s Children from Gun Violence”
June 15, 2022**

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1. *What role does implementing a threat assessment program play in securing America’s schools? How does the EAGLES act support the implementation of threat assessment programs in schools?*

ANSWER: Threat assessment is the best practice for preventing targeted school violence. The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) has found through over 20 years of research that students display a variety of observable concerning behaviors as they escalate toward violence. To identify, assess, and intervene with students who may pose a risk of harm to themselves or others, schools and communities should develop multidisciplinary threat assessment programs.

The primary objective of a student threat assessment is not to administer discipline, but rather to provide a student with help and to work to ensure positive outcomes for the student and the community. When conducted properly, a threat assessment will involve providing robust interventions and supports for students experiencing distress, which helps deescalate situations before they become violent and foster positive outcomes for the student and the community.

The EAGLES Act, named after the school mascot for Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, is a bipartisan bill that would reauthorize and expand the work of NTAC. It would establish a national program to prevent targeted school violence by facilitating evidence-based collaboration between state and federal agencies. The EAGLES Act’s ‘Safe School Initiative’ permanently establishes NTAC’s research and training components specifically for school violence prevention, allows further dissemination of evidence-based practices for schools. It also provides additional resources to help NTAC consult with state and local education personnel on enhancing safety in schools throughout the country.

2. *Does the use of threat assessment increase fair and evidence-based outcomes when screening whether a person may engage in violence?*

ANSWER: Research indicates that behavioral threat assessment programs reduce disproportionate outcomes, when compared to traditional disciplinary or law enforcement responses to concerning student behavior. Scientists at the University of Virginia examined 1,836 threat cases from 779 elementary, middle, and high schools that employed a threat assessment model in the state of Virginia. They found no statistically significant differences in rates of school suspensions or school transfers, and no differences in the rates of legal actions, including arrests, incarcerations, or legal charges, between Black, Hispanic, and White students. They further found that only approximately 1% of students were expelled, and only about 1% were arrested.¹ Other studies by some of the same researchers showed lower suspension rates for both Black and White students in schools that utilized threat assessment models compared to schools that did not.² Their research also suggests that threat assessment is associated with more positive student outcomes than traditional school-based discipline. A study published in 2012 found that students whose schools were trained to utilize a threat assessment model were 4 times more likely to receive counseling and 2.5 times more likely to have a parent conference than students in schools who did not receive threat assessment training. Conversely, students in schools that were not trained on threat assessment were 3 times more likely to receive a long-term suspension and 8 times more likely to be transferred to a different school.³

Evidence also suggests that threat assessment is effective in intervening to prevent acts of school violence. The non-profit organization Sandy Hook Promise reported that in 2021, 17% of over 82,000 total tips received by their anonymous reporting system, Say Something, were found to be credible threats of lives in danger, and that interventions resulting from these tips prevented over 60 acts of violence with a weapon, including 6 planned school shootings. Tips to this reporting system also resulted in mental health interventions which saved at least 257 students from suicide in 2021.¹ Another anonymous reporting system, OK2Say in Michigan, reported that between 2019 and 2020, 60 tips received by the service resulted in the confiscation of weapons. Testimonials from students who underwent threat assessment also suggest the process is effective and fair. One high school student who threatened to carry out a school shooting underwent a threat assessment in Virginia, and subsequently received support from the school's psychologist. After the Parkland shooting happened in 2018, the student thanked the psychologist for the help and said, "That could have been me."

¹ Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review*, 47, 183-195. doi:10.17105/SPR-2017-0030.V47-2

² JustChildren and Cornell, D. (2013). *Prevention v. punishment: Threat assessment, school suspensions, and racial disparities*. Retrieved from http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/UVA_and_JustChildren_Report_-_Prevention_v._Punishment.pdf

³ Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review*, 41, 100-115.

3. *A review of mass shooting events shows that more than two thirds of the shooters had a history of mental health issues and more than 80% showed signs and behavior consistent with mental health crises prior to carrying out their shootings. Why is mental health advocacy such a significant factor in ensuring the safety of America's schools?*

Research suggests that individuals who engage in targeted school violence often experience mental health crises prior to their attacks. A report published by The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) in 2019 examined 41 incidents of targeted school violence and found that 69% of school attackers exhibited psychological symptoms, which included anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and approximately 41% of school attackers were motivated, at least in part, by suicide. All school attackers examined in the study also experienced a life stressor, with 74% experiencing a stressor within one month of the attack, and 51% experiencing a stressor within two days of the attack.⁴ Another report published by NTAC in 2021 examined 67 disrupted plots of targeted violence in K-12 schools and found that 63% of students plotting school attacks exhibited emotional or psychological symptoms, and 81% of plotters experienced stressors in the year leading up to the time at which their plot to attack a school was discovered.⁵ Research conducted by NTAC and others suggest that there are almost always intervention points available before a student's behavior escalates to the point in which an arrest is warranted. These intervention points may include addressing bullying, providing mental health supports, assessing the impact of home-life factors, and mediating conflicts between classmates. A threat assessment program establishes a system for implementing these types of interventions and entrusts a team with responsibility for ensuring that no student falls through the cracks.

Importantly, most individuals in the United States who are diagnosed or who display symptoms or traits of a psychological, behavioral, neurological, or developmental condition do not commit acts of crime or violence. When considering these types of diagnoses, traits, or symptoms, it is possible that underlying situational factors (e.g., stressors the child is experiencing) may be the cause of the behavior, as opposed to a diagnosable disorder. While mental health is indeed an important dimension to examine regarding a student's risk of harm to themselves or others, a mental health evaluation alone is not a sufficient substitute for a comprehensive and multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment. For instance, mental health evaluations and treatments will not include things like a review of criminal records, corroborative interviews with people who know the student, or an analysis of a student's social media accounts. However, such methods can be employed, when necessary, during a comprehensive threat assessment. Mental health professionals, both in and out of the school, should be included in a collaborative threat assessment process that also involves teachers, administrators, and law enforcement. These threat assessment teams have the breadth of knowledge, skills, and experiences to identify, assess, and manage the crises students face within their school community.

⁴ U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (2019). *Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence*

⁵ U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*

Questions for the record from Senator Thom Tillis
Hearing on “Protecting America’s Children from Gun Violence”
June 15, 2022

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1. *Based on the work you have done to educate and advocate, what best practices do you believe would be most effective to ensure school safety and prevent gun violence in our schools?*

ANSWER:

Over the past four years, I have had the opportunity to meet and work side-by-side with some of the most experienced school safety professionals from across the country to learn about best practices. Many of the practices can be found at SchoolSafety.gov, which provides comprehensive guidance on a variety of school safety issues – from physical security to school climate to mental health counseling. While my answer is not exhaustive, I would like to single out certain practices that I believe are particularly important for securing our schools.

First, physical security measures are critical to preventing and mitigating violence. Every school should be staffed with at least one armed security officer. All school staff should receive training on proper classroom door locking procedures and ensure entryways to and from the outside are secured to prevent intruders. Additionally, when emergency incidents occur, mere seconds save lives. Having emergency preparedness communications technology – such as a duress system to notify the campus and law enforcement – is of paramount importance.

Second, every school should establish threat assessment teams that can help prevent targeted school violence before it occurs. Threat assessment teams are multidisciplinary, consisting of teachers, administrators, school psychologists, counselors, and law enforcement specialists. They evaluate and act upon incoming tips to provide robust interventions and supports for students experiencing distress. The goal is not to discipline the students – it is to provide them the help they need and find them a pathway away from violence. The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) of the U.S. Secret Service serves as a leading authority on threat assessment best practices for educational professionals around the country. Anonymous reporting systems are critical for making students feel comfortable reporting behaviors that are concerning.

Finally, I would encourage all school officials, parents, and community leaders to review the resources developed by Safe Schools for Alex, the non-profit I founded in honor of my son. In 2019, we launched a School Safety Dashboard which provides detailed, easily accessible statistics on safety incidents for schools in five states (with the number of states hopefully to increase). This kind of transparency on school safety-related incidents empowers parents to work with their children’s school to address trends in violence and to hold schools accountable for mitigating risks to student safety.