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## Threat Assessment in Our Public Schools

Committed to Keeping Our Children Safe

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### Summary

In June 2017, the 2016-17 Santa Cruz County Grand Jury issued a report entitled “Assessing the Threat of Violence in our Public Schools: Is enough being done?”<sup>[1]</sup> The report analyzed the capacity of local law enforcement and school districts to respond effectively to threats of [targeted school violence](#) before violence actually occurs. The report recommended, among other things, that the County Office of Education (COE) and the County Sheriff’s Office (CSO) work together to develop a comprehensive threat assessment plan.<sup>[2]</sup> Both the COE and CSO responded that a countywide plan was being developed and would be completed by December 2017.<sup>[3]</sup> This follow-up was undertaken to determine the status of this plan and its implementation.

## Background

The threat of violence in our schools is a tragic modern reality. Since 2013, there have been more than 300 school shootings in the United States.<sup>[4]</sup> In addition to carrying out the fire and earthquake drills that have long been part and parcel of the school experience, today's school children also participate in "[active shooter](#)" drills<sup>[5]</sup> and are familiar with concepts such as "[lockdown](#)"<sup>[6]</sup> and "[code red](#)."<sup>[7]</sup> We can no longer assume that our schools are safe havens for the most innocent members of our society.

Following an incident of threatened violence in a local school district at the end of the 2015-16 school year, the 2016-17 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury investigated the readiness of our local public schools and law enforcement agencies to respond to threats of targeted school violence. The investigation found that, although all local school districts have the [comprehensive school safety plans](#) mandated by law,<sup>[8]</sup> there is a lack of consistency in those plans and little focus on the type of comprehensive and sophisticated [threat assessment](#) that today's world requires.<sup>[9]</sup> This shortfall led to the June 2017 report "*Assessing the Threat of Violence in our Public Schools: Is enough being done?*" The report contained a number of recommendations including:

- better communication between school districts and parents
- communication and collaboration between school districts and law enforcement with respect to threat situations and preparation
- placement of [School Resource Officers](#) in all school districts
- training in threat assessment both for school districts and law enforcement<sup>[10]</sup>

The report also contained the following recommendation: "The COE and the CSO should collaborate to develop a plan in which all school districts are prepared and capable of assessing a threat of targeted school violence."<sup>[11]</sup>

In response to the recommendations of that report, both the COE and CSO indicated that a collaborative and multi-agency process would be undertaken to create a countywide threat assessment plan by December 2017.

The Grand Jury received responses from the COE, the CSO, and the Chiefs of Police of the cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Capitola, and Watsonville. This report follows up on the COE and CSO responses.

## Scope

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury reviewed the following documents:

- the 2016-17 Grand Jury report
- the responses of the COE, CSO, and Chiefs of Police
- the Santa Cruz Countywide Threat Assessment Plan revised December 2017
- agendas for the threat assessment planning meetings held in July, September, November, and December 2017
- the agenda for the School Safety Partnership meeting held February 9, 2018
- the Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety

Additional information about the Plan and the training was provided by the COE.

This investigation only looked at the COE and CSO's compliance with their responses and the development of the threat assessment plan. It did not analyze or evaluate the agencies' plans or preparations for physically securing school sites in a threat situation.

## Investigation

In July 2017, the COE and CSO convened a planning group of representatives of local school districts and law enforcement agencies to evaluate the Grand Jury's report and recommendations and to begin the development of the Countywide Threat Assessment Plan (the Plan). This initial meeting looked at elements of the Plan, a timeline for its implementation, and next steps.<sup>[12]</sup>

This group met again in September, November, and December to discuss the key components of the Plan, to form assessment teams for every district, to create a plan for professional development in threat assessment and school safety, and to plan for ongoing future meetings and cooperation.<sup>[13]</sup>

The result of this collaborative effort is a thorough and well-written threat assessment plan, based largely on the model developed by the Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia ("the Virginia Model"),<sup>[14]</sup> and discussed in the 2016-17 Grand Jury report.<sup>[15]</sup>

While much of the Plan is for internal use only, the publicly available summary<sup>[16]</sup> states that the Plan is designed to "provide practical guidelines for school-based teams within Santa Cruz County to conduct threat assessments of students who threaten to commit an act of violence."<sup>[17]</sup> The Plan also notes that the "goals of threat assessment are twofold:

- To maintain a safe environment by preventing an act of violence from taking place.
- To resolve student conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior."<sup>[18]</sup>

The summary discusses the makeup of a threat assessment team, which should include a school administrator, a law enforcement liaison, a mental health professional, and certificated and classified staff members.<sup>[19]</sup> It also includes the flow chart shown in [Appendix A](#) of this Report.<sup>[20]</sup>

The working version of the Plan, which the Grand Jury reviewed but which is not publicly available, includes a thorough discussion of each step of the model and practical tools to streamline the process of evaluating and documenting threats.

In support of the Plan, the COE and CSO have formed a [School Safety Partnership Team](#) that will meet quarterly to ensure the ongoing implementation and evolution of the Plan.<sup>[21]</sup> They have also created a Professional Development Plan for School Safety, which will identify and provide the necessary training. All districts will use these resources to train their own personnel.<sup>[22]</sup>

Neither the Plan, nor the professional development materials shared with the Grand Jury, explicitly call for rehearsals of the threat assessment protocol. Taking the

additional step of running through the flow chart in a practice situation would help ensure that all parties are able to mobilize the appropriate teams, utilize the tools at their disposal, and be well prepared to continue to keep our children safe.

## Findings

- F1.** As promised in their responses to the 2016-17 Grand Jury report, the COE and CSO collaborated with local law enforcement agencies to produce a thorough and well-written Countywide Threat Assessment Plan.
- F2.** The Plan's detailed flow chart, assessment protocol, and related documents will be valuable resources for school districts to use in threat situations.
- F3.** The Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety demonstrates the COE and CSO's commitment to adequately preparing school staff and local law enforcement to respond to future threats in our schools.
- F4.** Neither the Countywide Threat Assessment Plan nor the Professional Development Plan for School Safety explicitly call for rehearsing the threat assessment protocol in a non-threat situation, which may compromise the responders' readiness in a threat situation.

## Recommendations

- R1.** The COE and CSO should continue to work together to ensure that our schools and law enforcement agencies have up-to-date resources and training in threat response, assessment, and management. (F3, F4)
- R2.** The COE should mandate rehearsals of the threat assessment process in every school district to improve the schools' ability to determine the existence of a credible threat before violence actually occurs. (F4)

## Commendations

- C1.** The COE and CSO responded quickly and comprehensively to the recommendations of the 2016-17 Grand Jury report and drafted a plan that creates a firm foundation to address the safety of our students in the context of targeted school violence.
- C2.** The COE and CSO have demonstrated clear commitment to providing ongoing training so that school staff and law enforcement can function collaboratively and respond effectively to threats of violence in our schools.

## Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
County Superintendent of Schools	F2, F3, F4	R1, R2	60 Days June 11, 2018
County Sheriff	F2, F3	R1	60 Days June 11, 2018

## Definitions

- **Active shooter:** An Active Shooter is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use firearms(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims.<sup>[23]</sup>
- **Code Red:** In a code red situation, teachers and their students will assume a protective position in their classrooms. They will stay in this position until more instructions are given.<sup>[24]</sup>
- **Comprehensive School Safety Plan:** Comprehensive School Safety Plan defined in California Education Code Article 5, §§ 32280-32289.<sup>[25]</sup>
- **Lockdown:** a procedure to isolate students, faculty, and staff from danger by:
  - Removing students and faculty from the threat;
  - Isolating the dangerous situation from much of the school;
  - Allowing for an accurate accounting of students within each room; and
  - Depending on the situation, facilitating an organized evacuation away from the dangerous area.<sup>[26]</sup>
- **School Resource Officer:** A law enforcement officer with specialized training, deployed in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.
- **School Safety Partnership Team:** A group of educators and law enforcement personnel who will work together to plan an expanded safety plan at each school in the county and identify or create professional development for each area of that plan.<sup>[27]</sup>
- **Targeted School Violence:** Any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at their school with lethal means (e.g., a gun or knife); and, (ii) where the student attacker purposefully chose their school as the location of the attack.<sup>[28]</sup> The target may be a specific individual, such as a particular classmate or teacher, or a group or category of individuals. The target may even be the school itself.<sup>[29]</sup>

- **Threat Assessment:** A threat assessment is conducted when a person (or persons) threatens to commit a violent act or engages in behavior that appears to threaten what is termed “targeted violence.” Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat, and the circumstances surrounding the threat, to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out.<sup>[30]</sup>

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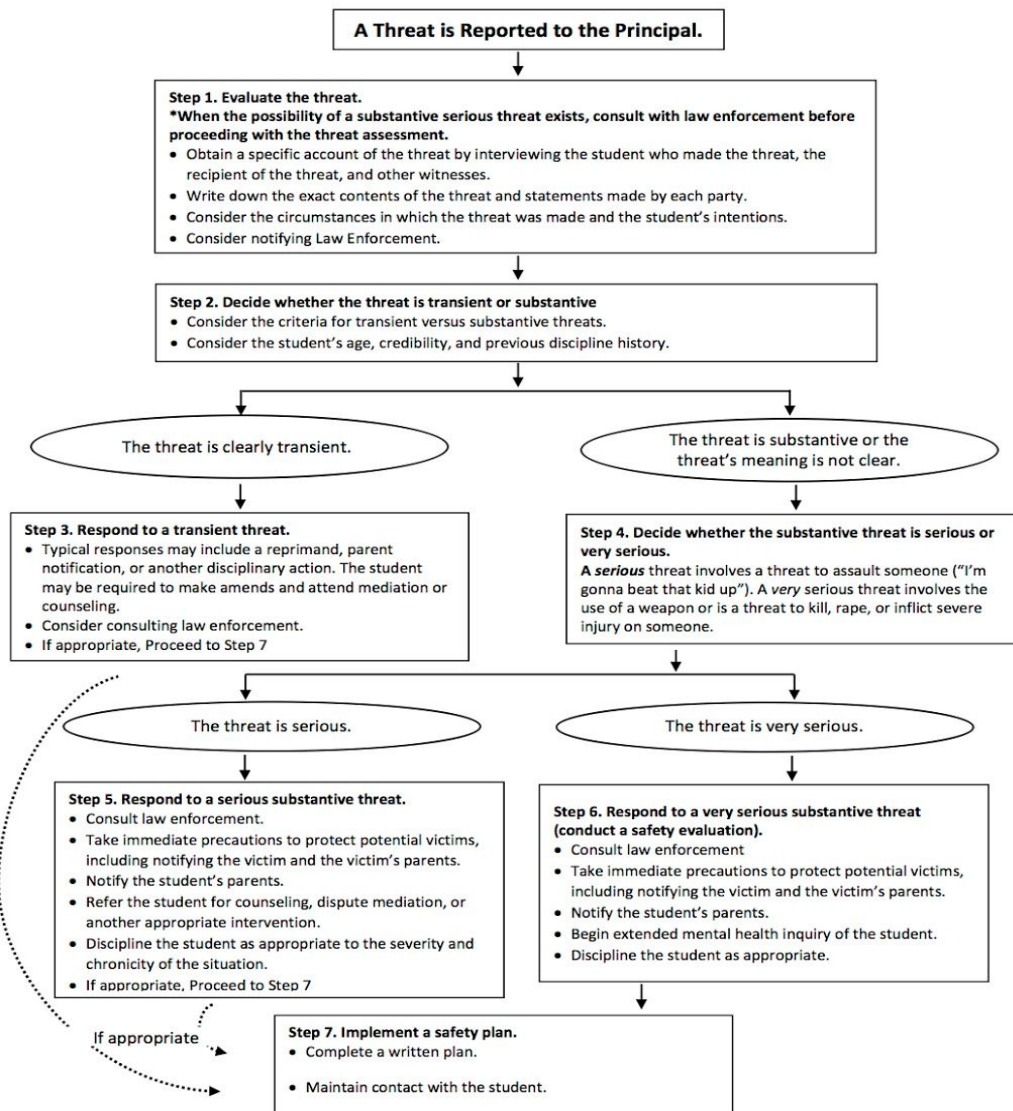
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**Site Visits**

None

## Appendix A – Threat Assessment Flow Chart



**Subject: Sheriff's Office response**

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From: Jeremy Verinsky - To: grandjury@scgrandjury.org - Date: May 16, 2018 at 11:31 AM, Attachments:  
SchoolThreatFollowUp\_Sheriff\_ResponsePacket.docx

To Whom it May Concern- attached please find the Sheriff's Office response to School Threat Follow-up report. Please let me know if you have any questions about this -Jeremy

Chief Deputy Jeremy Verinsky  
Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office  
831-454-7610 office  
jeremy.verinsky@santacruzcounty.us



**The 2017–2018 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury  
Requires that the  
Santa Cruz County Sheriff  
Respond to the Findings and Recommendations  
Specified in the Report Titled  
Threat Assessment in Our Public Schools  
by June 11, 2018**

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When the response is complete, please

1. Email the completed Response Packet as a file attachment to [grandjury@scgrandjury.org](mailto:grandjury@scgrandjury.org), and
2. Print and send a hard copy of the completed Response Packet to

The Honorable Judge John Gallagher  
Santa Cruz Courthouse  
701 Ocean St.  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

## Instructions for Respondents

California law PC §933.05 (included [below](#)) requires the respondent to a Grand Jury report to comment on each finding and recommendation within a report. Explanations for disagreements and timeframes for further implementation or analysis must be provided. Please follow the format below when preparing the responses.

### ***Response Format***

1. For the Findings included in this Response Packet, select one of the following responses and provide the required additional information:
  - a. **AGREE** with the Finding, or
  - b. **PARTIALLY DISAGREE** with the Finding and specify the portion of the Finding that is disputed and include an explanation of the reasons therefor, or
  - c. **DISAGREE** with the Finding and provide an explanation of the reasons therefor.
2. For the Recommendations included in this Response Packet, select one of the following actions and provide the required additional information:
  - a. **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED**, with a summary regarding the implemented action, or
  - b. **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IMPLEMENTED IN THE FUTURE**, with a timeframe or expected date for implementation, or
  - c. **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS**, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for that analysis or study; this timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report, or
  - d. **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

If you have questions about this response form, please contact the Grand Jury by calling 831-454-2099 or by sending an email to [grandjury@scgrandjury.org](mailto:grandjury@scgrandjury.org).

## Findings

**F2.** The Plan's detailed flow chart, assessment protocol, and related documents will be valuable resources for school districts to use in threat situations.

**AGREE**

**PARTIALLY DISAGREE** – explain the disputed portion

**DISAGREE** – explain why

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

- F3.** The Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety demonstrates the COE and CSO's commitment to adequately preparing school staff and local law enforcement to respond to future threats in our schools.

**AGREE**

**PARTIALLY DISAGREE** – explain the disputed portion

**DISAGREE** – explain why

**Response explanation** (required for a response other than **Agree**):

## Recommendations

**R1.** The COE and CSO should continue to work together to ensure that our schools and law enforcement agencies have up-to-date resources and training in threat response, assessment, and management.

**HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done

**HAS NOT BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IMPLEMENTED IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe

**REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)

**WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

### Response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The County Sheriff's Office and the County Office of Education have worked collaboratively to update policies and procedures. While the Sheriff's Office cannot mandate the adoption of policy by the school districts, these policies have been shared with school districts county-wide for them to modify/adopt as they need. The Sheriff's Office, in cooperation with our law enforcement partners, offer site-specific training to schools throughout the county on threat response.

The Office of Education has scheduled School Threat Assessment training for COE staff and School Districts in early May. We continue to meet quarterly as part of an expanded School Safety task force, with law enforcement agencies, school districts and now, fire agencies from throughout the county to facilitate on-going relationships, cross-training and pre-planning activities for response to school safety issues, including the threat of school violence.

We have already seen these procedures in practice with several reported incidents of threats of school violence. The checklists were followed and appropriate staff involved from both law enforcement and school districts, resulting in successful resolutions.

**Penal Code §933.05**

1. For Purposes of subdivision (b) of §933, as to each Grand Jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
  - a. the respondent agrees with the finding,
  - b. the respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
2. For purpose of subdivision (b) of §933, as to each Grand Jury recommendation, the responding person shall report one of the following actions:
  - a. the recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action,
  - b. the recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future, with a timeframe for implementation,
  - c. the recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report, or
  - d. the recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
3. However, if a finding or recommendation of the Grand Jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a County department headed by an elected officer, both the department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the Grand Jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her department.
4. A Grand Jury may request a subject person or entity to come before the Grand Jury for the purpose of reading and discussing the findings of the Grand Jury report that relates to that person or entity in order to verify the accuracy of the findings prior to their release.
5. During an investigation, the Grand Jury shall meet with the subject of that investigation regarding that investigation unless the court, either on its own determination or upon request of the foreperson of the Grand Jury, determines that such a meeting would be detrimental.
6. A Grand Jury shall provide to the affected agency a copy of the portion of the Grand Jury report relating to that person or entity two working days prior to its public release and after the approval of the presiding judge. **No officer, agency, department, or governing body of a public agency shall disclose any contents of the report prior to the public release of the final report.**

May 4, 2018

Re: County Office of Education Response to 2017-18 Grand Jury Report

The County Office of Education has carefully reviewed and considered the Findings and Recommendations set forth in the “2017-18 Santa Cruz County Grand Jury Report, Threat Assessment in Our Public Schools.” This letter shall serve as the official response of the Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools and the Santa Cruz County Office of Education (collectively, the “COE”) to the Findings and Recommendations of the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury (“Grand Jury”).

The County Office of Education and our partners in Law Enforcement, hold student and staff safety as our highest priority. We have been meeting actively since August 2017 with all local school Superintendents and Chiefs of Police, forming a committee we refer to as the School Safety Partnership, to coordinate the development and implementation of a Countywide Threat Assessment Plan for Schools as recommended by the Grand Jury Report. This collaboration between school and law enforcement leaders resulted in a countywide plan that addresses the findings of the 2016-17 Grand Jury report including communication protocols, guidance to districts, coordination with law enforcement, and professional development.

The Countywide Threat Assessment Plan for Schools was completed in December 2017. The School Safety Partnership supported the development of training materials and a Countywide Professional Development Plan for student safety. School districts were asked in turn to train their school staff in the implementation of the threat assessment protocol. We have scheduled trainings in the implementation of the Threat Assessment Protocol on May 2, 2018 for County program staff and May 10, 2018 for School District personnel.

The achievements of the School Safety Partnership are highlighted in the latest Grand Jury report in Findings 1, 2 and 3 and in Report Commendations 1 and 2. As a result of Finding 4 and Recommendation 2, we have modified the Threat assessment Protocol in two areas to include rehearsing the threat assessment protocol in non-threat situations. We are confident that our schools have systems in place to effectively prepare for and implement the threat assessment protocol.

Sincerely,



Michael Watkins  
Superintendent

- F1.** *As promised in their responses to the 2016-17 Grand Jury report, the COE and CSO collaborated with local law enforcement agencies to produce a thorough and well-written Countywide Threat Assessment Plan.*
- F2.** *The Plan's detailed flow chart, assessment protocol, and related documents will be valuable resources for school districts to use in threat situations.*
- F3.** *The Santa Cruz County Professional Development Plan for School Safety demonstrates the COE and CSO's commitment to adequately preparing school staff and local law enforcement to respond to future threats in our schools.*

**Response (F1, F2, F3)**

The COE and CSO have worked hard to implement the direction of the Grand Jury. This work has resulted in the development of resources, policies, and practices that improve student safety across all schools in the county.

- F4.** *Neither the Countywide Threat Assessment Plan nor the Professional Development Plan for School Safety explicitly call for rehearsing the threat assessment protocol in a non-threat situation, which may compromise the responders' readiness in a threat situation.*

**Response** The Threat Assessment protocol has been modified to explicitly call for rehearsing the threat assessment protocol in non-threat situations. Please see pages 4 and 25 of the updated Threat Assessment Protocol (attached).

**Recommendations**

- R1.** *The COE and CSO should continue to work together to ensure that our schools and law enforcement agencies have up-to-date resources and training in threat response, assessment, and management. (F3, F4)*

**Response** The COE and CSO continue to meet quarterly with all Superintendents and representatives from all law enforcement agencies. The School Safety Partnership continues to develop resources, policies, and training to create safer schools for all students in Santa Cruz County. We have scheduled trainings in the implementation of the Threat Assessment Protocol on May 2, 2018 for County program staff and May 10, 2018 for School District personnel.

- R2.** *The COE should mandate rehearsals of the threat assessment process in every school district to improve the schools' ability to determine the existence of a credible threat before violence actually occurs. (F4)*

**Response** Though the COE and CSO are not authorized to mandate school district staff rehearsals of the threat assessment process, we have included these tabletop rehearsals in the modified version of the Threat Assessment Protocol.

**Commendations**

- C1.** *The COE and CSO responded quickly and comprehensively to the recommendations of the 2016-17 Grand Jury report and drafted a plan that creates a firm foundation to address the safety of our students in the context of targeted school violence.*
- C2.** *The COE and CSO have demonstrated clear commitment to providing ongoing training so that school staff and law enforcement can function collaboratively and respond effectively to threats of violence in our schools.*

**Response (C1, C2)**

We are grateful to the Grand Jury for the opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to student safety through a collaborative process that resulted in the development of resources, policies, and practices that will improve student safety.

