

OPINION

A Guide for Responding to Behavioral Warning Signs in Your School

School shootings are often followed by outcries to take action—new hardware, new action plans or drills. But the path to violence prevention in schools lies in the system known as **behavioral threat assessment and management or BTAM**. It ensures that when a student is in crisis, no matter where they go, the adults around them are prepared.

Schools with functioning threat-assessment systems have successfully averted attacks, yet too many districts either lack the teams responsible for making sure the systems work properly or treat them as a box-checking exercise.

Where BTAM works, schools have adopted an outlook that undergirds the structures and culture it requires.

EDUCATORS NEED TO:

- **Pay attention to signs.**

The pathway to violence is marked by warning signs, including threats, grievances, weapons fascination, and disturbing online activity.

- **Care for students.**

When framing the work, the goal should be to meet students' unmet needs rather than to control, label, or punish them.

- **Be prepared to take further action.**

Many situations resolve with counseling, support services, or conflict mediation but sometimes cooperation with families or law enforcement is required.

NEXT STEPS FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

- **Build** or strengthen a multidisciplinary team that includes counselors, teachers, school police officers, and where appropriate, community partners.
- **Train** staff in ways that increase confidence and make them leaders in the work. Give team members specific skills in recognizing, reporting, and documenting behaviors of concern.
- **Ensure** everyone in the building knows what warning signs look like and where to share them.
- **Create** a culture where speaking up is safe.
- **Connect** with mental health resources.

CRITICAL WORK FOR THE BTAM TEAM:

- **Link** students in crisis with mentors in and out of school to help build protective factors.
- **Develop** clear, compassionate pathways for student referral. Planning should include exit and transition for any student who leaves the building after making a threat. This phase includes care, safety planning, and, often, reintegration into an educational setting.

