EFFECTS OF STUDENT THREAT ASSESSMENT TRAINING ON SCHOOL

ADMINISTRATORS' SELF-EFFICACY PERCEPTIONS AND STUDENT DISCIPLINE

PRACTICES

by

CHARLES ADAM BAGWELL

(Under the Direction of Walker Swain)

ABSTRACT

This action research (AR) case study included interventions designed to provide training for school administrators in addressing student threats of violence. Following interventions, the AR team collected data to explore changes to participants' self-efficacy perceptions and discipline practices in addressing student threats of violence.

Six assistant principals participated in student threat assessment training. Following training, the AR team generated qualitative data through interviews and questionnaires. The team analyzed quantitative data collected through pre- and post-assessments, pre- and post-surveys, and student discipline data from before and after implementation of the study's interventions. Research questions included the following:

1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to addressing student threats of violence change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

Findings included the following:

1. Participation in student threat assessment training enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

2. Collaboration within threat assessment teams enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

3. Past experiences involving student threats enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

4. Incident-specific circumstances often diminished self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

5. Participation in student threat assessment training reinforced school administrators' pre-established authoritative discipline practices as being appropriate and effective for addressing student threats of violence.

6. School administrators demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance approaches to discipline for students who make threats of violence.

7. Participants' schools, on average, demonstrated a reduction of exclusionary discipline actions following participation in student threat assessment training.

INDEX WORDS: student threat assessment, school administrator self-efficacy, authoritative student discipline

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my wife, Jessica – thank you for your unwavering support and love. Thank you for encouraging me to apply for the program three years ago. Thank you for taking care of business at home on the dozens of long nights when I had class. Thank you for understanding when I had to hide out in the kitchen to read or write, when I had to drive to Gwinnett for class, when I had to spend hundreds of dollars on books, and when I had to be away for hours – weekend after weekend to finish my dissertation. For that matter, thank you for putting up with my never-ending desire to better myself through education and advanced degrees. I could not have continued as a graduate student all these years, through all these programs, without your love and support. Thank you. I love you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I began the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the University of Georgia in 2016 after having worked for 11 years in public education. I spent those 11 years as a middle school English teacher in a small city district and then as a middle school assistant principal, a high school assistant principal, and now as a middle school principal in a larger, somewhat rural district in the southeastern United States. In addition to my current position as a school principal, I serve as my school district's safety director, a position I have held for the past five years. As safety director, I lead monthly district safety team meetings, facilitate safety scenario discussions at monthly principals' meetings, redeliver information from safety trainings and conferences to district and school leaders, collaborate with outside safety agencies, and present school safety information to the local board of education. The district safety team consists of over 30 school and district leaders including the superintendent, various district leaders, and the principal from each school within the district. My work as the leader of this team has fostered within me a passion for school safety.

As the leader of the district safety team, I have overseen the implementation of a variety of school safety initiatives designed to identify and fill holes in our schools' approaches to student safety. Some such initiatives include an anonymous reporting smartphone app. for students, systematic safety training for all school district employees, and restructured school safety plans. Following the spring 2018 school shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, I began to consider

and talk with other district leaders about potential initiatives to implement in order to prevent similar incidents from taking place within our schools.

After months of research and conversations, I believed it would be beneficial for our district to implement a comprehensive student threat assessment program across the 14 schools within the district. Threat assessment practices were developed by the United States Secret Service and include the following components:

1. Identifying individuals who may pose a threat of carrying out acts of targeted violence.

2. Conducting investigations to determine whether or not these individuals actually pose a threat.

3. Taking steps to manage any risk of violence (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

As I planned to bring student threat assessment processes to my district, I recognized that a foundational first step would need to include providing training for school personnel who may conduct student threat assessments. These personnel would include school administrators, counselors, social workers, and resource officers. This initial student threat assessment training session, which was to take place on July 29, 2019, would become this action research study's first intervention and the impetus for the entire study.

Following the July 29 training, assistant principals of each school were charged with leading school-based student threat assessment teams within their schools. Having served as an assistant principal for five years, I understood the complexity involved with the role of assistant principal and the pressure assistant principals often face to make decisions that may profoundly impact students, teachers, and parents. Many such decisions may involve student safety and student discipline, two foundational components of assistant principals' jobs.

As the chairperson of school-based threat assessment teams, assistant principals would become the school officials tasked with the responsibility of addressing incidents involving students' making threats of violence. Such incidents are uniquely complicated in their tendency to involve elements of both safety and discipline. These incidents are serious and may rise to the level of requiring interventions involving not only school administrators but also law enforcement officers, mental health specialists, and school district leaders in order to ensure safety within the school community. In my own experience as an assistant principal, I recall feelings of immense pressure, anxiety, and self-doubt when addressing student threats of violence. In these situations, I attempted to strike the delicate balance among ensuring safety, imposing appropriate discipline, and providing appropriate resources and information to students and parents. Striking this balance was rarely easy.

Prior to the training associated with this action research study, I had not participated in formal training on addressing student threats of violence. I received no such training in my preparation to become a school administrator or while on the job. As I reflected on my own insecurities in addressing student threats of violence, I believed my lack of training was a major contributor to my anxiety and poor self-efficacy perceptions.

Due in large part to my own experiences of self-doubt in addressing student threats of violence, I chose to conduct an action research case study aimed at assessing the degree to which training and support in conducting student threat assessments changed assistant principals' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices when addressing student threats of violence. Exploring the impact of student threat assessment training and support on assistant principal self-efficacy and student discipline practices was the crux of this action research study.

Research Problems

It was February 15, 2018, the day after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in which a former student of the targeted school used a semi-automatic rifle to fire on students and staff members, killing 17 people and wounding 17 others (*See Something, Say Something*, 2018). At a middle school in my district, the Hamilton County School System,[1] students in Mrs. Richard's first-period art class were discussing the shooting. As students worked on the day's assignment, they talked about what they had seen on the news and what their parents had told them about the event. Most of the students expressed concern over the event and sadness for those who had been affected. Some students spoke of their disbelief that such violence was possible in schools. Other students expressed concern over the possibility that they could become victims of a school shooting. One student, Jonathan, sat quietly and listened to the others without participating in the discussion. During a lull in the conversation Jonathan – very casually, very matter-of-factly, and without looking up from his work – stated that some of the students who were killed in the shooting "probably got what they deserved." Jonathan added nothing further. He continued to sit quietly and work until the end of the class period.

A predictable yet frantic series of events would follow Jonathan's statement. Administration would be notified of his "threat" by students, teachers, and parents. School officials would then conduct interviews of witnesses, call parents of classmates, contact the local Sheriff's Office, and seek guidance from the district office. In the ensuing days and weeks, as the dust settled, Jonathan would be charged by the Sheriff's Office and would be expelled from

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[1] All proper nouns related to study context and participants in this report are pseudonyms.

4

school for over a year. Several of Jonathan's classmates would transfer to other schools in the district or to area private schools. Local media outlets would run stories about the threat and the school's response. The community would sound off on various social media platforms about the threat and how unsafe the schools in our district appeared to be.

In many respects, the Hamilton County School System is similar to many school systems across the country. The school system is neither urban nor particularly rural. It encompasses sparsely populated towns and subdivisions. It includes trailer parks, government housing, family farms, and million-dollar lakefront homes.

The Hamilton County School System has a diverse student population with nearly 35% of students being of color and over 50% of students living in poverty (see Figures 2 and 3). Additionally, the district has a high population of students with disabilities and students who are English language learners (see Figure 3). It is within school systems such as the Hamilton County School System, diverse and poor, that student discipline situations in which students receive harsh and exclusionary zero tolerance disciplinary consequences are most common and most detrimental (Curran, 2016; Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015).

Jonathan's perceived threat of violence resulted in his receiving harsh and exclusionary disciplinary consequences. At the time of the incident, Jonathan's school administrators had not undergone training in student threat assessments. Perhaps if they had participated in such training, Jonathan's situation would have resulted in different outcomes.

As my colleagues, the principal and assistant principal of Jonathan's school, worked through the situation involving Jonathan's remarks in Hamilton County, hundreds of other school administrators across the country were dealing with similar incidents of students making threats of violence. In the months immediately following the spring 2018 school shootings in

5

Florida and Texas, the volume and frequency of reported student threats of violence toward schools increased substantially across the United States. According to one report, the number of threats of violence in United States K-12 schools increased by 159% from the fall semester to the spring semester of 2018 (Klinger & Klinger, 2018). Consequently, community members and parents across the country demanded that schools and law enforcement officers act swiftly to ensure student safety. As a result of these demands, many students like Jonathan who made threats of violence, regardless of the expressed intent or context of the threat, received severe and exclusionary school disciplinary consequences along with serious legal consequences (FBI National Press Office, 2018).

School Safety

School administrators are responsible for the safety of students and staff (Kingston et al., 2018). Effective school leaders understand the importance of balancing responsibilities regarding student safety with practices designed to maintain a welcoming and comfortable school environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Consistently implementing effective and fair student discipline practices is important for providing students with safe and welcoming school climates (Curran, 2019; Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Despite school officials' efforts to maintain positive and welcoming school climates, student threats of violence in K-12 schools are common. According to one report, there were nearly 500,000 documented student threats of violence in United States public K-12 schools during the 2007-2008 academic year (Neiman & DeVoe, 2009). Several years later, in 2010-2011, student threats were officially reported in 46% of all United States public K-12 schools (Neiman, 2011). A 2012 study found that approximately 12% of students report being threatened at school each year (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012). Many more threats in schools may go unreported (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

School administrators who encounter situations involving student threats of violence must act to ensure safety for those targeted by the threat and may enforce disciplinary actions for offending students, all while maintaining a supportive and welcoming school environment for everyone (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015). When school administrators fail to intervene appropriately in incidents involving student threats of violence, the results may prove disastrous for all involved: individuals targeted by the threats, offending students, and other members of the school and local communities (Cornell, 2018; Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009).

When considered within the larger context of the many dozens of daily responsibilities of school administrators, the charge of effectively addressing student threats of violence may prove daunting for even the most seasoned school administrators. Due to the many variables involved in situations involving threats of violence including the potential for catastrophic tragedies that may result from inaction or inept action, taking the appropriate precautions to mitigate violence and enhance school climate presents unique challenges for school administrators (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

Considering the frequency of student threats and the challenges involved with addressing these threats, school administrators must ensure that they are prepared to address student threats of violence when they occur. To this end, school administrators should participate in meaningful training opportunities related to addressing student threats during their preparation programs for becoming school administrators. Unfortunately, many prospective school administrators do not participate in training related to addressing student threats of violence (Cornell, 2018). This lack of training along with the challenges involved in addressing student threats of violence may foster among school administrators a sense of uncertainty in how to proceed in addressing student threats of violence (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Some school administrators may

become frustrated by the uncertainty of how to most effectively and efficiently deal with student threats (Cornell et al., 2004). All of these factors that contribute to indecision and frustration surrounding how to manage student threats of violence may lead to school administrators' maintaining poor self-efficacy perceptions regarding their abilities to properly address student threats of violence.

Bandura (1997) defines *self-efficacy* as one's "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). One's self-efficacy perceptions regarding his or her ability to complete a task may be influenced by training (Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993). Considering the complexity of addressing student threats and the corresponding uncertainty and pressure, school administrators who have not participated in student threat assessment training may lack a strong sense of self-efficacy in their abilities to accurately and appropriately assess and address student threats. Lacking a positive sense of self-efficacy presents a potentially overwhelming obstacle to an individual's confident undertaking and successful completion of a task (Bandura, 1997). An administrator's lack of self-efficacy in properly addressing student threats of violence may result in the administrator's conducting ineffective student threat assessments or altogether avoiding any action to address student threats, instead relying on harsh and exclusionary zero tolerance disciplinary actions for students who make threats. Without appropriate student threat assessment training, school administrators may attempt to address student threats solely by enforcing punitive, ineffective zero tolerance measures that provide no support for offending students and do little to prevent violence (Cornell, 2018; Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

Prior to the implementation of the interventions described in this action research case study, school administrators within the Hamilton County School System had received no formal

training in conducting student threat assessments. Based on informal conversations with colleagues and actions taken by school administrators across the district in response to student threats, I feared that many of my colleagues lacked the self-efficacy perceptions necessary to address student threats effectively. I also feared that the lack of student threat assessment training resulted in Hamilton County School System's school administrators' overreliance on zero tolerance discipline practices for students who threatened violence.

This action research study attempted to solve the problems outlined above. Contributing factors to the study's problems included the following:

1. Student threats of violence frequently occur in K-12 public schools (Neiman & DeVoe, 2009; Neiman, 2011).

2. School administrators are often charged with ensuring comprehensive approaches to school safety, including approaches to address student threats of violence (Kingston et al., 2018).

3. Failure to properly address student threats of violence is harmful (Cornell, 2018).

4. Properly addressing student threats of violence is often a complex and difficult task (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

Considering these contributing factors, the action research study addressed the following problems:

1. School administrators may lack training in addressing student threats of violence (Cornell, 2018).

2. A lack of training in how to address student threats of violence may contribute to poor self-efficacy perceptions among school administrators in their abilities to properly address student threats of violence (Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993).

9

3. A lack of training in how to address student threats of violence may prompt school administrators to rely on exclusionary zero tolerance discipline practices for students who threaten violence (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

Theoretical Frames

Self-efficacy theory addresses the development of skills among individuals to increase willingness for involvement in intimidating situations and tasks (Bandura, 1977). School administrators may perceive situations involving student threats of violence to be intimidating. These situations are often complex, involve many variables, and present the risk of catastrophic results if not properly addressed. Despite the intimidating nature of many situations involving student threats of violence, administrators must address these situations appropriately in order to prevent violence and preserve healthy school cultures.

Self-efficacy theory supports the notion that school administrators will be able to address student threats of violence most effectively and appropriately when the administrators perceive themselves to be adequately efficacious in addressing the situations appropriately. Regarding individuals' embracing intimidating tasks, Bandura (1977) writes, "they get involved in activities and behave assuredly when they judge themselves capable of handling situations" (p. 194). School administrators tasked with addressing student threats of violence must maintain an appropriate sense of self-efficacy in this important area of their work if they are to successfully address student threats of violence by mitigating the potential for harm and by promoting a positive and welcoming school culture for all through an authoritative approach to discipline.

Baumrind's (1978) authoritative discipline theory posits that authoritative discipline styles in which authority figures respond to students' needs through providing support while also holding students to high expectations for behavior produce desirable outcomes for student

behavior (Pellerin, 2005). One may distinguish authoritative student discipline from indifferent, permissive, or authoritarian discipline (Pellerin, 2005). These distinctions were originally applied to parenting styles but have since been used by researchers to discuss school discipline cultures (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Pellerin, 2005).

Authoritative discipline involves a balance of high demandingness with high responsiveness (Pellerin, 2005). In other words, authoritative school officials match high expectations for student behavior with high support for students in efforts to meet the expectations (Pellerin, 2005). Indifferent school officials maintain no expectations and provide no support for student discipline and behavior (Pellerin, 2005). Students in these schools may have free reign to do as they please. Indifferent school cultures lack discipline, structure, and routine (Hetherington, 1993). Permissive discipline provides high support but low expectations for student behavior (Pellerin, 2005). Students within permissive schools are routinely encouraged and supported but are not held to high standards for behavior and discipline (Pellerin, 2005). Authoritarian discipline cultures operate with high expectations and low support, often including unnecessarily harsh and uncompromising consequences for student misbehavior (Pellerin, 2005). These schools are characterized by strict application of a set of rigid rules coupled with harsh, zero tolerance punishment for students who do not comply (Pelerin, 2005). Students of indifferent, permissive, or authoritarian school cultures are less successful than students of authoritative environments (Pellerin, 2005). In fact, students in schools with authoritative cultures demonstrate better outcomes in achievement, social competence, and behavior than students in indifferent, permissive, or authoritarian schools (Hetherington, 1993).

Authoritative discipline theory appears in the student threat assessment literature in addressing the influences of student threat assessment practices on school culture (Cornell et al., 2012). Regarding the connection between authoritative discipline theory and student threat assessment, Cornell et al. (2012) write, "According to this theory, school discipline should reflect the characteristics of good parenting…a combination of both high expectations…and warm support" (p. 112). Authoritative discipline theory underscores the student discipline component of student threat assessment by encouraging schools to eliminate harsh and ineffective zero tolerance policies.

The presence of authoritative discipline policies in schools, opposed to authoritarian, zero tolerance discipline practices, may enhance students' feelings of safety within their schools (Fisher, Viano, Curran, Pearman, & Gardella, 2018). Authoritative discipline components such as positive student/teacher relationships and fair and consistent rules contribute to a reduction in student exposure to violence and result in enhanced student perceptions of safety (Fisher et al., 2018). On the other hand, zero tolerance discipline practices and policies "mandate the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature" (Curran, 2019, p. 321). Such practices may contribute to students' perceptions of schools as both unsafe and unwelcoming.

To promote safe and inclusive school environments, schools should address disciplinary infractions involving student threats of violence by balancing appropriate punitive consequences with supportive services, such as counseling (Cornell, 2018). The authoritative discipline response to student threat infractions contrasts with trends toward zero tolerance approaches to student discipline (Curran, 2016). Taking an authoritative discipline approach to student discipline in a threat assessment model may promote enhanced school engagement and

achievement for students (Pellerin, 2005). Conversely, zero tolerance discipline practices for students who make threats of violence will result in lost instructional time and decreased student performance (Losen et al., 2015).

Study Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this action research case study was to address the research problems by implementing a student threat assessment training program and assessing how participation in the program changed school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices for incidents involving student threats of violence. This action research case study may provide transferable knowledge regarding changes in self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices for school administrators in similar contexts who receive student threat assessment training and support. School administrators working in contexts similar to the Hamilton County School System may consider participating in training on how to conduct student threat assessments in schools. Participation in student threat assessment training and implementation of student threat assessment practices may improve school administrator self-efficacy perceptions and foster a positive and student-centered school environment that does not rely on zero tolerance discipline for students who make threats of violence.

Research Questions

1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to addressing student threats of violence change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will report on the existing relevant literature. Specifically, literature concerning the rise of targeted school violence in the national consciousness, efforts of the federal government to address targeted school violence, and empirical research concerning student threat assessment in schools will be reviewed.

A Chronology of School Violence and the Development of Student Threat Assessments

The United States Secret Service defines *targeted violence* as "any incident of violence where an attacker selects a particular target prior to an attack" (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019, p. 1). Targeted school violence events, particularly school shootings, are rare in United States K-12 schools (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The United States Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center's 2019 report on targeted violence in schools is the most current source of information regarding the frequency of such events (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). In their report, the Secret Service classified events meeting each of the following criteria as targeted school violence events:

- Violence was perpetrated by either a current or recent former student.

- The perpetrator purposefully used a weapon.

- The perpetrator caused physical injury to or death of at least one other student or school employee.

- The event took place on school property or in the school building.

- The perpetrator purposefully targeted one or more specific or random students and/or school employees (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

The report excludes certain incidents of violence in schools, particularly those involving gang violence, drug violence, or community violence that took place on school campuses (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). School shootings, as they are generally understood by the public, certainly qualify as acts of targeted school violence. "Based on the stated criteria, researchers identified 41 incidents of targeted school violence, perpetrated by 41 current or recently former students, from January 2008 through December 2017" (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019, p. 3).

If one considers the thousands of schools across the United States and the millions of children and adults who daily attend these schools, one may conclude that 41 incidents of targeted violence over a decade qualifies these events as being rare. The vast majority of students attending schools within the United States will complete their elementary and secondary education without ever being directly affected by an act of targeted school violence (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, & Reddy, 2002). A 2010 study found that 21 students are killed each year on average in United States schools (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). With over 125,000 K-12 schools in the United States, the a given school can expect to have a student murdered on its campus once every 6,000 years (Borum et al., 2010). Though rare, the effects of targeted school violence events, when they do occur, are tragic and are very often enduring for victims of the incidents, their families, their communities, and for the nation as a whole (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski; 2002).

One particularly notorious type of targeted school violence, school shootings, has a scattered but lengthy history in the United States (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018).

One of the first documented incidents of a student carrying out a school shooting against a K-12 school occurred in 1979 when a 16-year-old female high school student opened fire on an elementary school near her home. During the shooting, the student killed two adults and injured eight students and one adult (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018).

Various perpetrators carried out school shootings periodically over the next two decades. The frequency of school shootings spiked toward the end of the 20th century with a number of tragic and highly-publicized school shootings perpetrated by students taking place in 1997 (Pearl, Minnesota and West Paducah, Kentucky), in 1998 (Jonesboro, Arkansas and Springfield, Oregon), and culminating with the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in which 12 students and 1 teacher were killed (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

Public outcry surrounding these events compelled leaders of relevant federal agencies to begin searching for solutions to combat this growing trend of school shootings carried out by students (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Attempts at solutions included the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, zero tolerance policies, target hardening, and profiling of potential school shooters (Borum et al., 2010). Near the beginning of the 21st century, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the United States Secret Service (SS), and the United States Department of Education (ED) undertook the process of conducting the first extensive studies of this school shooting phenomenon (Borum et al., 2010).

The FBI published *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (O'Toole, 2000) to report the findings of the Leesburg Symposium, a 1999 conference of 160 school violence experts from across a range of disciplines including education, law enforcement, and mental health (Borum et al., 2010; O'Toole, 2000). Conference participants examined 18 school shooting plots, only some of which culminated in violence (Borum et al., 2010; O'Toole, 2000).

The final report included several recommendations for making schools safer. Regarding K-12 school-based threat assessment, the report states, "In every school, an established threat assessment procedure managed by properly trained staff can help school administrators and other school staff distinguish between different levels of threats and choose different appropriate responses" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 5). The report goes on to define threats and to offer investigative factors, levels of risk, and threat assessment approaches (O'Toole, 2000).

The School Shooter (O'Toole, 2000) admonishes school leaders to act on every threat of violence to maximize the safety of all students, to develop school community perceptions of safety, and to identify students in need of support and interventions (O'Toole, 2000). The report emphasizes the necessity of providing services for any student who is prone to threats and/or threatening behaviors. While disciplinary measures may be necessary for a student making a threat, such measures (especially exclusionary measures including suspensions or expulsions) should not replace sound threat assessment procedures and supportive interventions (O'Toole, 2000). In fact, the report holds "disciplinary action alone, unaccompanied by any effort to evaluate the threat or the student's intent, may actually exacerbate the danger" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 26).

In June of 1999 the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education began working collaboratively to address the issue of school shootings with the *Safe School Initiative* (Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2002). This interagency effort aimed to address the issue of school shootings by relying on the Secret Service's expertise in preventing acts of targeted violence and the Department of Education's expertise in creating safe school environments (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

17

The *Safe School Initiative* examined 37 incidents of targeted school violence. These incidents involved 41 attackers and occurred in the United States from 1974 through June 2000 (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The *Safe School Initiative* examined distinguishing behaviors and communications of would-be school attackers prior to their attacks to determine how this information could be used to prevent future targeted school attacks from taking place (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The primary objective of the *Safe School Initiative* was to study the pre-attack behaviors of school shooters to establish a knowledge base that could be passed on to educators and law enforcement agents across the country to assist them in their efforts to prevent school attacks (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Similar to the more recent Secret Service report (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019), the *Safe School Initiative* defines targeted school violence as "any incident where (i) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at his or her school with lethal means…: and, (ii) where the student attacker purposefully chose his or her school as the location of the attack" (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 7). Regarding targeted school violence, the *Safe School Initiative* reports 10 key findings which informed the report's recommendation for K-12 schools to implement student threat assessment practices to prevent targeted school violence. Findings include the following:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.

- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.

- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.

- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.

- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention. (Vossekuil et al., 2002, pp. 11-12)

These findings support the notion that perpetrators of targeted school violence tend to exhibit pre-attack behaviors that may, prior to the attack, alert others to the would-be attackers' intentions to carry out violence (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, & Reddy, M., 2002). Many targeted school violence offenders have directly told others of their plans to commit violence. In fact, eventual school shooters communicated their plans to other individuals before carrying out their attacks in more than 80% of the incidents reviewed by the *Safe School Initiative* (Fein et al., 2002). Based on the study's findings, the authors of the *Safe School Initiative* concluded, just as their FBI counterparts had in their report (O'Toole, 2000), that the implementation of student threat assessment in K-12 schools may effectively prevent acts of targeted violence against schools (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Threat assessment is a process the United States Secret Service uses to determine the degree to which a person poses a threat to an individual under Secret Service protection (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Threat assessment "involves efforts to identify, assess, and manage

19

individuals and groups who may pose threats of targeted violence" (Fein et al., 2002, p. 4). From information gathered during the threat assessment process, the Secret Service may take actionable measures to prevent the individual from carrying out targeted violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

The *Safe School Initiative* concluded that school officials can implement similar methods in assessing threats posed by students in order to take preventative action before an attack against the school (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The goal of student threat assessment in K-12 schools is to "identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk" (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018, p. 1). *Safe School Initiative* authors recommend training for school personnel and law enforcement officers on how to conduct student threat assessments. Training should include direction regarding types of information to gather, how to gather and analyze the information, and how to intervene when the evidence suggests a student poses a threat of targeted violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

As a result of the *Safe School Initiative* findings, Secret Service and Department of Education officials were so convinced of the capability of student threat assessment processes to prevent future school shootings that they published a threat assessment guide for schools. This guide, entitled *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Fein et al., 2002) establishes processes for school officials to implement in conducting student threat assessments.

In addition to detailed guidance regarding conducting student threat assessments, the guide includes recommendations of additional practices for school officials to implement in order to enhance the effectiveness of student threat assessments. One such recommendation is

for school leaders to take measures to foster cultures of respect within their schools so that students will know and trust at least one school employee (Fein et al., 2002). These types of relationships within a school community are crucial for fostering open lines of communication for students to share information that may lead to school officials' conducting a student threat assessment in order to prevent violence.

One of the key findings of the *Safe School Initiative* involved the propensity of attackers to reveal their plans of attack to one or more of their peers (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Unfortunately, many of the students who knew of these plans in advance of the attacks did not share this information with adults (Fein et al., 2002). A crucial first step in successful student threat assessment implementation within a school is to break this code of silence among students (Fein et al., 2002). Schools should foster a culture of respect in which students feel comfortable taking their concerns about peers to school employees (Fein et al., 2002).

Threat Assessment in Schools (Fein et al., 2002) established six foundational student threat assessment principles to guide the work of K-12 student threat assessment teams. These principles include:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or traits.

- An integrated systems approach should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.

- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether the student has *made* a threat. (Fein et al., 2002, p. 29)

Threat Assessment in Schools (Fein et al., 2002) includes recommendations for schools to consider in developing multidisciplinary student threat assessment teams. These teams should include a school administrator to chair the team, a law enforcement officer (preferably the school's resource officer), a mental health professional, and other professionals as needed (Fein et al., 2002). The guide concludes with directions for student threat assessment teams to follow in conducting student threat assessments. These directions address creating a central point of contact, conducting a threat assessment inquiry, and conducting a threat assessment investigation (Fein et al., 2002).

Upon completion of these reports, the Secret Service and Department of Education disseminated copies of the *Safe School Initiative* (Vossekuil et al., 2002) and *Threat Assessment in Schools* (Fein et al., 2002) to K-12 schools throughout the United States (Borum et al., 2010). During the time since their distribution nearly twenty years ago, these documents have provided both school officials and law enforcement officials with foundational information regarding student threat assessment as the primary targeted violence prevention measure in schools (Borum et al., 2010; National Threat Assessment Center, 2018).

Student Threat Assessment Empirical Research

Following publication of the *Safe School Initiative* (Vossekuil et al., 2002) and *Threat Assessment in Schools* (Fein et al., 2002), Professor Dewey Cornell and his research group, the Virginia Youth Violence Project of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education,

began the process of using the government's findings to develop student threat assessment guidelines for K-12 schools (Cornell, 2018). Regarding the purpose for the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, Cornell et al., (2009) state, "The Virginia model was designed to carry out the recommendations of school safety reports by the FBI and Secret Service" (p. 126). In addition to providing guidelines for schools, Dr. Cornell's team set out to test the government's recommendations surrounding student threat assessments (Cornell 2018). The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) development team, during its design process, collaborated with experts across a range of relevant disciplines. These experts included Mary Ellen O'Toole and Terri Royster, two members of the FBI's team that developed *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (O'Toole, 2000).

Cornell and his team developed a preliminary set of threat assessment guidelines, which they field-tested in 35 Virginia K-12 schools during the 2001-2002 academic year (Cornell, Sheras, Kaplan, McConville, Douglass, Elkon, McKnight, Branson, & Cole, 2004). This field-test research endeavor was one of the first studies of K-12 student threat assessments to follow the publications of *The School Shooter* (O'Toole, 2000), *Safe School Initiative* (Vossekuil et al., 2002) and *Threat Assessment in Schools* (Fein et al., 2002). Cornell and his team examined data from 188 student threats compiled from 35 Virginia K-12 schools within 2 school divisions in 1 county during the 2001-2002 academic year (Cornell et al., 2004; Cornell, 2018). Researchers designed this study to examine effects of schools' implementation of threat assessment practices based on the FBI's (O'Toole, 2000) recommendations as interpreted by the Virginia Youth Violence Project (Cornell et al., 2004; Cornell, 2018).

Prior to the implementation of these threat assessment guidelines in the 35 participating schools, researchers conducted interviews with the principals of these schools in order to gain

insights into current threat assessment practices and obstacles. At the time of these interviews, principals reported that student threats were relatively common events but that most were not serious (Cornell et al., 2004). Principals shared a collective sense of uncertainty and frustration regarding how to address serious threats and bemoaned the non-existence of concrete student threat assessment guidelines (Cornell et al., 2004).

Data generated from these interviews reaffirmed the importance and urgency of establishing clear and practical threat assessment guidelines for use by school leaders (Cornell et al., 2004). Cornell et al. (2004) established the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines and developed a K-12 threat assessment training manual designed to supplement the federal government's student threat assessment reports and resources. Prior to the beginning of the 2001-2002 academic year, principals, assistant principals, psychologists, counselors, and school resource officers from the two participating Virginia school divisions received copies of the manual and participated in student threat assessment training using the VSTAG. These schools implemented the VSTAG in conducting threat assessments during the 2001-2002 academic year (Cornell et al., 2004).

At the conclusion of the 2001-2002 academic year, researchers analyzed threat assessment data from the two school divisions. Of the 188 documented threats made by students, there were 27 threats to kill (14%) and 24 threats to shoot (13%) (Cornell et al., 2004). Half of the 188 threats (94) resulted in offending students' being suspended out of school, and 3 of the 188 threats led to expulsion from school for students who made the threats (Cornell et al., 2004). Additionally, 12 students were placed in alternative education settings after the threat assessment team determined that it was unsafe for these students to return to their schools (Cornell et al., 2004).

Importantly, researchers found that of the 188 threats examined, none of the offending students carried out the violence they had threatened (Cornell et al., 2004). Additionally, researchers concluded that threat assessment processes are relevant for all levels of K-12 students as threat assessment teams addressed threats made by students at all grade-levels K-12 (Cornell et al., 2004). Lastly, the researchers identified three important factors for successful implementation of student threat assessment in K-12 schools. These factors include a shared base of understanding of school violence among student threat assessment team members, a multidisciplinary team approach, and strong support from the superintendent (Cornell et al., 2004). Cornell and his team used the findings from this study to further refine and revise their student threat assessment guidelines (Cornell, 2018).

In 2006, several years after the field test study, Cornell and Sheras published *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence*. From the time of its publication, K-12 school districts throughout the United States and Canada have used this manual as the foundational document to train student threat assessment teams within schools (Cornell, 2018). Cornell (2018) recently published an updated edition of his student threat assessment guide. The new edition is entitled, *Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines: Intervention and Support to Prevent Violence* (Cornell, 2018).

During the 2004-2005 academic year, district leaders within the Memphis City School System in Tennessee adapted the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines for use among their 118,000 students across 194 schools (Strong & Cornell, 2008). Due to its large size, the district was unable to provide student threat assessment team training in all schools. Therefore, district leadership opted to implement the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines on a trial basis at a centralized facility (Strong & Cornell, 2008). This centralized district student

threat assessment team convened only for those students whose actions were deemed by school administration to warrant suspension of four or more days (Strong & Cornell, 2008). The centralized threat assessment team in the Memphis study consisted of two school psychologists, two school social workers, and a supervising psychologist (Strong & Cornell, 2008). School administrators and school resource officers were notably absent from this threat assessment team.

The primary objective of the Memphis study was to determine the viability of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in a large, urban school district (Strong & Cornell, 2008). During the 2004-2005 academic year, 13,659 students qualified for intervention from the student threat assessment team based on the four-day suspension threshold (Strong & Cornell, 2008). Of these students, 209 referrals were made to the student threat assessment team because these students' infractions included threats of violence. Of these 209 referrals, there were 32 threats to shoot (15%) and 30 threats to kill (14%) (Strong & Cornell, 2008). There were a number of less violent threats such as threats to hit or beat up someone (Strong & Cornell, 2008). Students across all grade levels PreK-12 made threats, with a high of 40 threats made by 5th grade students and a low of 1 threat made by a PreK student (Strong & Cornell, 2008).

For each case of a student threat reported to the centralized threat assessment team, the team followed the Virginia Guidelines by assigning one team member to interview the student in order to identify the nature of the threat as either transient (not severe) or substantive (severe). Strong & Cornell (2008) define transient threats as "behaviors that do not express a sustained intention to harm someone" (p. 45). They define substantive threats as "an ongoing intent to harm someone" (Strong & Cornell, 2008, p. 45). Of the 209 threats assessed, the team classified 102 threats (49%) as transient and 107 threats (51%) as substantive (Strong & Cornell, 2008).

The Memphis Student Threat Assessment Team distinguished between substantive threats as either "serious" or "very serious." In general, substantive threats of physical assault or battery are considered "serious" while substantive threats of murder, rape, sexual assault or violence with a weapon are "very serious" (Cornell, 2018). The team categorized 30 (14% of total cases) of the 107 substantive threats as "serious" and 77 cases (37% of total cases) as "very serious" (Strong & Cornell, 2008, p. 48).

The team conducted mental health assessments of all offending students in substantive cases and of 20 student offenders in transient cases (Strong & Cornell, 2008). For each case, the team made violence prevention recommendations to schools, students, and parents. The team also made recommendations that certain students should receive mental health services such as counseling or other forms of treatment (Strong & Cornell, 2008). The students who made threats in these cases received disciplinary consequences at varying degrees of severity (Strong & Cornell, 2008). None of the 204 student offenders of the 209 threats examined during the Memphis Study carried out the violence that they had threatened (Strong & Cornell, 2008). Findings from this study support the conclusion that the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines are viable for large urban districts such as Memphis City Schools (Strong & Cornell, 2008).

A third important empirical study in the K-12 threat assessment literature involves a group of researchers from the University of Virginia who conducted a nonexperimental study of 280 public high schools in Virginia in order to examine school climate conditions among schools that implemented student threat assessment guidelines to prevent acts of targeted violence (Cornell et al., 2009). This study generated the first report comparing schools that use a threat

assessment approach for violence prevention with schools that do not use a threat assessment approach (Cornell et al., 2009).

Cornell et al. (2009) examined all 314 Virginia high schools' principals' responses to a threat assessment survey question from the state-mandated online school safety audit following the 2006-2007 academic year. This question asked whether principals used "a formal threat assessment process to respond to student threats of violence" (Cornell et al., 2009, p. 122). In responding to this survey question, 95 principals indicated that their schools the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines; 54 principals indicated that their schools had no formal threat assessment process; and 131 principals indicated that their schools used a threat assessment process other than the Virginia model (Cornell et al., 2009). Of these 131 responses, 52 principals indicated that leadership within the school developed their threat assessment model; 48 principals indicated that district-level staff developed their threat assessment model; 6 principals reported that a combination of school and law enforcement officials developed their threat assessment model; and the remaining principals provided different or no additional information regarding the source of their threat assessment guidelines, resulting in 280 of the total 314 Virginia high schools being included in this study (Cornell et al., 2009).

Researchers analyzed school climate survey responses of 7,318 randomly-selected 9th grade students from across the state (Cornell et al., 2009). The survey addressed student victimization, bullying, and student willingness to seek help from school staff (Cornell et al., 2009). Study findings indicate that students attending schools that implement the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines reported a more favorable school climate and a higher likelihood of reporting concerning circumstances or student behaviors to staff when compared with peers in schools that implemented alternate or no threat assessment guidelines (Cornell et

al., 2009). Additionally, schools using the Virginia Guidelines reported fewer long-term

suspensions than other schools examined in the study (Cornell et al., 2009). Researchers note

that these differences between schools using the Virginia Guidelines compared with schools

using different threat assessment approaches were more pronounced than differences when

schools using the Virginia Guidelines were compared with schools using no threat assessment

approaches (Cornell et al., 2009). Findings from this study support the importance of school

officials' receiving training in student threat assessments from experts in the field as opposed to

attempting to create their own guidelines. Study authors note "it is unlikely that in-house

administrative school staff would have had the time and resources to develop comparable

procedures for their schools" (Cornell et al., 2009, p. 126).

In 2008, six years after the publication of the *Safe School Initiative* (Vossekuil et al.,

2002) and *Threat Assessment in Schools* (Fein et al., 2002), the Secret Service and Department of

Education continued their collaborative efforts toward combating targeted violence against K-12

schools in their publication of *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information*

Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack (Pollack et al., 2008). This study, more

commonly known as the *Bystander Study*, drew from the two prior reports developed by the

Secret Service and Department of Education to determine how students with prior knowledge of

targeted school attacks (bystanders) made decisions concerning if, how, and to whom they report

their knowledge prior to an attack (Pollack et al., 2008).

Pollack et al. (2008) identified 198 bystanders of an undisclosed number of averted

school violence incidents along with the 37 incidents examined in the *Safe School Initiative*. Of

these 198 bystanders, 15 individuals participated in the study. These participants included six

individuals who had prior knowledge of school violence events that were averted and nine

individuals who had prior knowledge of school shootings that took place (Pollack et al., 2008). Researchers interviewed participants in order to learn about their knowledge, actions, and perceptions of the school violence incidents (Pollack et al., 2008).

Findings from the *Bystander Study* led Pollack et al. (2008) to make three recommendations to schools in efforts to enhance threat assessment procedures. The major premise was to encourage bystanders to come forward with information that may enable school officials and/or law enforcement officials to prevent an attack. The recommendations included the following items:

1. Schools should ensure a climate in which students feel comfortable sharing information they have regarding a potentially threatening situation with a responsible adult.

2. School districts are encouraged to develop policies that address the many aspects of reporting a threat.

3. Teachers, administrators, and other faculty should be trained on how to properly respond to students who provide them with information about a threatening or disturbing situation, as well as how to deal with actual threats (Pollack et al., 2008, pp. 8-10).

The *Bystander Study* (Pollack et al., 2008) concludes with the recommendation that schools should establish threat assessment teams to examine threats of violence and other threatening or concerning behaviors.

A review of the literature uncovered three studies involving investigations into K-12 school personnel's responses to threat assessment training (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008; Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012; Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). These studies examined responses of school personnel from various school divisions within Virginia. Study participants included educators who participated in single-day Virginia Student Threat Assessment

Guidelines training sessions. Training participants used *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) during the training sessions.

The creators of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines conducted training sessions across the select Virginia school divisions for educators who would become members of schools' student threat assessment teams (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Training participants included school administrators, psychologists, law enforcement officers, and counselors (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Trainers divided sessions into four distinct sections covering the following topics:

- violence in K-12 schools

- threat assessment teams and procedures

- psychological factors and legal issues

- case exercises (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012).

Participants from each group of trainees completed pre- and post-assessments to measure changes to participants' knowledge surrounding threat assessments, and participants completed surveys to examine participants' perceptions of the training (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Statistical analyses of pre- and post-assessments from each of the three studies indicated substantial changes in school violence knowledge, threat assessment knowledge, and preparedness to administer student threat assessments (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Additionally, survey results indicated that the vast majority of the trainees viewed the training favorably, understood the basics of student threat assessment, and would be able to use what they learned in the training to address threats more effectively (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012).

These studies represent an important contribution to the K-12 student threat assessment literature in their examinations of pre- and post-training perceptions of school staff (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Regarding implications of these studies for enhanced student safety, the authors note "the changes in staff attitudes toward school safety and student threats of violence are noteworthy because they have direct implications for school safety policies and disciplinary practices" (Cornell & Sheras, 2006, p. 329).

Despite the best intentions of school officials and the documented effectiveness of K-12 student threat assessments, targeted school violence still may occur within schools where officials implement student threat assessment practices. On December 13, 2013, a male senior student at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado shot and killed a female student and then himself at the school (Goodrum & Woodward, 2016). In the months leading up to the shooting, the perpetrator had displayed a number of concerning behaviors including verbally threatening to kill a teacher (Goodrum, Thompson, Ward, & Woodward, 2018). Three days after the student made this threat, the school psychologist and assistant principal conducted a threat assessment on the student, finding him to be "low-risk" (Goodrum et al., 2018). The student participated in a brief follow-up meeting three weeks after the initial threat assessment. It was around this time that the student began making plans to carry out the shooting that would take place three months later (Goodrum et al., 2018).

Prior to the student's threat assessment, school officials at Arapahoe High School had participated in student threat assessment training based on the Secret Service guide (Fein et al., 2002). However, a review of the shooting, the preceding behaviors of the shooter, and the subsequent actions and inactions of school staff revealed multiple failures in implementation of

the Secret Service's student threat assessment guidelines (Goodrum et al., 2018). These failures included the following:

- failure to include the recommended four or five members on the threat assessment team

- failure to include role-playing scenarios during student threat assessment training

- failure to check in regularly with the subject of the student threat assessment

- failure to properly investigate the threat assessment subject's intentions

- failure to use an empirically validated tool for threat assessment (Goodrum et al., 2018).

Various studies report different types of effects of K-12 student threat assessment training that go beyond targeted school violence prevention. Such effects include those pertaining to students with disabilities (Kaplan & Cornell 2005), disciplinary outcomes for students (Cornell et al., 2012), and student bullying (Cornell et al., 2011).

Kaplan and Cornell (2005) examined the effects of student threat assessment processes on students who receive special education services, finding that students who are subjects of threat assessments often are those who receive special education services (Kaplan & Cornell, 2005). In fact, Kaplan and Cornell's (2005) study found "students in special education exhibited a significantly higher total threat rate than general education peers" (p. 113). Many of these students are classified as having an emotional disturbance (Kaplan & Cornell, 2005). The prevalence of students with disabilities being the subjects of student threat assessments is one consideration that demonstrates why zero tolerance policies regarding student threats simply is not best practice. As noted by Kaplan and Cornell (2005), students with disabilities often "cannot receive standard disciplinary consequences" for certain behaviors (p. 108).

In their examination of the student discipline effects of threat assessment implementation on students with disabilities, Kaplan and Cornell (2005) found that although students with disabilities were disproportionately represented as subjects of threat assessments, these students were not disciplined with disproportionately high rates of exclusionary, severe disciplinary measures. Regarding out of school suspension rates, the authors found "students receiving special education services were about as likely to be suspended from school for making a threat (36%) as students in general education (31%)" (Kaplan & Cornell, 2005, p. 114). This finding supports the notion that student threat assessment practices may provide school administrators with intervention options beyond the zero tolerance approaches that may result in disproportionate rates of suspension for students with disabilities.

In addition to students with disabilities, zero tolerance discipline practices and procedures regarding students who make threats of violence are potentially ineffective and harmful for all students. High suspension rates resulting from schools' implementing zero tolerance practices are detrimental to student learning, achievement, and eventual high school graduation (Losen et al., 2015). These detriments are particularly profound for minority students (Losen et al., 2015). Sadly, school districts serving high populations of minority students are more likely than districts with fewer minority students to enforce zero tolerance student discipline policies and practices (Curran, 2019). Millions of K-12 students are suspended out of school annually (Losen et al., 2015). Students of color, particularly Black and Latino students, receive exclusionary discipline consequences such as suspension at greater rates than their non-minority peers (Losen et al., 2015). Considering the detriments of such practices, it is incumbent upon school administrators to consider alternative measures and to implement authoritative discipline practices when addressing student threats of violence.

A particular experimental study demonstrates potential for student threat assessment to provide greater support for students who make threats as opposed to simply assigning consequences without follow-up support (Cornell et al., 2012). Researchers examined 201 incidents across 40 schools involving students' making threats of violence on school grounds (Cornell et al., 2012). Researchers analyzed differences in disciplinary outcomes for students who attended schools with student threat assessment practices in place (experimental group) vs. students who attended schools without student threat assessment practices in place (control group) (Cornell et al., 2012). Researchers found that students who make threats in schools within the experimental group were more likely than students at schools from the control group to receive counseling services and parent conferences as a result of making threats (Cornell et al., 2012). Rather than receiving support services, students who made threats in schools with no formal student threat assessment procedures in place were likely to receive only severe and exclusionary disciplinary consequences for making threats (Cornell et al., 2012).

Prior to the implementation of student threat assessment practices in the experimental schools, the common practice across all schools in both groups was automatically suspending students for making threats while rarely providing these students with any type of mental health support services (Cornell et al., 2012). Findings from this study support the notion that student threat assessment not only enhances safety within schools but also supports offending students' social development. A student threat assessment approach "sends students the message that their problems will be addressed but that their school attendance remains a priority" (Cornell et al., 2012, p. 189).

A 2011 study (Cornell et al.) on student threat assessment's effects on bullying in schools demonstrated that threat assessment practices have the potential to decrease rates of bullying

among students. Researchers examined differences among rates of student bullying across 23 high schools with threat assessment practices in place (experimental group) compared with student bullying rates across 26 high schools without threat assessment practices in place (control group). Study findings indicate a 79% greater decline in bullying infractions in the experimental group as compared to the control group (Cornell et al., 2011). Study authors attribute this decline to the student threat assessment model's emphasis on addressing bullying along with the recognition that student threats and bullying are frequently linked to one another (Cornell et al., 2011).

Despite the documented effectiveness of student threat assessment practices in preventing targeted attacks against schools, many K-12 schools across the United States do not currently implement systematic student threat assessment practices. A study marking the ten-year anniversary of the 1999 Columbine tragedy found that only 49% of K-12 schools across the country used multidisciplinary threat assessment teams (Gray, 2009). In fact, despite widespread anti-bullying and violence prevention legislation in many states, most states currently do not have legal requirements regarding school-based threat assessments (Woitaszewski, Crepeau-Hobson, Conolly, & Cruz, 2018). Virginia, Florida, and Maryland are the only states with legislation mandating student threat assessments and threat assessment teams in K-12 schools (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). Five other states (Nebraska, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Washington) have laws that reference the need for K-12 threat assessment in some capacity without directly requiring schools to implement threat assessment practices (Woitaszewski et al., 2018).

In addition to the widespread absence among states of any legislation addressing student threat assessment in K-12 schools, most state departments of education and other state

36

government agencies do not maintain any clear requirements for conducting threat assessments. Rather, most states offer some type of student threat assessment resources or guidance, primarily via the states' Department of Education webpages (Woitaszewski et al., 2018). Regarding K-12 student threat assessment, the southeastern state in which the action research case study took place provides on its Department of Education website "school crisis management resources with reference to threat assessment guidance" (Woitaszewski et al., 2018, p. 129).

The lack of K-12 student threat assessment laws and requirements is concerning since studies have clearly shown that school attackers tend to communicate their intentions to others prior to carrying out attacks (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Pollack et al., 2008; Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Although most states provide guidance on student threat assessment practices, the tragic nature of school shootings and the demonstrable preventative effects of threat assessments support the need for more support from states in implementing threat assessments in K-12 schools.

Conclusion

Student threat assessment became a prevalent method for combating targeted school violence following a series of tragic and highly-publicized school shootings in United States schools toward the end of the 1990s (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Several United States Government studies carried out by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Secret Service, and Department of Education in the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine shooting identified the implementation of K-12 student threat assessment procedures as an effective method for preventing future school shootings (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Shortly after these reports' publications, Cornell and the Virginia Youth Violence Project team used the reports' findings as the basis for developing the Virginia Student Threat

37

Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) (Cornell, 2018). Cornell's model quickly became the most widely used K-12 student threat assessment model in the United States (Cornell, 2018).

During the first two decades of the 21st Century, several research studies demonstrated the effectiveness of the VSTAG in addressing student threats and responding accordingly to prevent violence (Cornell et al., 2004; Cornell et al., 2009; Cornell, 2018; Strong & Cornell, 2008). Other studies identified positive effects of K-12 threat assessment on students with disabilities (Kaplan & Cornell, 2005), disciplinary outcomes (Cornell et al., 2012), and bullying outcomes (Cornell et al., 2011). Additionally, a series of studies demonstrated positive effects of school officials' knowledge and perceptions of threat assessment training (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012). Unfortunately, despite the wide-ranging and demonstrable benefits of K-12 student threat assessment, many schools do not implement systematic threat assessment practices (Gray, 2009), and many states do not require schools to implement threat assessment practices or provide direction for doing so (Woitaszewski et al., 2018). In summary, the empirical and narrative student threat assessment literature supports the notion of student threat assessment practices as being effective for violence prevention and school culture enhancement.

Gap in the Literature

A gap in the student threat assessment literature existed regarding changes to school administrators' perceptions and practices following participation in student threat assessment training and support. Specifically, the literature did not address the following elements as they pertain to school administrators' addressing student threats of violence in contexts similar to the Hamilton County School System:

- Self-efficacy perceptions regarding one's ability to address student threats of violence appropriately.

- Discipline practices implemented for students who make threats of violence.

This action research case study filled this gap in the literature by reporting on changes to school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence and changes to school administrators' discipline practices implemented for students who made threats of violence after administrators participated in student threat assessment training.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The goals of action research are generating new knowledge, achieving action-oriented

outcomes, educating both the researcher and the participants, enhancing the work of the local

context, and taking a sound methodological approach to the study (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

These goals align with my foundational goal for the study of identifying and addressing a

problem within my local context. Action research was the ideal research methodology to use for

investigating the above research questions surrounding change in school administrators'

perceptions and practices after participation in student threat assessment training.

Stringer (2014) defines action research as "a systematic approach to investigation that

enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (p.

1). Further, action research is an "action or cycle of actions that organizational or community

members…are taking…to address a particular problematic situation" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p.

4). As a practitioner within the context of this action research case study, I worked

collaboratively with other practitioners, the action research team members, to investigate

solutions to the research problems. Specifically, I led an action research team in identifying

problems, developing interventions, implementing interventions, generating data, and analyzing

data.

The target action research team members included leaders within the school district who

shared common interest and influence in enhancing student safety procedures and implementing

effective student discipline practices. Therefore, potential members included any school

administrator, central office leader, or school resource officer. Actual action research team members included the district's school resource officer supervisor, the district's director of secondary education, the principal of Sampson Middle School, and myself, the district safety team director and principal of Nash Middle School. Potential study participants included school principals and assistant principals. Actual study participants included six assistant principals from various schools within the district.

The action research team convened for the first time in June 2019. The action research case study involved two research cycles spanning from July 2019 through December 2019. The first cycle took place from late July 2019 through mid-September 2019. The second cycle followed, spanning from late October 2019 through December 2019. Both cycles mirrored the action research pattern of *plan*, *act*, *observe*, *reflect* (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Cycles consisted of planning an intervention (plan), implementing the intervention (act), generating data (observe), and analyzing data (reflect).

Investigating school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices proved to be a complex undertaking involving many variables, including school and community priorities, participant experiences and personalities, student dynamics, and time. Herr and Anderson (2014) recognize the complexity of conducting action research within a particular context. They write, "Action research takes place in settings that reflect a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power. Here, the notion of reflexivity is crucial" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 4). Throughout the action research process, I consistently reflected on the Action Research Team's work in attempts to initiate change that would solve problems while creating new knowledge related to the problems, interventions, and context (Herr & Anderson, 2014).   Using an action research method for this

study provided the framework for planning and implementing interventions and then gathering and analyzing data to evaluate the utility of the interventions in solving the research problems and answering the research questions.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Data Collection Overview</h2>

The action research case study followed a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis by generating both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data collection methods included participant interviews and written questionnaires. In addition to these qualitative data sources, I also examined quantitative data generated by pre- and post- Likert scale surveys and comparisons of student discipline data from across the school district during Semester 1 of 2018 (before student threat assessment training) and Semester 1 of 2019 (after student threat assessment training).

The University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved data collection methods used in this action research case study (see Appendix A). I received approval to conduct my research in the Hamilton County School System (see Appendix B). I obtained informed consent from each of the study's participants (see Appendix C). Alignment of research methods is shown in Table 1.

Along with the primary qualitative (interviews and questionnaires) and quantitative (pre- and post- Likert scale surveys and discipline data analysis) methods of data collection, I reviewed available supplemental data to provide further context for the study. These additional data sources included pre- and post-assessment data for the first research cycle. Dr. Dewey Cornell, the developer of the threat assessment training implemented as the study's interventions, generated pre- and post-assessment data and survey data from Hamilton County Schools' student

threat assessment training participants following the first research cycle's intervention, the initial student threat assessment training session (see Figures 4 and 5).

The intervention for the second research cycle included a twenty-minute online module over student discipline practices within a threat assessment framework. The module was developed by Dr. Cornell's team and included five pre- and post-Likert scale survey items. This module was available to my district as an option for additional training to supplement the professional development session that served as the study's first intervention. For the online module, I analyzed participants' responses to the pre- and post-surveys to provide additional context for the study. Pre- and post-survey data are included in Figure 6.

As demonstrated in Table 1, I relied on qualitative data collection methods during both research cycles to answer the study's two research questions. These qualitative methods included one-on-one interviews for the first research cycle and written questionnaires for the second research cycle. I supplemented these qualitative methods with analysis of quantitative student discipline data in order to answer the second research question which addressed assistant principals' student discipline practices. Quantitative data including pre- and post-assessment data and pre- and post-survey data informed study findings reported below.

Data Analysis Overview

I analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to identify themes and establish findings for each of the two research questions. I transcribed each of the six participant interviews for Cycle 1 and coded for themes. For Cycle 2, I analyzed participants' written responses to ten questionnaire items by coding for themes. Regarding quantitative student discipline data, I conducted a comparative analysis of the volume of various student discipline incidents (infractions) and actions (consequences) from Semester 1 of 2018 (before student threat

assessment training) with the frequency of similar incidents and actions from Semester 1 of 2019

(after student threat assessment training).

Table 1

Alignment of Research Methods

Research Question 1	Interventions	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis Method
How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to conducting student threat assessments change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?	Single professional learning session on conducting student threat assessments.	One-on-one interviews.	Coding for themes.
	Online professional learning module on student discipline within a student threat assessment model.	Written questionnaires.	Coding for themes.
Research Question 2	**Interventions**	**Data Collection Method**	**Data Analysis Method**
How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?	Single professional learning session on conducting student threat assessments.	One-on-one interviews. Comparative analysis of quantitative student discipline data.	Coding for themes. Comparative data analysis.
	Online professional learning module on student discipline within a student threat assessment model.	Written questionnaires. Pre- and post-Likert scale surveys. Comparative analysis of quantitative student discipline data.	Coding for themes. Survey data analysis. Comparative data analysis.

Limitations

The limitations of this study related to the nature of the study as action research as

opposed to other research methods. As action researcher, I was an "insider" in the study's

context as both "researcher and practitioner" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 2). As such, I

personally knew each of the study participants. While five of the six participants worked in

schools other than my own and were in no way under my supervision, one of the participants was

44

my assistant principal and fell under my direct supervision. In their work as leading school safety efforts within their buildings, all participants were subject to my influence in my capacity as the district's safety director. I intentionally selected the six study participants because of my professional relationship with each of them and my trust in their diligence and commitment as study participants. Over the course of the study, all participants proved to be reliable in their participating in interventions and in their providing rich data.

As is the case in many action research studies, my primary aim for this study was solving problems within my context. Herr and Anderson (2014) acknowledge this aspect of action research when they write, "Those who engage in action research projects are often more interested in generating knowledge that can be fed back into the setting under study than generating knowledge that can be shared beyond the setting" (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 6). However, the findings from this action research case study may prove to be generalizable beyond my context, particularly within somewhat rural school districts that serve similarly diverse student and community demographics. Readers of this study will have to decide for themselves if the methods and findings may be of value in their own communities.

Subjectivity Statement

In addition to developing and facilitating the research for this study, I was a practitioner within the study context. Specifically, I was the school district's safety director and the principal of one of the district's three middle schools. I knew each of the study participants and action research team members well, having worked with each of them in some capacity for six years.

I chose to focus my action research study on an area of school safety because of a personal interest developed over my five years as the school district's safety director. After investigating different types of student threat assessment training programs, I chose to implement

and report on relevant components of the implementation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (Cornell, 2018). I chose this program because of its documented effectiveness as a student threat assessment program (Cornell, 2018).

Despite my position of influence among the participants and my personal interest in the research topic and interventions, I made every effort during the research process to maintain objectivity and professionalism as both a researcher and as a practitioner. I maintained close contact with my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Walker Swain, throughout the process and relied on his guidance and expertise in my work as an action researcher.

CHAPTER 4

ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

The Hamilton County School System (HCSS) was the setting of the action research case study. HCSS is the only public-school district in Hamilton County, a relatively rural county in the southeastern United States. Hamilton County comprises nearly 300 square miles of rolling hills, farmland, wooded areas, and sparsely populated towns. The county is home to approximately 45,000 residents, the majority of whom (77.4%) are White. Other races represented within the county's population are Hispanic (14.9%), Black (3.9%), Asian (2.5%), two or more races (1.6%), American Indian (1%), and Pacific Islander (0.3%) (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The racial breakdown of Hamilton County residents is illustrated in Figure 1.
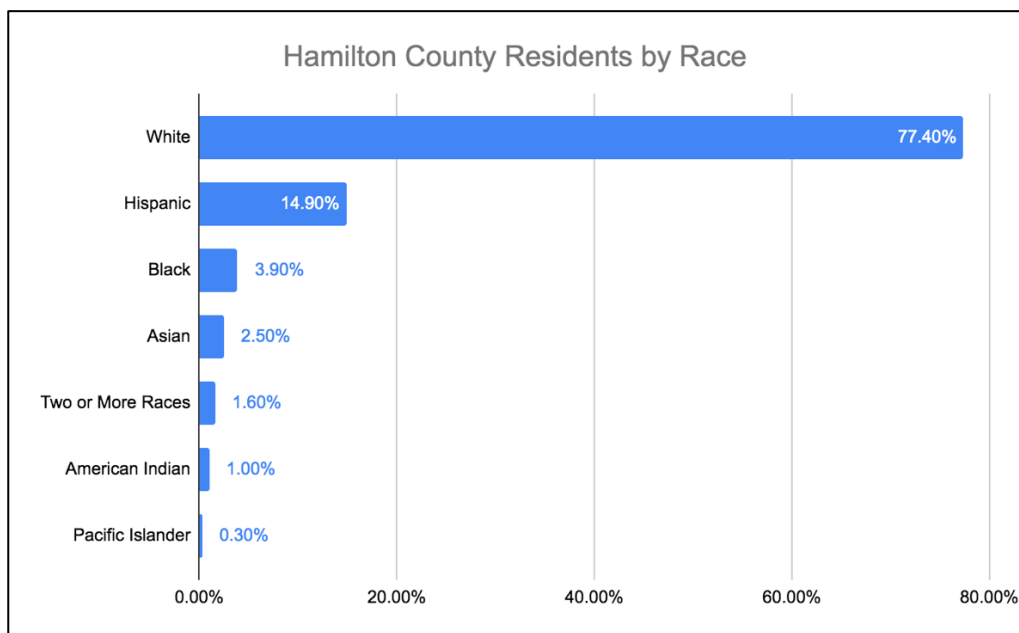

Figure 1: Hamilton County Residents by Race

Many adult Hamilton County residents work in the agriculture industry, particularly in the poultry industry, or in one of several factories within the county. The median household income is $41,600, and approximately 15.6% of Hamilton County residents live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The majority of county residents over age 25 (78.3%) are high school graduates, and a small percentage of county residents (17.5%) hold a Bachelor's Degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

As Table 2 illustrates, the Hamilton County School System consists of 14 schools, including 8 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 1 ninth grade academy, 1 traditional high school serving grades 10-12, and 1 alternative secondary school serving grades 6-12. Half of the schools within the district were designated as Title I schools during the 2019-2020 academic year. Each of the district's 14 schools has 1 principal and 1 assistant principal, except for the traditional high school which has 1 principal and 4 assistant principals. In total, there are 14 principals and 17 assistant principals in the district.

Table 2

Hamilton County Schools by Type

Hamilton County Schools	
Elementary Schools (grades PreK-5)	8
Middle Schools (grades 6-8)	3
Ninth Grade Academy (grade 9)	1
High School (grades 10-12)	1
Alternative School (grades 6-12)	1

There were over 7,200 students enrolled in HCSS during the 2019-2020 academic year, the year of the action research study. Student demographics included the following: 61.1% White, 30.5% Hispanic, 3.2% Multi-racial, 2.7% Black, 2.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.2% American Indian (see Figure 2). Additionally, 56.8% of students were classified as economically

disadvantaged, 19.7% as English Learners, and 17.3% of students as having a disability (see Figure 3).

The Hamilton County School System serves a diverse student population with large percentages of students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty. School districts with distinctions such as these are often prone to punitive zero tolerance practices that negatively impact students of minority groups at greater rates than their non-minority peers (Curran, 2016; Losen et al., 2015).
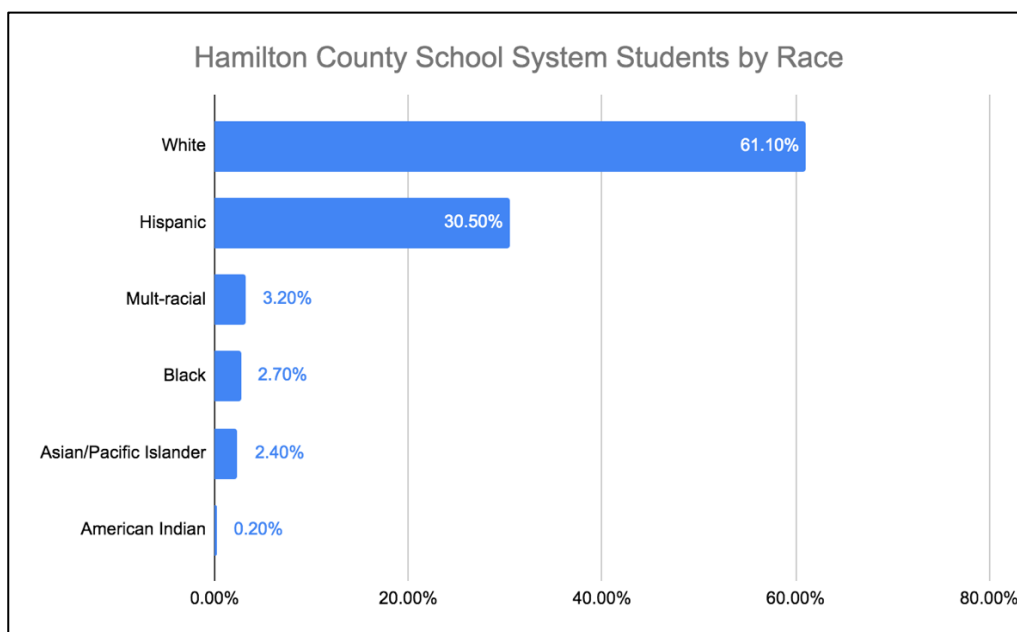

Figure 2: Hamilton County School System Students by Race
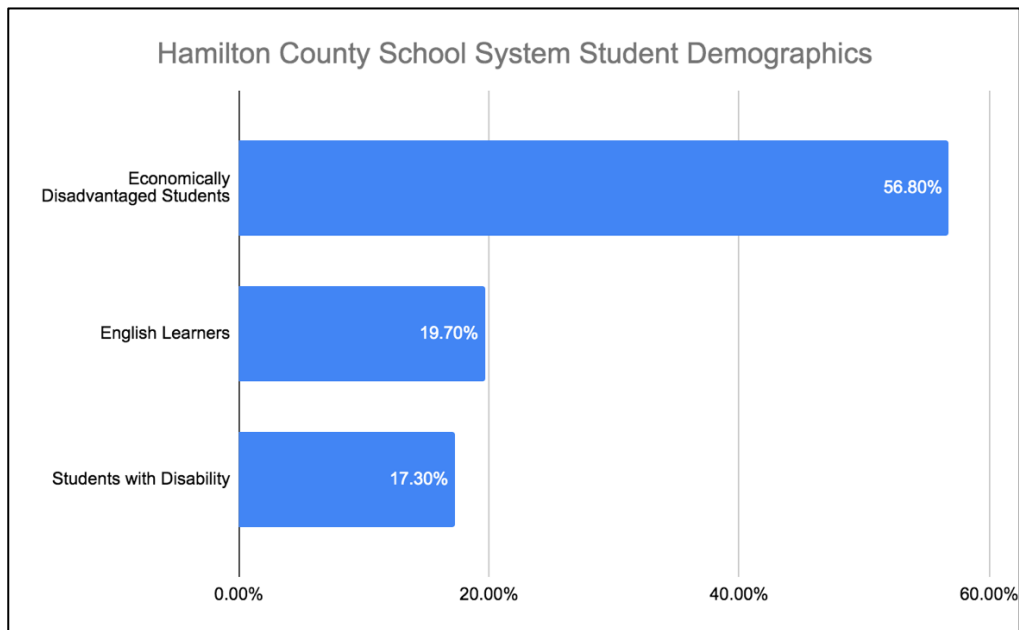
Figure 3: Hamilton County School System Student Demographics

The action research case study addressed a school safety initiative, student threat assessment teams, within the Hamilton County School System. School safety is a priority for district leadership. The HCSS superintendent consistently reminds district and school leaders of the district's "Big Four," the superintendent's four main areas for leaders to focus efforts in working to improve schools and serve students. The first item of the "Big Four" is *Safety*. The superintendent's message regarding safety centers on the importance of ensuring that our students, teachers, and school employees are safe at school.

The opportunity to serve the Hamilton County School System as both a school principal and also as the district's safety director has allowed me to develop a unique perspective regarding areas of strength and weakness in safety across our schools. As safety director, I have influence to enact change regarding school safety improvements. During my time as the district's safety director, I have gained the trust of school board members, district leaders, and school leaders. The superintendent's emphasis on ensuring safety in our schools along with my

position as the district's safety director has afforded me the ability to bring student threat assessment procedures to HCSS and to study the impact of this safety initiative on assistant principals' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices.

Initiating the Study

The process of implementing student threat assessment procedures in the Hamilton County School System began in December 2018. In the wake of the spring 2018 school shooting incidents in Parkland, Florida and Santa Fe, Texas, I began to research safety initiatives to implement in HCSS to prevent shootings from taking place in our schools. Research supported student threat assessment procedures as being the most effective violence prevention measures schools could take (Cornell, 2018; National Threat Assessment Center, 2018).

On December 13, 2018, after several months of investigating various student threat assessment models, I emailed Dr. Dewey Cornell, the Director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project and creator of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG), in order to inquire about training opportunities. Specifically, I asked if there were "train the trainer" sessions that I could attend so I could deliver training to Hamilton County Schools employees. Dr. Cornell replied to my email on December 13 with information about different types of training sessions. After reviewing his email, I determined the most effective and efficient training method would be for Hamilton County Schools to host a one-day training session for all district employees who may function as members of student threat assessment teams. These employees would include principals, assistant principals, school counselors, school social workers, mental health specialists, and school resource officers.

On December 17, 2018, a few days after corresponding with Dr. Cornell, I met with the Hamilton County School System superintendent to discuss potential safety initiatives for

implementation during the 2019-2020 academic year. During our meeting, I presented my case

for why our district needed to establish common procedures for conducting student threat

assessments at each school. I proposed that we invest in professional development on student

threat assessments for school administrators, student support staff members, and school resource

officers. After establishing our district's need for common student threat assessment procedures,

I argued that the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines protocol (VSTAG) was the

most effective and pragmatic threat assessment model available. I described the information I

learned from Dr. Cornell's email about VSTAG training and requested permission to schedule

VSTAG training for our district. After some discussion, the superintendent gave his consent for

me to proceed with procuring the training for our district.

Following this meeting with my superintendent, I emailed Dr. Cornell, who referred me

to his colleague, Dr. Sharmila Mehta, a licensed clinical psychologist and member of the

Harvard Medical School faculty. Dr. Mehta agreed to conduct the training session for our

district. I scheduled the training for July 29, 2019, the first day returning to work after summer

vacation for many of the training participants.

Prior to working through this process of initiating student threat assessment training for

the Hamilton County School System, I had not decided upon a topic for my action research

study. However, events would unfold in the subsequent months that would result in the July 29

student threat assessment training session becoming the first intervention of the action research

case study. Therefore, interestingly for this action research study, Intervention 1 was planned

before other key components of the action research study such as the problems, purpose,

questions, and action research team were established.

Action Research Team

As noted above, the action research team was not involved in planning Intervention 1.

However, in May 2019, several months after scheduling the July 29 training session but before

its implementation, I began to draft the research questions and identify potential members of the

action research team. Based on the nature of my study as a districtwide study surrounding

school safety, I decided to recruit three specific district leaders to participate as members of the

action research team. These individuals were Mike Kemp, the supervisor of the district's school

resource officers, Patricia Davidson, the director of secondary schools, and Denise Prichard, the

principal of Sampson Middle School. Each of these individuals had served on the district's

safety team for several years and were influential and respected leaders within the district.

I emailed these individuals on June 18, 2019 to invite them to participate as members of

the action research team. In the email, I briefly explained my action research plan and described

what I believed participating as an action research team member would entail. All three

individuals responded to my email within a few days and agreed to serve on the team.

Action research team meeting 1. The action research team met for the first time on

June 28, 2019. At this meeting, I outlined my perceptions of the action research problems and

drafts of the research questions. The team engaged in some conversation regarding the problems

and questions. The team carried out initial planning for the first research cycle in discussing the

upcoming July 29 professional development session's functioning as the first intervention to

address the research problems. The team then discussed data collection methods and agreed that

interviews would provide the most beneficial data for Intervention 1. In concluding this

planning meeting, the team agreed upon next steps in the first research cycle to include acting,

observing, and reflecting (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Agreed upon steps were to include

participating in the study's first intervention (acting), revising interview items (planning), conducting interviews (observing), analyzing data (reflecting), and planning future interventions (planning). The team would meet again several months later to continue the action research process.

Action research team meeting 2. The action research team met for a second time on October 30, 2019. This meeting took place after the first research cycle's intervention and data collection. The team met to review pre- and post-survey and assessment data from Intervention 1 provided by the VSTAG training and to review participants' responses to interview items. At the time of the meeting, I had not yet transcribed interviews. However, I shared key take-aways from the interviews with the action research team and my observations regarding participants' perspectives of the student threat assessment training and its impact on their self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices.

After reviewing components of Research Cycle 1, the team discussed possible interventions for Research Cycle 2. The team considered two potential interventions. The first intervention discussed was a table top exercise for study participants. The exercise would involve presenting participants with various scenarios involving student threats and then leading a discussion among participants about how to respond under the student threat assessment model. The second intervention the team discussed for Cycle 2 was an online module addressing student discipline in a threat assessment model. After some discussion, the team agreed upon the second option, the online discipline module, for Intervention 2. The team cited three reasons for choosing this option:

1. As was the case for the training implemented as Intervention 1, the module used for Intervention 2 was developed by the team that created the VSTAG. The Action Research

54

Team believed that using this consistent source of professional development for both

interventions would be important for ensuring consistency of information presented.

2. Because of its format as an online module, participants would have flexibility to access

   this training at their convenience as opposed to the action research team needing to

   schedule a time for all participants to meet.

3. The module directly addressed student discipline, a major component of the action

   research study and the focus of Research Question 2.

The team concluded its second meeting with a plan to move forward with the second

cycle of the action research case study. The plan involved acting by implementing the

intervention, observing by collecting data through a survey and questionnaire, and reflecting by

analyzing data.

Action research team meeting 3. The action research team's third meeting took place

on December 12, 2019. During this meeting, the team reviewed and briefly discussed interview

transcripts from the first research cycle. The team also reviewed participants' survey responses

and questionnaire responses from the second research cycle. I shared plans with the team to

collect quantitative student discipline data from Semester 1 2018 (before student threat

assessment training) and Semester 1 2019 (after student threat assessment training) to explore

any changes in the volume of various student incidents and actions. The team adjourned the

meeting with no further plans to meet. This meeting would be the final meeting of the action

research team. Table 3 shows the timeline of events of the action research case study initiation

and activities of the action research team.

Table 3

Timeline of Case Study Initiation and Action Research Team Activities

Activity	Agent(s)	Outcomes	Timeline
Student threat assessment training session planning	• Action researcher • HCSS Superintendent • VSTAG Developer • VSTAG Trainer	Set initial student threat assessment training for July 29, 2019	December 2018
Action research team development	• Action researcher	Created action research team to include the following HCSS leaders: • Safety director/middle school principal (action researcher) • School resource officer supervisor • Director of secondary education • Middle school principal	June 2019
Action research team meeting 1	• Action research team members	Planned for first stages of action research to include the following: • Participating in Intervention 1 • Conducting interviews • Analyzing data from interviews • Planning future interventions	June 28, 2019
Action research team meeting 2	• Action research team members	• Reviewed available Intervention 1 data • Establish Intervention 2	October 30, 2019
Action research team meeting 3	• Action research team members	• Reviewed data from Intervention 1 and Intervention 2 • Discussed plans for collecting and analyzing comparable quantitative student discipline data	December 12, 2019

Study Participants

  As noted above, the purpose of this action research case study was to address the research problems by implementing a student threat assessment training program and assessing how participation in the program changed school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices for incidents involving student threats of violence. Based on my understanding of student threat assessment processes and how schools within the HCSS operate regarding student safety and discipline, I knew that following the July 29, 2019 training each school's assistant principal would be charged with leading school-based student threat assessment teams. Therefore, prior to the July 29 student threat assessment training session, I invited each assistant principal from all 14 schools in the district to participate as subjects of the action research study. I initially invited assistant principals to participate in the action research through a July 3, 2019 email that briefly explained the research plan and what I anticipated as participants' involvement over the course of the research cycles.

  Twelve of the district's seventeen assistant principals responded to the email and agreed to participate in the study. With such widespread interest in participating in the study, my original plan was to include all 12 assistant principals who expressed willingness to participate. However, on September 30, 2019, during my defense of Critical Milestone II, members of my dissertation committee advised that I narrow the field of participants in order to generate a greater depth of data than would be possible with 12 participants. Based on the committee's feedback, I decided to narrow my list of participants to six assistant principals.

  I chose these six participants based the levels of schools in which they worked (elementary, middle, high), years of school administration experience, and professional relationships with me. I wanted to include assistant principals from all levels, elementary,

middle, and high schools, who were relatively new in their positions as assistant principals. At the time of the study initiation, all six study participants had been in their current positions for fewer than five years. In addition to considering school level and years of experience, I chose assistant principals with whom I had good working relationships. I chose participants who I believed to be dependable and competent as school leaders. My final group of participants included Lauren Johnson, Megan Washington, Bobby Anderson, Linda Elisma, Derrick Lincoln, and Dennis Bell.

Participant profiles. Lauren Johnson and Megan Washington were the two elementary school assistant principals who participated in the study. At the time of the study, Lauren had been the assistant principal at Duncan Elementary School (DES) for three years. Although Lauren had worked in public education for 21 years, her position as assistant principal of DES was her first as a school administrator. Before taking this position, she served as an instructional coach and math teacher at a middle school within the Hamilton County School System. Lauren expressed that she enjoyed her work in educational leadership and would like to continue to advance in the field by becoming a school principal within a few years.

At the time of the study, Megan Washington had spent her entire 25-year career working at Forrest Elementary School (FES). She began as a teacher before advancing to the position of instructional coach and finally assistant principal, her role as a study participant. She had been the assistant principal of Forrest Elementary School for four years and shared her plan to retire from her position within the next five years.

Bobby Anderson and Linda Elisma were the middle school assistant principal study participants. Bobby was in his fourth year as the assistant principal of Sampson Middle School (SMS). Prior to becoming and assistant principal, Bobby worked in public education for 17

years, spending the majority of that time as a high school chorus teacher. During his interview following Intervention 1, Bobby stated that working as the Fine Arts Department Head for several years prompted his desire to enter administration. Bobby shared his plan to continue to advance in the field of educational leadership by becoming a principal within the next few years.

Linda Elisma was the assistant principal of Nash Middle School (NMS), where I served as the principal. Linda worked in public education for 16 years prior to her participation in the action research study but was in her first year as a school administrator during the study. During her career, Linda has served as a high school special education teacher and special education department head. Linda's eventual career goal is to become the Hamilton County School System Special Education Director.

Derrick Lincoln and Dennis Bell were the high school assistant principal study participants. Derrick worked in public education for 14 years. At the time of the study, he had ben the assistant principal of Nelson Academy (NA), which serves only ninth grade students, for four years. Derrick's role as assistant principal of Nelson Academy was his first position in educational leadership. Prior to becoming an assistant principal, Derrick spent ten years as a middle school history teacher in a neighboring county. Derrick planned to continue to advance in educational leadership by becoming a principal within the next few years.

Dennis Bell was the assistant principal in charge of school safety and student discipline at Hamilton County High School. He worked in education for over 25 years, but was in his first year as a school administrator during the study. Prior to becoming an assistant principal, Dennis spent the majority of his career as a school counselor at both the middle school level and at the high school level. Dennis did not aspire to advance in educational leadership beyond his current role. He planned to retire from his current position within the next five years.

Participant summary. These participants brought a variety of experience and expertise to the action research study. All participants had worked in public education for over ten years, but were relatively new school administrators. Two of the participants were in their first year as school administrators, and no participant had been an assistant principal for more than four years. Two of these leaders planned to retire in the next few years, but the other four leaders were looking to continue to advance as educational leaders. Each of these participants was responsible for school safety, student discipline, and leading student threat assessment teams within his or her school. Interestingly, five of the six participants graduated from Hamilton County High School and have lived in Hamilton County for most of their lives. Only Derrick Lincoln, who grew up in a neighboring county, was originally from a county other than Hamilton County. Table 4 provides an overview of the study participants.

Table 4

Action Research Case Study Participant Overview

Name	School	# Years in Public Education	# Years as Assistant Principal	Next Career Step
Lauren Johnson	Duncan Elementary (DES)	21	3	Principal
Megan Washington	Forrest Elementary (FES)	25	4	Retirement
Bobby Anderson	Sampson Middle (SMS)	17	4	Principal
Linda Elisma	Nash Middle (NMS)	16	1	District Office
Derrick Lincoln	Nelson Academy (NA)	14	4	Principal
Dennis Bell	Hamilton County High (HCHS)	25	1	Retirement

Action Research Cycles

The action research case study spanned from June 2019 through January 2020. The study's first event was the initial action research team meeting in June 2019, and the study's final event was the quantitative student discipline data analysis in January 2020. The study consisted of two research cycles, each of which included of an intervention followed by data collection and analysis. Additionally, I collected quantitative student discipline data from across the district in order to compare numbers and types of student incidents and disciplinary actions from Semester 1 of 2018 (before student threat assessment training) and Semester 1 of 2019 (after student threat assessment training).

Research Cycle 1

Action Research Cycle 1 took place from July 2019 through mid-October 2019. This cycle's intervention was the July 29 student threat assessment training presented by Dr. Sharmila Mehta to 51 district employees, including the 6 study participants. Data collection for the first research cycle took place in October 2019 and included a single one-on-one interview of each of the study's six participants. Data analysis consisted of transcribing interviews and coding for themes.

Intervention. The first research cycle's intervention involved a single-day, six-hour Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) training session for select Hamilton County School System personnel and school resource officers. The VSTAG is a research-based framework for school personnel to implement in leading multidisciplinary teams to conduct student threat assessments. Fifty-one individuals participated in this training session. Training attendees included all Hamilton County School System principals, assistant principals,

61

counselors, school social workers, and school resource officers. During my six years as a Hamilton County School System employee, this session was the first training over any topic to be attended by this particular collection of district and law enforcement personnel.

The session's facilitator was Dr. Sharmila Mehta, a colleague of Dr. Dewey Cornell, the author of the VSTAG (Cornell, 2018). Dr. Mehta is a licensed clinical psychologist and the Director of Inpatient Child Psychology Training at the Cambridge Health Alliance. Additionally, Dr. Mehta is on the Harvard Medical School Faculty and is a former student of Dr. Cornell's at the University of Virginia.

The VSTAG training session took place on July 29, 2019 in the Hamilton County High School cafeteria. The training included the presentation of information along with whole-group and small-group activities. Training attendees sat at circular tables with colleagues from their schools or departments so they could work together on student threat assessment scenarios during the training. Dr. Mehta worked through an extensive PowerPoint presentation which training attendees had received a few days in advance. Attendees also had access to hard copies of the presentation during the training along with student threat assessment manuals (Cornell, 2018) and electronic student threat assessment forms. Dr. Mehta divided the training session into the following four sections:

1. Rationale for Threat Assessment
2. Using the Threat Assessment Guidelines
3. Case Studies and Research Findings
4. Practical Issues, Small Group Exercises, and Implementation

Training attendees completed a pre-assessment just before the training began and a post-assessment just after the training ended to collect data addressing training participants' student

threat assessment knowledge form before and after participating in the training session. Assessment items addressed information addressed during the training session surrounding school violence, threat assessment, and student discipline. Dr. Cornell shared pre- and post-assessment results from our session with me several weeks later. Of note, the overall percentage of correct answers to questions on the assessment increased among participants from 40% before the training to 85% after the training. Complete pre- and post-assessment results are included in Figure 4.
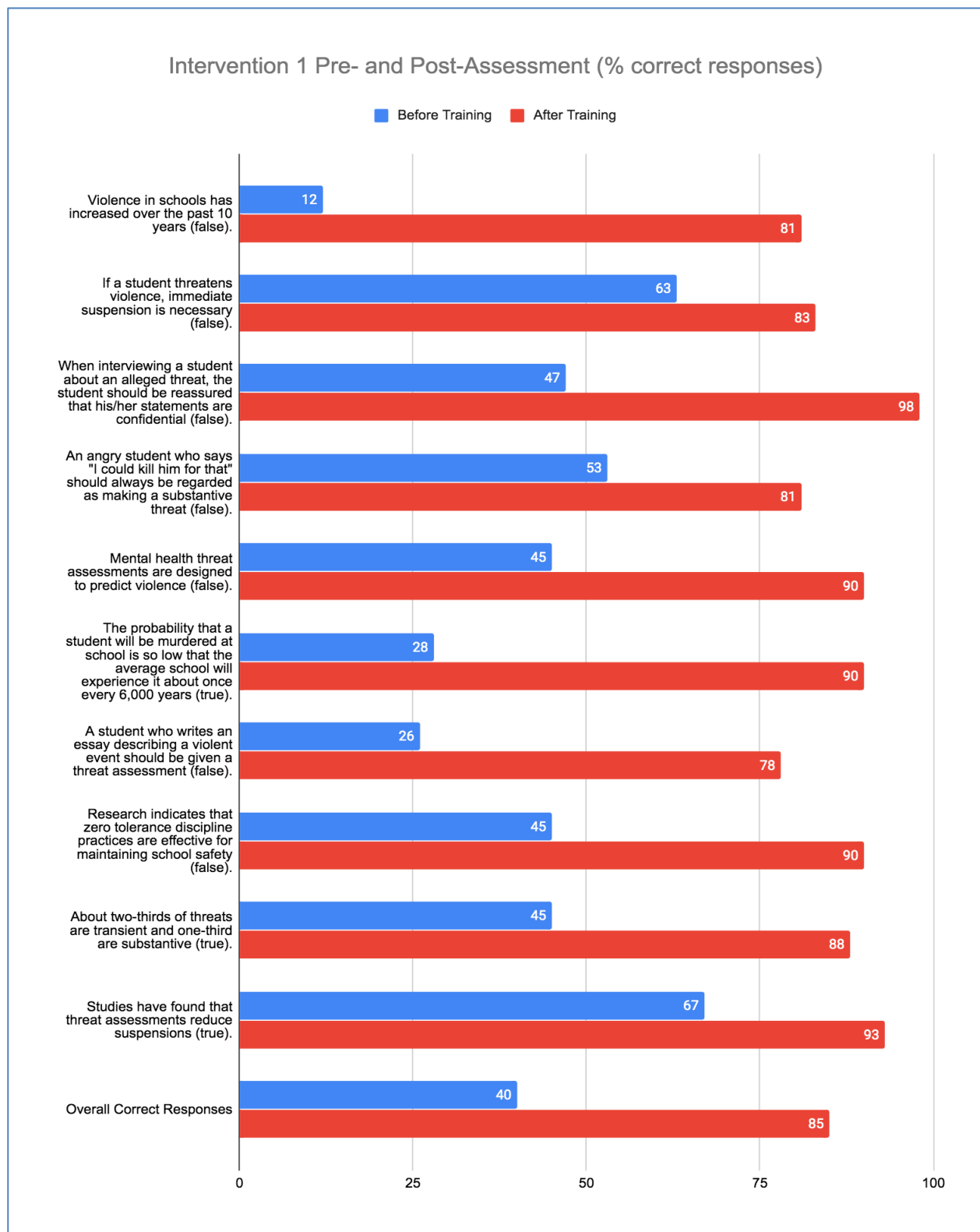
Figure 4: Intervention 1 Pre- and Post-Assessment (% correct responses)

In addition to the pre- and post-assessment, training participants completed a survey after the session to evaluate the session's effectiveness. All training participants gave positive evaluations of the training by either agreeing or strongly agreeing with each of the five survey statements evaluating the session (See Figure 5).
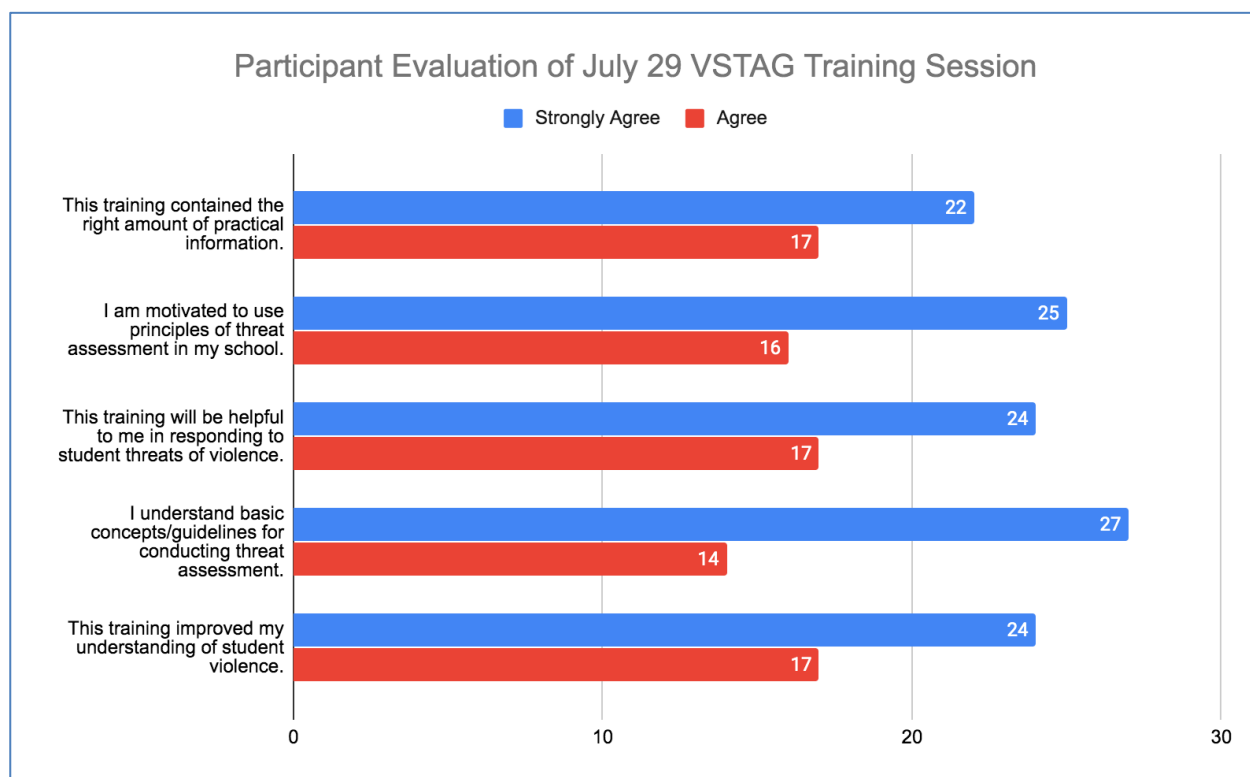
Figure 5: Participant Evaluation of July 29 VSTAG Training Session

Data collection and analysis. The new school year began shortly after the July 29 training session. With the opening of the 2019-2020 academic year, school leaders would have the opportunity to implement the student threat assessment practices learned during the July 29 session. I chose to allow the six study participants a few months to implement the student threat assessment procedures and practices within their schools before I began data collection. I scheduled individual interviews with each participant to take place during the month of October 2019. Each interview was held after school on six separate school days at the participants'

schools. I chose to hold interviews at participants' schools in order to make the process of

participating in the action research study as accommodating for participants as possible. All

interviews consisted of one-on-one conversations with me, the interviewer. Table 5 shows the

interview schedule.

Table 5

Research Cycle 1 Interview Schedule

Interviewee	Interviewer	Interview Date	Interview Time	Interview Location
Lauren Johnson	Adam Bagwell	October 7, 2019	4:00	Duncan Elementary School
Bobby Anderson	Adam Bagwell	October 8 2019	4:00	Sampson Middle School
Dennis Bell	Adam Bagwell	October 9, 2019	4:00	Hamilton County High School
Megan Washington	Adam Bagwell	October 15, 2019	4:00	Forrest Elementary School
Linda Elisma	Adam Bagwell	October 16, 2019	4:00	Nash Middle School
Derrick Lincoln	Adam Bagwell	October 17, 2019	4:00	Nelson Academy

I began developing interview items during the *Action Research II* course at the University

of Georgia in the spring of 2019, before the July 29 student threat assessment training session.

In early October 2019, prior to the first interview, I sent the interview items to my action

research team members for review and feedback. The team provided feedback, and I adjusted

interview items accordingly. Interview items were designed as open-ended questions to elicit

participant responses that would support findings to answer the study's research questions.

Interview items included questions to address each of the following components of the action

research study:

- Context and relevant background information of the participants.

- Knowledge, philosophies, and responsibilities in school safety and student discipline.

- Understanding and implementation of student threat assessment practices.

- Self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence.

- Common discipline practices implemented in addressing student threats of violence.

- Specific actions participants would take in various hypothetical student threat scenarios.

- Perceptions of zero tolerance practices and policies.

Interview items were approved by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The final set of 20 interview items is included in Appendix D.

Each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes. I audio recorded each of the interviews and then transcribed the interviews from the audio recordings. I maintained field notes as I conducted interviews in order to record observations I made during the interviews. After transcribing interviews, I coded for themes.

Summary. The first research cycle provided study participants with the opportunity to participate in a professional development session on leading a multidisciplinary team to conduct student threat assessments. Participants then were able to spend the first two months of the 2019-2020 academic year implementing the student threat assessment practices within their buildings. I conducted one-on-one interviews with participants in October 2019 to generate data on the impact of the professional development session on participants' threat assessment self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices. I analyzed interview data to extract themes that would support findings to address research questions.

Research Cycle 2

Action Research Cycle 2 took place from late October 2019 through December 2019. This cycle's intervention (Intervention 2) was an online professional development module on managing student discipline within a threat assessment model. Just as with the training provided as Intervention 1, this module was developed by the developer of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines: Dr. Dewey Cornell and his team at the University of Virginia. The data collection for the second action research cycle took place from November 2019 through December 2019 and included a ten-item questionnaire and pre- and post-Likert Scale surveys. Data analysis consisted of coding questionnaire responses for themes and examining pre- and post-survey responses to identify changes in participants' knowledge and perceptions. I report pre- and post-Likert scale survey data in the Findings Section. However, one should consider the small sample size of respondents (six) when assessing pre- and post-survey data's utility in supporting findings to address research questions. I believe these data to be useful in supporting study findings.

Intervention. On October 30, 2019, shortly after I concluded participant interviews for the first research cycle, the action research team convened for its second meeting. Several days after the meeting, on November 8, 2019, I initiated Research Cycle 2 by emailing participants instructions for accessing and completing Intervention 2, an online module entitled, "Threat Assessment Team Presentation: Discipline." The module was developed by the same group that provided the July 29 student threat assessment training (Intervention 1). Hamilton County School System had access to the module as an optional follow-up professional learning opportunity for district employees who participated in the July 29 session.

In my email, I asked participants to view the module (which would take approximately 20 minutes), complete the pre- and post-Likert scale surveys, and respond to the ten-item questionnaire. The pre- and post-Likert scale surveys were included within the module. I developed the ten-item questionnaire to collect qualitative data from participants for this intervention. Questionnaire items addressed participants' impressions of the information presented in the module. Items also addressed participants' thoughts concerning the projected impact of the module's information on participants' student discipline practices and participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence. Self-efficacy perceptions addressed in questionnaire items related to perceptions involving participants' abilities to prevent violence and abilities to properly address student discipline. In my November 8 email, I included a document containing directions for accessing and viewing the module and directions for completing the data collection tools. This document is included in Appendix E.

Participants accessed the module using a unique passcode that was provided to Hamilton County School System employees by Dr. Cornell's team with the University of Virginia. The module opened with a series of Likert-scale survey questions designed to gather baseline data from participants regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies and knowledge of research into zero tolerance discipline in schools.

Following the pre-survey, the module transitioned to video clips of two individuals narrating information about student discipline within a threat assessment model. The presenters emphasized the idea that threat assessment processes and student discipline processes are distinct, though often related, processes. Threat assessment is interested in determining if an individual poses a future threat. Student discipline is concerned with wrongful actions that a student has already committed.

In addition to video clips of the module's two narrators, the module included several segments of actors depicting students committing actions that may include threats or threatening behaviors. The narrators discussed each scenario and how a threat assessment team may approach investigating whether or not the students in the scenarios posed a threat. The narrators also discussed how school administrators may address discipline for students in the scenarios whose actions were disruptive.

The narrators then spent the final five minutes of the module describing relevant research into zero tolerance discipline policies and threat assessment teams. The module described alternatives to zero tolerance discipline policies, including Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative discipline practices. The module concluded with a post-Likert scale survey that included the same items as those on the pre-survey.

Data collection and analysis. I collected qualitative data and quantitative data to assess participants' understanding and perceptions of content presented in the module along with participants' projections regarding how the information may impact their work in addressing student discipline in incidents involving threats of violence. Specifically, in attempts to answer Research Question 2, I analyzed data to determine if there was any change in participants' beliefs about how to go about implementing discipline for students who make threats of violence.

Before viewing the module, participants completed the five-item pre-Likert scale survey included within the module. Participants were to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement by selecting a rating on a scale of 1-9 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = not sure; 9 = strongly agree). After viewing the module, participants completed a post-Likert scale survey containing the five items presented as the pre-Likert scale survey. These survey items are included in Appendix E. I analyzed pre- and post-survey responses to identify rates of

70

change in participants' degrees of agreement or disagreement with each item (See figure 6).

Relevant pre- and post-Likert scale survey results are included in the Findings Section.

After viewing the module and completing the post-Likert scale survey, participants responded to the ten questionnaire items in writing and emailed the completed forms to me. These forms included pre-Likert scale survey responses, post-Likert scale survey responses, and responses to the ten questionnaire items. I chose to gather qualitative data for Research Cycle 2 through written questionnaire responses rather than through focus groups or another round of face-to-face interviews. This choice was based on the difficulty involved with scheduling face-to-face interactions with study participants. With all participants being assistant principals, their schedules were often full in the afternoons after school. I did not believe that participants would be interested in meeting on weekends, holidays, or mornings before school. Since I had already met with each participant once after school, I believed I would get more willing involvement more thorough data by providing participants with the flexibility to view the module at their convenience and then reply to the questionnaire items in writing. All participants viewed the module, completed the ten questionnaire items, and emailed completed forms to me in November or December 2019. Questionnaire items are included in Appendix E.

Summary. The second research cycle included a twenty-minute online module developed by the group responsible for the student threat assessment training session implemented as Intervention 1. The online module addressed student discipline within a threat assessment model, paying particularly close attention the harmful effects of zero tolerance discipline practices. Participants completed this module approximately three to four months after participating in Intervention 1 and approximately one to two months after participating in Research Cycle 1 interviews. Participants completed a five-item pre- and post-Likert scale

survey and a ten-item written questionnaire. Items from these data collection tools primarily addressed student discipline for incidents of student threats of violence. I analyzed quantitative survey data and qualitative questionnaire data. Findings supported by these data are included below. Data from Research Cycle 2 primarily support findings for Research Question 2; however, some questionnaire items and their participant responses inform findings for Research Question 1.

Student Discipline Data

All Hamilton County School System administrators, including the six study participants, participated in training on student threat assessment practices during Intervention 1, the July 29 professional development session presented by Dr. Sharmila Mehta. Prior to this session, no school administrators within the Hamilton County School System had received formal, district-initiated training in student threat assessments as HCSS employees. School administrators across the 14 HCSS schools, therefore, implemented student discipline practices during Semester 1 of the 2018-2019 academic year (2018) without having been trained in student threat assessments. These administrators, however, implemented student discipline practices during Semester 1 of the 2019-2020 academic year (2019) after having participated in student threat assessment training.

Since student discipline is often a component of situations requiring student threat assessments, I examined quantitative student discipline data from across the Hamilton County School System in order to look for any changes in the quantity of student discipline incidents and types of administrative actions. Examining student discipline data from Semester 1 of 2018 and Semester 1 of 2019 allowed me to identify changes in the quantity of student discipline incidents from before and after school administrators' participation in student threat assessment training.

In order to examine data sets that would be most comparable, I examined student discipline data from across all 14 HCSS schools from Semester 1 of 2018 (before student threat assessment training) and data from Semester 1 of 2019 (after student threat assessment training). The district office provided me with raw numbers of each student incident type and each administrative action for all HCSS schools. Considering the research problems and questions, I was especially interested in examining any changes to the quantity of exclusionary discipline actions involving ISS (in-school suspension) and OSS (out-of-school suspension) from before and after student threat assessment training. A description of the data is included in the Findings Section.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

This action research study addressed the following problems associated with school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence:

1. School administrators may lack training in addressing student threats of violence (Cornell, 2018).

2. A lack of training in how to address student threats of violence may contribute to poor self-efficacy perceptions among school administrators in their abilities to properly address student threats of violence (Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993).

3. A lack of training in how to address student threats of violence may prompt school administrators to rely on exclusionary zero tolerance discipline practices for students who threaten violence (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

The purpose of this action research case study was to address the research problems by implementing a student threat assessment training program and assessing how participation in the program changed school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices for incidents involving student threats of violence. Research questions included the following:

1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to conducting student threat assessments change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

A summary of findings for these research questions is included in Table 6.

Table 6

Findings Summary

Research Question	Findings
1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to addressing student threats of violence change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?	Theme 1 – Participation in student threat assessment training enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence. Theme 2 – Collaboration within student threat assessment teams enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence. Theme 3 – Past experiences involving student threats enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence. Theme 4 – Incident-specific circumstances often diminished self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.
2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?	Theme 5 – Participation in student threat assessment training reinforced school administrators' pre-established authoritative discipline practices as appropriate and effective for addressing student threats of violence. Theme 6 – School administrators demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance approaches to discipline for students who make threats of violence. Theme 7 – Participants' schools, on average, demonstrated a reduction of exclusionary discipline actions following participation in student threat assessment training.

Research Question 1: Self-Efficacy

I implemented qualitative data collection and analysis methods to examine changes to school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats after

participation in student threat assessment training. In analyzing participants' interview and

questionnaire responses, four themes related to Research Question 1 emerged:

1. Participation in student threat assessment training enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of

    school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

    appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of

    violence.

2. Collaboration within threat assessment teams enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of

    school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

    appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of

    violence.

3. Past experiences involving student threats enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school

    administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

    appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of

    violence.

4. Incident-specific circumstances often diminished self-efficacy perceptions of school

    administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

    appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of

    violence.

Theme 1 – Changes to Participant Self-Efficacy Perceptions after Training

Participation in student threat assessment training enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of

school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

Qualitative data generated during both research cycles support the finding that participants' self-

efficacy perceptions related to conducting student threat assessments improved after participating in the study's two interventions. Participants demonstrated self-efficacy improvements in two distinct areas:

1. Ability to prevent violence through student threat assessment procedures.

2. Ability to implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures for students who make threats of violence.

Prior to participating in student threat assessment training, participants generally lacked high self-efficacy perceptions regarding their ability to effectively address situations involving student threats of violence. When asked to reflect on her self-efficacy perceptions prior to participating in student threat assessment training, Megan Washington, assistant principal of FES, shared:

> *I really had no knowledge of how to approach situations involving student threats. I remember dealing with a threat my first year as an AP, and I was blindsided by how serious that situation became.*

This situation was Megan's first incident as an assistant principal involving a student making a threat of violence. The situation involved two fifth-grade female students. According to Megan, one of the students, Clara, was "infatuated" with the other student, Samantha, and wanted to be her only friend. Megan described what she remembers of this incident:

> *Clara would become enraged if she saw Samantha sitting beside another student or even talking with other classmates…Clara allegedly made several threats to harm or even kill Samantha if she saw her hanging out with anyone else.*

By the time reports of these threats were made to Megan, the situation had escalated into a very serious matter. Samantha's parents were very concerned for their daughter's safety; Clara's

parents were skeptical of the allegations against their daughter; and other students and their parents began to hear and spread misinformation about the threats.

Within a few days of receiving the report, Megan was feeling pressure from parents, district office personnel, and even local law enforcement officials to get this situation right. Having never been trained in student threat assessment practices, Megan had low self-efficacy perceptions in her ability to handle this situation. She muddled through as best she could and relied on her principal to take the lead. Megan remembered:

I was blown away by how big of a deal the whole thing became. I spent literally hours and hours interviewing students and teachers, talking with parents on the phone, and meeting with the district office. I spent a lot of time with our school resource officer…I never expected to have to deal with something like that. It really blew up.

Bobby Anderson, SMS assistant principal, shared Megan's sentiment. He remembered second-guessing himself as he worked through situations involving student threats. Prior to participating in the training, Bobby maintained a sense of uncertainty in addressing student threats. This uncertainty led to poor self-efficacy perceptions. Bobby shared:

Before the training, there was some wavering in confidence. There was always the concern of, "Am I doing what's right by this student? Am I doing what's best for the other students involved? Am I doing what's best for the school?"

To one extent or another, all six participants shared that prior to the July 29 student threat assessment training (Intervention 1), they maintained low self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence. They attributed this wavering of self-efficacy to a lack of training and to limited experience. Essentially, participants shared to varying degrees a sense of frustration at not knowing exactly how to proceed when addressing student threats of violence.

At the time of the study, all participants were relatively new in their positions with no participant having had more than four years of experience as a school administrator. Four of the study participants did have some experience in dealing with student threats as assistant principals prior to participating in student threat assessment training. However, the two participants with the least experience as school administrators, first-year assistant principals Linda Elisma (NMS) and Dennis Bell (HCHS), had no prior training in student threat assessments or experience in dealing with student threats. Linda Elisma shared:

> *Before the training, I had zero confidence in my ability to deal with student threats. I had really never even considered that dealing with threats would be a big part of my job. I guess I never really thought about it.*

The other first-year assistant principal participant, Dennis Bell, had over twenty years of experience as a school counselor prior to becoming an administrator. As a counselor, Dennis was adept at talking to students and deciphering how to question students to learn information to best support them. Even though Dennis had years of prior experience working with students, he shared his poor self-efficacy perceptions his ability to address student threats as an assistant principal. As a counselor, his job was to listen to students and provide resources for support. Now as an assistant principal, he realized that his role in addressing student threats would expand. He shared:

> *There's a difference in the counseling way and the administrative way. The administrative way is to neutralize the threat by keeping everybody in the building safe. Before, I would talk to the kid, and then get the AP if I thought anyone was unsafe. Now, I AM the AP.*

Participation in the July 29 student threat assessment training seemed to have a positive impact on all participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence. Regarding the training, Lauren Johnson (DES assistant principal) remarked:

> As much awareness as we can have, as much education and training on dealing with threats, then that just improves my confidence.

Lauren appreciated the training's framework for addressing student threats. She described this framework as providing step-by-step procedures for investigating incidents involving potential threats, determining whether or not implicated students posed a threat, and taking precautions to prevent violence. She shared that implementing such well-defined processes enhanced her self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats.

Likewise, Derrick Lincoln (NA assistant principal) cited the training's clear and well-defined processes as having a positive impact on his self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence. He stated:

> For me, it's all about the procedures. I am more confident now in my ability to handle a threat because I have well-defined procedures to fall back on. The training and the manual really solidified exactly what I need to do when I've got a kid saying he's going to hurt someone.

Derrick implemented the training immediately in his school. After the training, he revised his school's investigation forms to include interview questions from the student threat assessment manual. Derrick found confidence in knowing that he was implementing research-based procedures that have been shown to be effective in preventing violence. He added:

> I don't guess I can ever say with 100% certainty that nothing bad is going to happen. Kids are still unpredictable. But, I feel good about what I'm doing. I know that if I

implement what I learned during the training and follow the procedures in the manual,

I'm doing the best job I can do to keep my students safe.

The second intervention, the threat assessment student discipline module, was also effective in increasing participants' self-efficacy perceptions, particularly self-efficacy perceptions involved in addressing student discipline in situations involving student threats. In reflecting on the module's impact on her self-efficacy perceptions regarding student discipline, Megan Washington (FES assistant principal) stated:

I feel more confident in my ability to make the right decision for a student who makes a threat. Before the training, there was an instinct to be really hard on the kid no matter what. I didn't want to take any chances. But now, I feel better about taking my time to work through the process before I jump to the most extreme punishments.

Megan shared the importance of working within a student threat assessment team to thoroughly evaluate implicated students' actions and words along with any other relevant factors that the team uncovered during the threat assessment process. Megan recognized that the discipline component of student threat assessment is important and impactful. Regarding assigning fair consequences, she stated:

It's a big deal. You don't want to ruin a kid's life by being overly harsh, but at the same time, you've got to send a message that we're simply not going to tolerate students making threats. Who wants to come to a school that's unsafe? Nobody. We have to make sure our kids and our parents know that we take threats seriously. I now understand how to use discipline to do both: to watch out for the well-being of all students and to communicate that we have a safe school.

Megan gleaned information from the student threat assessment discipline module that she used to ensure that she treated students fairly while communicating that her school was safe. Her ability to implement these effective discipline practices enhanced her self-efficacy perceptions in dealing with student threats.

Derrick Lincoln's (NA assistant principal) sense of self-efficacy in managing the student discipline side of threat assessments was enhanced by the second intervention. His main take-away from the module involved the importance of not jumping to conclusions with student discipline prior to learning all the facts. He stated:

> *I think I've always been pretty good at getting to the bottom of what actually happened. Early on in an investigation, I've got a sense for what I'm probably going to end up doing with discipline. But, I've gotten some things wrong in the past. My main take-away from this module was that it's okay to take my time and get all the facts before making a decision about consequences. I never really felt free to do that before.*

Following participation in the study interventions, Derrick believed himself to be more efficacious in making discipline decisions for students. He attributed this enhancement to his self-efficacy perceptions to his learning the importance of taking his time and being thorough in gathering all the relevant information in the student threat assessment process before deciding on students' consequences.

All participants' self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence improved following participation in the study's two interventions. Regarding her sense of self-efficacy following the interventions, Lauren Johnson (DES assistant principal) stated:

> *I am very confident in my ability to deal with student threats. When I get a report of a student threatening to hurt someone, I know exactly what to do to get to the bottom of*

what's going on. Participating in threat assessment trainings has heightened my

awareness and given me tools to use to prevent violence in my school.

First-year assistant principal Linda Elisma (NMS assistant principal) shared that her self-efficacy perceptions involving addressing student threats increased substantially after participating in student threat assessment training. When asked to describe any changes to her self-efficacy perceptions, Linda replied:

I am definitely more confident now than I was before the training. I'm still relatively new

in my position, so I don't have a ton of experience in dealing with threats. But, I

understand how to use what I learned in training to determine the severity of a threat and

to decide about interventions and consequences.

Dennis Bell (HCHS assistant principal) did not hesitate when responding to questions about changes in his self-efficacy perceptions after participating in student threat assessment training. He stated:

I am very confident in my ability to prevent violence and in my ability to enforce

appropriate student discipline.

All six participants shared that their self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence improved after participating in the two study interventions. Specifically, self-efficacy perceptions improved among participants regarding their ability to prevent violence and their ability to implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

Theme 2 – Collaboration within Threat Assessment Teams

Collaboration within threat assessment teams enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of

school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.
Following each of the interventions, in response to questions intended to glean information about participants' general self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats, participants shared that they maintained varying degrees of high self-efficacy perceptions. When asked to provide reasons for these elevated perceptions, participants cited three main factors: participation in student threat assessment training, collaboration within threat assessment teams, and past involvement with student threat situations.

An especially important component of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines training was the necessity of working within multidisciplinary threat assessment teams to address student threats of violence. Other than participation in student threat assessment training, perhaps the most impactful contributing factor in enhancing participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence was participants' working within student threat assessment teams. During the qualitative data collection processes of both cycles, participants shared that working with colleagues in student threat assessment teams rather than having to address student threats in isolation was a major factor in enhancing participants' self-efficacy perceptions.

Hamilton County High School assistant principal Dennis Bell recognized the importance of including threat assessment team members from a variety of disciplines. Inclusion of these members enhanced his self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats because of his confidence in the team's collective ability to address the situation appropriately. He stated:

> *It* (working within a threat assessment team) *definitely boosts my confidence because*
>
> *everybody has a specialized area. If I bring in the mental health specialist, I know she's*
>
> *thinking about the mental health of that child. She's looking at the answers he gave to*

our questions and thinking about factors that I would never consider, even with my

counseling background. I've got the SRO here who knows the law. I'm not a policeman.

The student may say something that to me isn't a big deal, but to that officer, it's huge.

Dennis's statement revealed his understanding that appropriately assessing a student threat is a

complex task that requires a variety of individuals with different areas of expertise. Dennis

acknowledged that he would be unable to consider certain important elements of a threat

assessment on his own. His self-efficacy perceptions regarding his own competency in

addressing threats were enhanced by his ability to work within his school's threat assessment

team.

The student threat assessment training convinced Lauren Johnson (DES assistant

principal) of the importance of working within a team to address student threats. Prior to

participating in the training, Lauren believed it necessary to work through student threats of

violence in isolation. She shared:

When I dealt with threats in the past, I may have asked my principal for some advice, but

I was basically on my own. I didn't want to bother her (the principal) *or the SRO if I*

could avoid it. Trying to dot all the i's and cross all the t's by myself was stressful. It's

not that I couldn't ask for help. It's just that I didn't want to. I wanted to handle it by

myself. The training really opened my eyes and showed me that I owed it to the students

to involve others who knew things that I didn't. Once I realized this, the stress was lifted.

Lauren's acceptance of the importance of working within threat assessment teams enhanced her

self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats appropriately. She continued:

Our people (threat assessment team members) *are really good. I know when we pull*

together and work through a situation, we are going to get it right.

Theme 3 – Past Experiences Involving Student Threats

Past experiences involving student threats enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence. Participants with prior experience as school administrators shared that past experiences of addressing student threats enhanced their current self-efficacy perceptions. Four of the six participants had worked as school administrators for at least two years prior to the study. Two of the participants were beginning their first year as school administrators. All of the four experienced participants shared that they had dealt with situations involving student threats in the past. Although participants addressed these situations without the benefit of having undergone formal student threat assessment training, these past experiences contributed to enhancing participants' self-efficacy perceptions.

Regarding the impact of past experiences on her self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence, Megan Washington, a fourth-year assistant principal of Forrest Elementary School, shared:

> *When I think back on the threats I dealt with before the training, there are some things I wish I could do differently. But just going through those experiences and learning from the mistakes make me more confident in getting things right the next time.*

Megan cited her rushing to judgements regarding investigation conclusions and implementing overly-harsh student disciplinary consequences as two specific areas of her practice in conducting student threat assessments that she has adjusted after participation in the study interventions.

86

Likewise, Derrick Lincoln (NA assistant principal) recognized that having undergone the study interventions would have made a difference when dealing with prior student threat situations. However, having the experiences of working through those situations enhanced his self-efficacy perceptions. Derrick shared:

> *Before the training,* (when dealing with a student threat) *we fell back on our common practice of investigation, and we usually got it right. I think those practices were effective. When I've dealt with threats this year, the training has helped me know what questions to ask and what to look for, but being able to think back on incidents over the past few years has made a difference, too.*

Although, the four experienced participants cited their prior experiences as contributing factors for their high self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence, these experiences *alone* did not seem to enhance participants' self-efficacy perceptions much at all. However, when coupled with participation in threat assessment training, going through the process of dealing with student threats in the past enhanced participants' perceptions of efficacy in addressing student threats in the present. Bobby Anderson, a fourth-year assistant principal of Sampson Middle School remarked:

> *I definitely made mistakes* (in dealing with student threats before training). *Fortunately, everything worked out. Even though I did some things wrong, just knowing that I dealt with those* (threats) *and nobody got hurt gives me confidence moving forward with this* (student threat assessment guidelines).

Theme 4 – Incident-specific Circumstances Involving Student Threats

> *Incident-specific circumstances often diminished self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate*

87

student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence. Rather than enhancing participants' self-efficacy perceptions, various incident-specific factors had the effect of diminishing participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing student threats of violence. In addition to questions designed to learn more about participants' general self-efficacy perceptions, I included questions designed to gather information about participants' self-efficacy perceptions in specific student threat scenarios. I asked participants a series of questions surrounding two hypothetical student threat scenarios. I also asked participants to discuss one or more actual student threat situations they had encountered as school administrators. Often, in this line of questioning, participants expressed a decreased sense of self-efficacy due to a variety of incident-specific circumstances.

Qualitative data support the notion that following participation in the two threat assessment training interventions, participants generally believed themselves to be adequately efficacious in addressing student threats of violence. However, several participants shared diminished self-efficacy perceptions regarding specific threat assessment incidents due to unique incident-specific circumstances. A variety of contextual factors involved in any incident of a student threat of violence may positively or negatively impact participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing the incident. However, qualitative data conveyed primarily incident-specific circumstances that had the effect of diminishing participants' self-efficacy perceptions. Among others, such contextual factors included the severity of the threat, the background of the student making the threat, the number of individuals threatened, and the prevalence of knowledge of the threat within the community.

During the individual interviews for the first research cycle, I presented participants with two hypothetical student threat scenarios. The first scenario involved an angry student in a

classroom making a verbal threat to kill another student. In this scenario, the student who made

the threat was immediately remorseful and apologetic for making the threat. In the second

scenario, a student was found to be in possession of a "hit list" of classmate names listed under

the heading, "Scheduled to Die." When confronted with his list by school administration, the

student was quiet, detached, and not remorseful. In addition to these two hypothetical scenarios,

I asked participants to speak about a real-life student threat scenario they had recently addressed.

Participants' responses in addressing these three scenarios provided insight for how contextual

factors involved in student threats of violence influenced school administrators' self-efficacy

perceptions.

When confronted with each of the hypothetical student threat scenarios, all participants

communicated a high sense of self-efficacy in their ability to address the situations appropriately.

However, in general, participants' degree of confidence in their ability decreased when

discussing the second scenario, which was of a more severe nature than the first scenario.

When asked to compare her self-efficacy perceptions between the two scenarios, first-

year assistant principal of Nash Middle School, Linda Elisma stated:

> *The first one seems pretty straightforward. The student apologizes and accepts*
>
> *responsibility. Obviously, he was mad and said something in the spur of the moment that*
>
> *he regretted. The second one is trickier. The hit list is more of a premeditated threat. It*
>
> *seems more specific and more dangerous. I would want to pull in the team to really*
>
> *assess this situation…I still think I could handle this one, but I would want to take more*
>
> *time and rely on the expertise of the team. I wouldn't even feel the need to pull the team*
>
> *together for the first scenario.*

Background information pertaining to students who make threats was an important factor across all participants. Dennis Bell, the former counselor and current assistant principal of Hamilton County High School, communicated the importance of gathering information about the offending student's background in addressing the second scenario. He stated:

> *If I've got a kid with a hit-list, that's already at a level ten for me. Now, depending on what I know about this kid, it could get worse. Is the kid a loner? Is he an outcast? Does he get in fights? Does he have a record? I need to know who this kid is. The more red flags that show up, the more concerned I am about this kid trying to go through with his plan. This one is a big deal. I would need a lot of help to make sure we didn't miss anything.*

Several other participants shared their concern with the student's demeanor and emphasized the importance of reviewing the students' discipline record. Bobby Anderson (SMS assistant principal) shared:

> *It's my job to know our kids. We have about 500 students here, and I need to know a little bit about all of them. If a student makes a hit-list, chances are really good that he's already on my radar. At that point, it's a matter of reviewing his* (discipline) *record, talking with his parents, and putting together all the pieces to see what's really going on.*

Scenario 2, the hit list scenario brought to light the importance of the quantity of targeted individuals in influencing participants' self-efficacy perceptions. In this scenario, multiple students were threatened. Having multiple students named as potential victims in a threat of violence increased the severity of the threat and seemed to decrease participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing the threat. Regarding the number of targeted individuals, Derrick Lincoln (NA assistant principal) stated:

It's (number of targeted individuals) *definitely a factor* (in his self-efficacy perceptions regarding the hit list scenario). *If I've got a whole list of potential victims, that just makes the threat more severe. The more severe the threat, the more urgency I would feel to get it right and to get it right fast. That just adds to the pressure, which adds stress, which can make me doubt myself. That's where I've got to fall back on the training and the team.*

The assistant principal of Sampson Middle School, Bobby Anderson, echoed Derrick's sentiments regarding the impact of the number of potential targets in influencing his self-efficacy perceptions. Bobby discussed a student threat of violence that he addressed during his first year as an assistant principal. This incident involved a bomb threat written by a student on a restroom wall. This threat targeted everyone in the school. Bobby shared:

I remember thinking that whoever wrote this had just threatened over 500 people. Just the sheer volume of people now involved in this incident made the whole thing a really big deal…It was my first year, and I knew enough to know that I didn't know what I was doing. Throw in a situation involving the whole school, and I was really unsure how to even start.

Perhaps the most influential incident-specific factor in diminishing participants' self-efficacy perceptions was an elevated prevalence of community awareness of and interest in a specific student threat of violence. When I asked participants to describe incidents of student threats that they had encountered in their time as assistant principals (both before and after participating in student threat assessment training), participants described a variety of situations. Some situations were relatively minor and easily resolved without much, or in some cases any, community knowledge. However, other cases (like the case involving Jonathan described in

Chapter 1) became very high-profile and were discussed by members across the school

community and larger community outside the school. Some incidents were reported on in the

local newspaper and widely discussed on social media.

Each participant who experienced a high-profile student threat incident shared that the

public's knowledge and interest in the threat heightened the severity of the situation and

diminished participants' self-efficacy perceptions in addressing the threat appropriately. Megan

Washington (FES assistant principal) and Derrick Lincoln (NA assistant principal) spoke at

length about two such cases that they experienced. Megan's case involved a bomb threat and

Derrick's case involved verbal threats by a student to "shoot up the school." Knowledge of both

incidents became widespread within the community. Administration at both schools felt

immense pressure to reassure the community by handling these situations appropriately and

quickly. Megan remembers:

> *Everything else took a backseat for at least a week. Everyone knew, or thought they*
>
> *knew, about the bomb threat. Of course, there was a lot of misinformation out there.*
>
> *But, everyone had an opinion. Everyone had questions. It seems like we were second-*
>
> *guessed at every turn.*

Derrick's incident seemed to consume the minds of many people within the community.

Parents and other adults debated heatedly on social media about the school's responsibility to

keep students safe. Several students missed school because of the threat. A few students even

transferred to other schools. Derrick shared:

> *People were out of control. I got on Facebook and read what people were saying about*
>
> *me, about Dr. Foster* (the principal)*, even about the sheriff. Very little of what they*
>
> *thought they knew was actually right. It would have been laughable if it wasn't so*

serious…We actually lost students to other schools. A handful of kids, like four or five,

actually transferred to Tolliver Academy (a local private school).

In addition to participation in student threat assessment training, participants' self-efficacy perceptions regarding their ability to address student threats of violence were either enhanced or diminished by collaboration within student threat assessment teams, past experiences involving student threats, and various incident-specific circumstances. While training, collaboration, and past experiences seemed to have positively impacted participants' self-efficacy perceptions, certain incident-specific circumstances appeared to have had the effect of harming participants' self-efficacy perceptions. Most notable among these circumstances were the severity of threats, backgrounds of students making threats, quantity of individuals targeted by threats, and prevalence of knowledge of the threat within the community.

Research Question 2: Student Discipline

I used both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods to investigate how school administrators' student discipline practices in situations involving students' making threats of violence changed after participation in the study's two interventions. In analyzing participants' interview and questionnaire responses along with pre- and post-Intervention 1 student discipline data from across the district, three themes related to Research Question 2 emerged:

1. Participation in student threat assessment training reinforced school administrators' pre-established authoritative discipline practices as being appropriate and effective for addressing student threats of violence.

2. School administrators demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance approaches to discipline for students who make threats of violence.

3. Participants' schools, on average, demonstrated a reduction of exclusionary discipline actions following participation in student threat assessment training.

Theme 5 – Reinforcement of Authoritative Discipline Practices

Participation in student threat assessment training reinforced school administrators' pre-established authoritative discipline practices as being appropriate and effective for addressing student threats of violence. During interviews for the Research Cycle 1, all participants cited the role of addressing student discipline as one of the primary functions of their positions as assistant principals. Of the six participants, four participants had between one and three years of experience as assistant principals prior to participating in student threat assessment training. Each of these four participants had prior experience in handling student discipline, including discipline for students who made threats of violence. These participants shared that prior to participating in the research study's interventions related to student discipline, they already practiced many of the authoritative discipline practices within their schools.

Two of the participants were first-year school administrators. These novice assistant principal participants shared that although they had no experience as assistant principals in charge of student discipline prior to participation in the student threat assessment training, the student discipline components of the study's interventions aligned with other student discipline training they had received in their preparation programs for becoming assistant principals.

The four experienced assistant principal participants shared that the student threat assessment training, particularly the student discipline module, reinforced their pre-established authoritative discipline practices. Each of these participants noted the training's emphasis on thorough investigations to gather relevant facts before deciding upon fair and appropriate consequences for students who make threats. Participants shared that they already operated

94

within authoritative discipline systems wherein, in their roles as assistant principals, participants investigated allegations of student misconduct and assigned fair, appropriate, and progressive consequences. Lauren Johnson (DES assistant principal) shared:

The training really affirmed that the way I approach student discipline is the right way to do it. I never assign blanket consequences for students who mess up. I try to always get to the bottom of what happened before deciding what to do. I owe it to students to be fair with them. It's the only way they will learn.

Bobby Anderson (SMS assistant principal) agreed that the training seemed to reinforce practices for student discipline already in place at his school. Bobby stated:

I feel like I already do a lot of that (discipline practices addressed in training module). *When a kid threatens someone, I don't automatically send him home. Now, I will suspend him while I investigate if I believe I need to* (suspend the student) *to keep everyone safe. But, I don't just automatically kick him out of school or anything like that. He gets due process just like everyone else.*

The study's two first-year assistant principal participants did not have prior experience as assistant principals in addressing student discipline. However, both Linda Elisma (NMS assistant principal) and Dennis Bell (HCHS assistant principal) shared that the student discipline training that they have received prior to the study interventions aligned with the study interventions. Linda shared:

Since this is my first year as an assistant principal, I really don't have any student discipline experience to fall back on. The training I received before becoming an AP emphasized a lot of what the module talked about: conducting thorough investigations,

95

avoiding out-of-school suspension and expulsion, and using discipline as a teaching tool

rather than solely as punishment.

Likewise, Dennis Bell shared that training he received prior to becoming an assistant

principal aligned with what the student discipline threat assessment module taught. Specifically,

Dennis acknowledged his understanding of the importance of providing support for students who

made threats of violence. He remarked:

I've never been one to just hammer kids when they do wrong. As a counselor, I spent

over twenty years looking for ways to support students. I think bring a lot of those skills,

a lot of the support and positive reinforcement skills, to my job as an assistant principal.

The way I do discipline aligns with what the module teaches.

All participants affirmed their agreement with the authoritative student discipline

methods described in the student threat assessment training interventions. These methods

described in the module reinforced participants' pre-established beliefs in the importance of fair

student discipline practices. Experienced assistant principal participants shared that the student

discipline principles and methods taught during the student threat assessment training

interventions reinforced participants' pre-established authoritative student discipline practices.

Novice assistant principal participants received training prior to participation in the action

research study interventions that aligned with the student discipline training provided in the

interventions.

Theme 6 – Harmful Effects of Zero Tolerance Discipline Practices

School administrators demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of zero

tolerance approaches to discipline for students who make threats of violence. However, all

participants maintained their belief in the importance of being able to remove a student who may

pose a threat from the school for an appropriate amount of time. Participants believed that

exclusionary measures such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and alternative

school placement were appropriate in certain circumstances, but certainly not all circumstances,

involving student threats of violence. Specifically, participants believed exclusionary measures

were necessary for ensuring the safety of other students when a threat assessment team

determined that a student either posed a threat or that the students' actions were of such an

extreme nature as to make that student's continued presence at school a source of disruption to

the learning environment. While participants communicated their belief in the necessity of such

practices, participants did not hold to a zero-tolerance approach to implementing these measures

for all students who made threats, regardless of circumstances. Participants emphasized the

importance of conducting thorough investigations into circumstances surrounding alleged threats

of violence and considering investigation findings in determining appropriate discipline

measures for students who have violated school rules.

Derrick Lincoln (NA assistant principal) agreed with the student threat assessment

training regarding zero tolerance discipline practices as being ineffective and harmful for

students. He stated:

> *At the end of the day, our job is to keep students safe. That's our number one*
>
> *responsibility. Sometimes, that may mean we have to keep a student under close*
>
> *supervision in our ISS room while we work on an investigation. It may also mean that we*
>
> *have to tell a kid, "Sorry, buddy. You can't go to school here anymore." We're*
>
> *fortunate that our district has a great alternative school program that serves students*
>
> *who, for one reason or another, aren't being successful in traditional schools…I would*

never want to kick a kid out of school entirely with nowhere for him to go. That's not

good for anybody.

Linda Elisma (NMS assistant principal) appreciated the components of the threat assessment training that addressed the negative and inequitable effects of zero tolerance policies on minority students. She shared:

The research is clear that zero tolerance policies negatively affect students of color at a

much greater rate than white students. I appreciated the training for including the

research on zero tolerance policies and race. It's something that all educators need to be

aware of.

Bobby Anderson agreed with the importance of avoiding zero tolerance measures in assigning consequences without first conducting fair and thorough investigations. He also agreed with administering fair and appropriate consequences. He did not, however, shy away from exclusionary consequences for students who made threats when he believed such consequences were warranted and necessary to protect others. He stated:

If I can't say with absolute certainty that a student who makes a threat doesn't actually

pose a threat, then it's my job to make sure that student isn't around potential victims in

my school. It's my job to suspend that student out of school until we can secure a seat for

him at the alternative school where he can be more closely monitored.

Interestingly, Bobby's school, Sampson Middle School, was the only secondary participant school where student the number of exclusionary discipline actions increased after training (See Table 7).

Quantitative survey data generated during Research Cycle 2 support the finding that the student threat assessment training influenced participants' perceptions of the harmful effects of

zero tolerance discipline practices. Participants completed a pre-survey and a post-survey in conjunction with the second intervention, the online training module concerning student discipline practices within a student threat assessment model. Likert-scale survey items addressed participants' perceptions of zero tolerance discipline policies. The six participants' average rate of agreement decreased on each item from the pre-survey to the post-survey. Participants demonstrated the greatest average change (1.8) on survey item 3, "We need zero tolerance policies/practices for student threats of violence." The smallest change from the pre-survey to the post-survey was for item 1, "The disciplinary practices at my school are effective." Item 1 is also the item with the highest average measure of agreement among the participants on the pre-survey (8) and on the post-survey (7.8). Survey results indicate that Intervention 2, the student discipline module, influenced participants' understanding and beliefs regarding student discipline, particularly regarding zero tolerance discipline practices. Participants demonstrated greater understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance discipline practices. Survey results are shown in Figure 6.
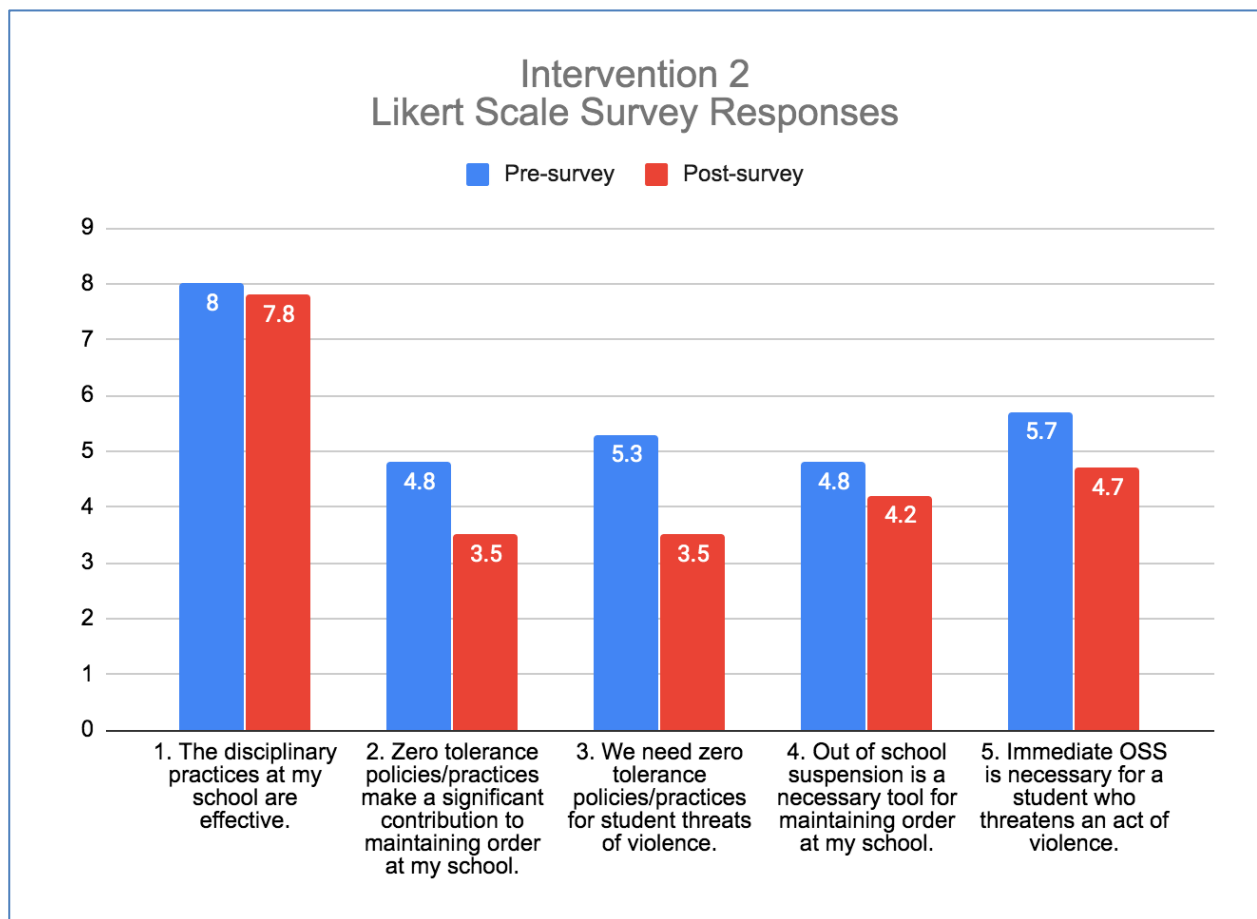
Figure 6: Intervention 2 Likert Scale Survey Responses

All participants agreed with the student threat assessment training components that dealt with zero tolerance student discipline practices and policies for students who make threats. Participants recognized the importance of following threat assessment procedures to identify and implement the most appropriate and effective measures for preventing violence and supporting students who make threats. Participants, however, maintained their belief that exclusionary discipline practices such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and placement of students at the alternative school are sometimes necessary for protecting students and for carrying out fair disciplinary consequences for students who make threats.

Theme 7 – Reduction of Exclusionary Discipline Actions across Participants' Schools

Participants' schools, on average, demonstrated a reduction of exclusionary discipline actions following participation in student threat assessment training. A comparison of quantitative student discipline data from Semester 1 of 2018 (pre-student threat assessment training) to data from Semester 1 of 2019 (post-student threat assessment data) revealed several areas of change. While changes reflected in these data may result from a variety of factors related to this study's interventions or not, it is worth noting that Intervention 1, the July 29 student threat assessment training session, is the only training session involving student discipline to be attended by all school administrators within the system to take place between the time period of these two data sets. While I do not draw any direct correlations between this study's interventions and the change in the number of discipline infractions and actions noted below, one should consider these changes within the context of the district's involvement in this study and its interventions, which address the harmful effects of exclusionary disciplinary practices.

An examination of the data revealed the total number of discipline incidents for the Hamilton County School System decreased by 90 from 726 incidents reported during Semester 1 of 2018 to only 636 incidents reported during Semester 1 of 2019 (See Table 7). Exclusionary discipline actions decreased within the district. Assignments of ISS decreased by 73 incidents from 600 in 2018 to 527 in 2019 (See Table 7). Also, OSS assignments decreased by 36 from 99 students assigned OSS in 2018 to 63 students assigned OSS in 2019 (See Table 7). Figure 7 shows numbers of district-wide student discipline actions from Semester 1 of 2018 and Semester 1 of 2019.
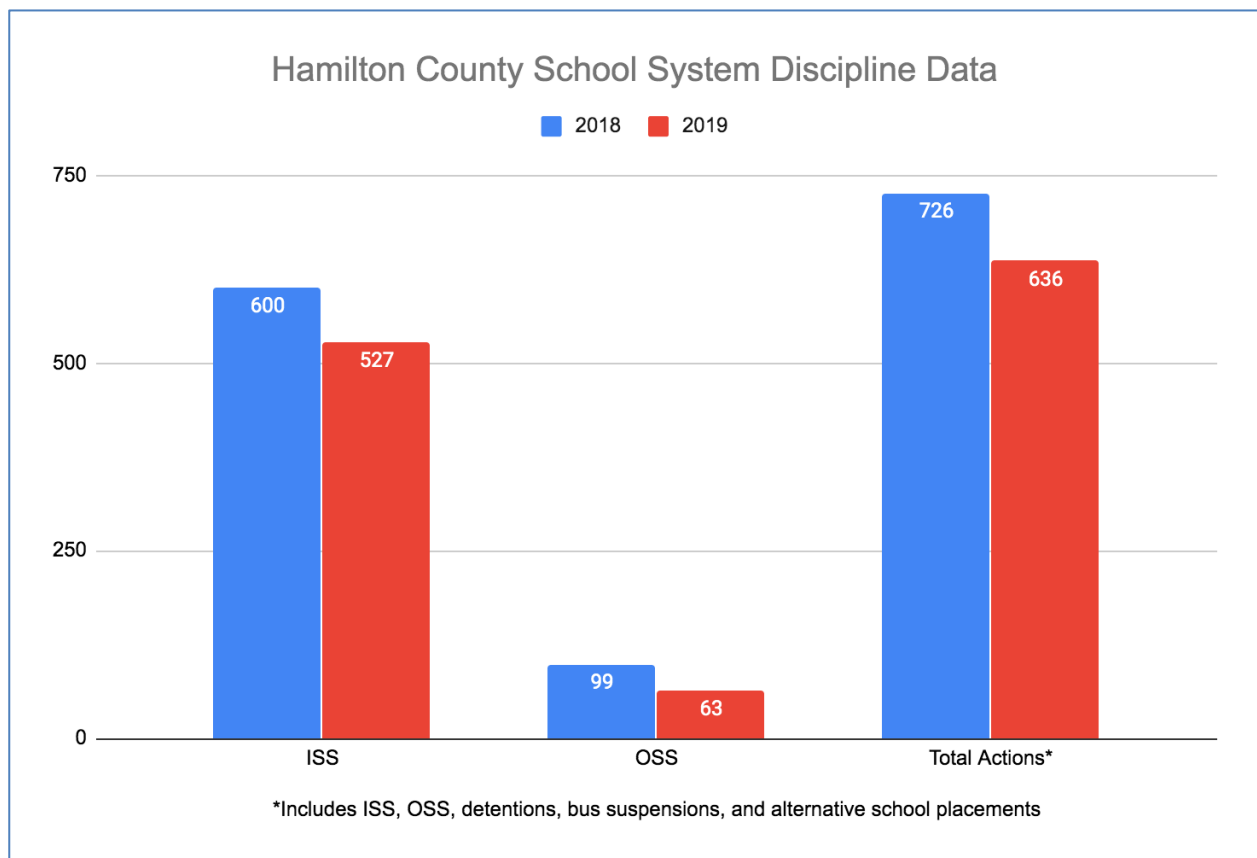
Figure 7: Hamilton County School System Discipline Data

The assistant principal in charge of student discipline was the same individual for both data sets (2018 Semester 1 and 2019 Semester 1) in 4 of 6 schools of the study participants. However, Nash Middle School and Hamilton County High School assistant principals in charge of student discipline, Linda Elisma (NMS) and Dennis Bell (HCHS) are new in their positions as of Semester 1 of 2019. Although these two administrators were not in their current positions during Semester 1 of 2018, I decided to include their schools' data in Table 7, which shows discipline data from the six participants' schools along with the districtwide data.

In examining student discipline data from the six student participants' schools, Nelson Academy (NA) had the most dramatic decrease of student incidents and exclusionary discipline

actions. Total Semester 1 exclusionary discipline assignments decreased by 91 events (74 ISS

and 17 OSS) from 2018 to 2019 (See Figure 8). Sampson Middle School showed an increase of

In-school suspension actions (See Figure 9). Considering school levels, high schools decreased

across all three measured areas (# ISS actions, # OSS actions, and # discipline incidents).

Middle schools decreased only in OSS actions, and elementary schools increased across the three
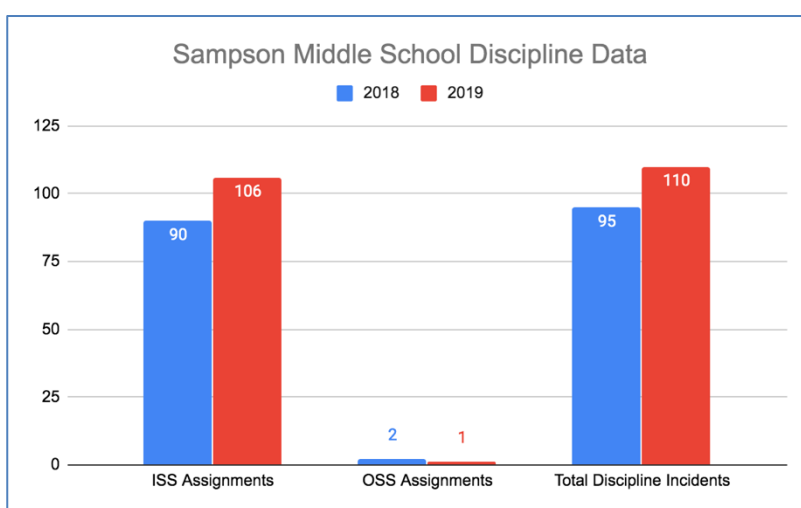
measured areas (See Table 7).

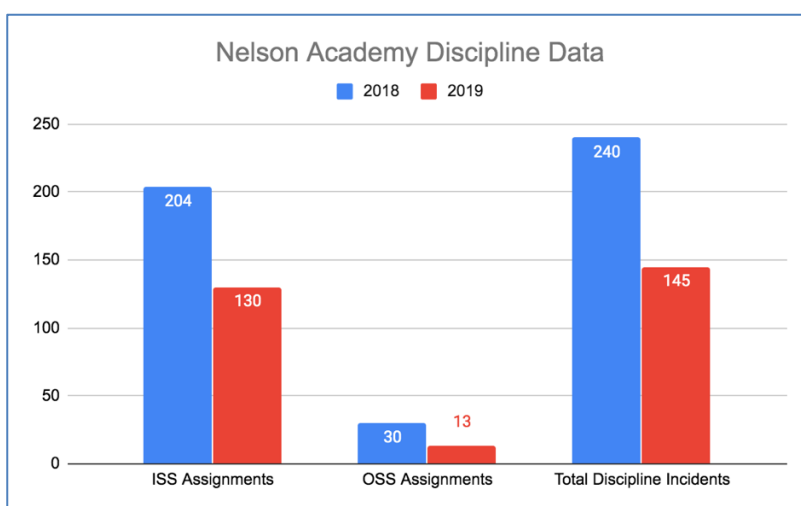

Figure 8: Sampson Middle School Discipline Data

Figure 9: Nelson Academy Discipline Data

Table 7

Comparative Student Discipline Data

	Elementary				Middle				High				District	
	DES		FES		SMS		NMS*		NA		HCHS*		HCSS	
Year	18	19	18	19	18	19	18	19	18	19	18	19	18	19
# ISS actions	1	2	0	1	90	106	82	70	204	130	146	111	600	527
Change – school	+1		+1		+16		-12		-74		-35		-73	
Change – level	+2				+4				-109					
# OSS actions	1	6	6	3	2	1	5	3	30	13	19	14	99	63
Change – school	+5		-3		-1		-2		-17		-5		-36	
Change – level	+2				-3				-22					
# discipline incidents	2	8	6	4	95	110	88	83	240	145	177	135	726	636
Change – school	+6		-2		+15		-5		-95		-42		-90	
Change – level	+4				+10				-137					

*Study participants at NMS and HCHS were not school administrators during Semester 1 of 2018.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Addressing student threats of violence can be a complex and challenging function of any

school administrator's job. Due to the complexity and challenges involved in addressing student

threats of violence, particularly considering the potential for tremendous harm that may result

from inaction or insufficient action, some school administrators may lack adequate self-efficacy

perceptions regarding their ability to properly address student threats of violence (Cornell et al.,

2004). Likewise, the student discipline component involved in addressing student threats of

violence is often fraught with obstacles and variables that school administrators must consider

when deciding upon fair and appropriate consequences for students who make threats of

violence. From an abundance of caution and an inaccurate understanding of the appropriateness

and effectiveness of zero tolerance discipline practices, school administrators may tend to rely on

zero tolerance, exclusionary discipline practices when addressing situations involving student

threats of violence. School administrators within the Hamilton County School System

demonstrated tendencies to experience these obstacles associated with addressing student threats

of violence. Therefore, the action research team carried out this action research case study in

order to address problems associated with addressing student threats of violence.

Analysis and Conclusions

The purpose of this action research case study was to address the research problem by

implementing a student threat assessment training program and assessing how participation in

the program changed school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline

practices for incidents involving student threats of violence. I have based the following

conclusions on my analysis of the action research case study findings along with connections to

the existing literature.

Conclusion 1 – participation in student threat assessment training may

enhance school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions regarding their ability to prevent

violence and to implement fair and appropriate student discipline. Prior to participating in

the study's interventions, participants expressed varying degrees of low self-efficacy perceptions

in their ability to properly address student threats of violence. This low sense of self-efficacy

among school administrators existed, at least in part, as a result of the lack of training in how to

address student threats of violence. Study participants' condition prior to participation in the

interventions reflected the widespread sense of frustration and uncertainty of school

administrators surrounding how to address student threats of violence (Cornell et al., 2004;

Cornell, 2018).

Self-efficacy perceptions among participants regarding their abilities to properly address

student threats of violence were enhanced by participation in student threat assessment training

(Mathieu, Martineau, & Tannenbaum, 1993). Following the interventions, participants

communicated improved self-efficacy perceptions regarding the ability to use student threat

assessment strategies to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate disciplinary

consequences when addressing student threats. The student threat assessment training and

support provided participants with the means by which to develop the necessary skills to address

student threats effectively. Possessing these skills increased participants' abilities to address

student threats with confidence that their actions would result in positive outcomes (Bandura,

1977).

Conclusion 2 – participation in student threat assessment training may reinforce school administrators' prior understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance discipline practices. A zero-tolerance approach to student discipline may result in lost instructional time, decreased student achievement, increased achievement gaps, increased school disruptions, increased chronic absenteeism rates, and increased perceptions of schools as unsafe (Cornell et al., 2011; Curran, 2016; Curran, 2019; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Losen et al., 2015). Schools that adhere solely to exclusionary consequences for students who make threats may actually exacerbate the potential for violence by withholding supportive interventions from students who may pose a threat (O'Toole, 2000). Conversely, schools that implement authoritative discipline practices that align with student threat assessment training as presented in this study's interventions promote a positive school culture. These schools may experience fewer of the detrimental effects that accompany zero tolerance approaches to student discipline (Cornell et al., 2009).

All study participants increased their knowledge and understanding of the negative and often unintended consequences associated with zero tolerance discipline practices. This increased knowledge aligns with findings from the literature regarding the effects of student threat assessment training on participants' knowledge and understanding of zero tolerance student discipline practices (Allen et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2011; Cornell et al., 2012).

Conclusion 3 – student threat assessment training may benefit school administrators at all K-12 school levels. Students at all levels of K-12 schools are prone to making threats of violence (Cornell, 2018; Cornell et al., 2004). Therefore, school administrators across school levels should be prepared to address these threats appropriately in order to ensure safety and promote positive school climates. Participation in student threat assessment training may

prepare school administrators at all K-12 school levels to address student threats of violence. Study participants at all levels expressed that they benefitted from the student threat assessment training and that their schools are safer places with improved cultures because of the practices implemented as a result of the training. Quantitative student discipline data demonstrated the most dramatic shifts away from exclusionary discipline practices took place at the secondary level, particularly in high schools. While school administrators at all levels of K-12 education may encounter situations involving student threats of violence, secondary school administrators may benefit most from student threat assessment training.

Implications

Study findings and conclusions are specific to the Hamilton County School System, the site of the action research case study. However, implications from this study may extend beyond the study context and provide useful information for practitioners in other contexts. Potential implications and recommendations for future research are included here.

Recommendations for Practice

School administrators across the country value ensuring school safety and promoting positive school cultures (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Addressing student threats of violence may prove vexing for many school administrators (Cornell, 2018). As they attempt to navigate through these challenging situations, administrators may maintain poor self-efficacy perceptions, doubting their abilities to ensure safety and promote positive school cultures through fair, effective, and supportive student discipline practices. Such may be the case especially for those school administrators who attempt to address student threats of violence without having first received training in student threat assessments.

The literature has established that implementation of student threat assessment procedures in schools has the potential to positively influence schools' safety and culture (Cornell, 2018; Cornell, et al., 2011; Fein et al., 2002; National Threat Assessment Center, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Along with these important benefits of student threat assessment implementation in schools, participants in this action research case study demonstrated additional benefits of participating in student threat assessment training. Specifically, participants experienced improved self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats of violence, and participants gleaned greater appreciation and commitment to authoritative discipline practices in addressing student threats of violence.

Considering the various benefits of participation in student threat assessment training, schools and districts may consider the following recommendations for practice:

1. Provide student threat assessment training for K-12 school administrators who may chair student threat assessment teams.

2. Ensure a research-based and student-centered model of student threat assessment training, such as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.

3. Ensure student threat assessment training that includes authoritative discipline measures as a component of the training.

4. Consider rethinking any existing zero tolerance practices pertaining to students who make threats of violence.

Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers may choose to continue to investigate changes to school administrator self-efficacy perceptions and discipline practices as they relate to addressing student threats of violence. Future research endeavors in this work may address replicating results of this action

research case study. One may be interested to investigate how findings related to research problems, questions, and interventions similar to those addressed here would result in contexts both similar to the Hamilton County School System and in contexts that are different. Additionally, researchers may seek to investigate how a prolonged action research study of this type, with additional research cycles and interventions would influence study findings.

Summary

The purpose of this action research case study was to address the research problems by implementing a student threat assessment training program and assessing how participation in the program changed school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and student discipline practices for incidents involving student threats of violence. Two research questions drove the study's interventions and methods:

1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to addressing student threats of violence change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after participation in interventions designed to provide student threat assessment training and support?

The action research team carried out a series of research cycles to address each of these research questions. For each cycle, the team's actions included planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Herr & Anderson, 2014). At the conclusion of this process, the study had revealed seven findings:

1. Participation in student threat assessment training enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and

appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

2. Collaboration within threat assessment teams enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

3. Past experiences involving student threats enhanced self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

4. Incident-specific circumstances often diminished self-efficacy perceptions of school administrators regarding their ability to prevent violence and implement fair and appropriate student discipline measures in situations involving student threats of violence.

5. Participation in student threat assessment training reinforced school administrators' pre-established authoritative discipline practices as being appropriate and effective for addressing student threats of violence.

6. School administrators demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance approaches to discipline for students who make threats of violence.

7. Participants' schools, on average, demonstrated a reduction of exclusionary discipline actions following participation in student threat assessment training.

Upon careful reflection of these findings, three conclusions emerged. Conclusions include the following items:

1. Participation in student threat assessment training may enhance school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions regarding abilities to prevent violence and to implement fair and appropriate student discipline.

2. Participation in student threat assessment training may reinforce school administrators' prior understanding of the harmful effects of zero tolerance discipline practices.

3. Student threat assessment training may benefit school administrators at all K-12 school levels.

Considering these conclusions, school and district leaders may wish to consider the following recommendations:

1. Provide student threat assessment training for K-12 school administrators who may chair student threat assessment teams.

2. Ensure a research-based and student-centered model of student threat assessment training, such as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.

3. Ensure student threat assessment training that includes authoritative discipline measures as a component of the training.

4. Consider rethinking any existing zero tolerance practices pertaining to students who make threats of violence.

Future research endeavors involving implementation of student threat assessment training for K-12 school administrators may address replicating results of this action research case study. Researchers may investigate findings related to school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions and discipline practices related to addressing student threats of violence in contexts both similar to the Hamilton County School System and in contexts that are vastly different. Additionally,

researchers may seek to investigate how a prolonged action research study of this type, with

additional research cycles and interventions would influence study findings.

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Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

June 26, 2019

Dear Walker Swain:

On 6/26/2019, the Human Subjects Office reviewed and approved the following submission:

Title of Study:	Effects of Student Threat Assessment Training and Implementation on Principals' Self-efficacy Perceptions and Student Discipline Practices
Investigator:	Walker Swain
Co-Investigator:	Charles Adam Bagwell
IRB ID:	PROJECT00000125
Funding:	None
Review Category:	FLEX - Exempt 7

Should you modify this study in the future, please be aware that not all modifications will require review by the IRB since it was determined to be "Exempt." For more information on modifications that will require review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation, please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2, you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" button.
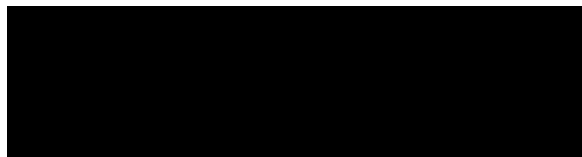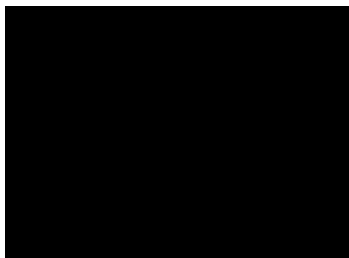
In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Please close this study when it is complete or submit a Progress Report by 6/25/2024, whichever comes first.

Sincerely,
Benilda P. Pooser, Ph.D., CIM
Director, Clinical Research Compliance

Appendix B – Study Site Approval Letter

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To Whom It May Concern:

Adam Bagwell, Principal at ████████████ Middle School and a graduate student of the
University of Georgia, has made a request to complete a research project using research data
from the school district. The ████████████ School System grants authorization to Mr.
Bagwell to recruit participants and conduct his study entitled Effects of Student Threat
Assessment Training and Implementation on Principal's Self-efficacy Perceptions and Student
Discipline Practices within the ████████████ School System setting.

Mr. Bagwell's research proposal meets all requirements of the ████████████ School
System's procedures on graduate work.

Sincerely,

████████████████
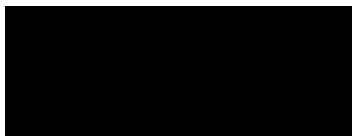
Director of Human Resources

Appendix C – University of Georgia Study Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

Effects of Student Threat Assessment Training and Implementation on Principals' Self-efficacy Perceptions and Student Discipline Practices

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researchers below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Dr. Walker Swain*
University of Georgia
walker.swain@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: *Adam Bagwell*

Study Purpose:

We are conducting this action research study to learn more about changes to school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions, student discipline practices, and school climate perceptions following student threat assessment training and implementation.

The study will address the following research questions:

1. How do school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions with respect to addressing student threats and threatening behaviors change after student threat assessment training and implementation?
2. How do school administrators' student discipline practices change after threat assessment training and implementation?
3. How do school administrators' perceptions of authoritative school characteristics change following implementation of student threat assessments?
4. What will an action research team learn about changes in principals' self-efficacy perceptions and discipline practices following student threat assessment training and implementation?

Study Procedures:

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you are a school administrator in the Habersham County School System. As a part of a district-wide student safety initiative, you will participate in student threat assessment training on July 29, 2019. You will implement student threat assessments during the 2019-2020 academic year. I would like to invite you to participate in this study to help us learn more about the impact of student threat assessment training and implementation on school administrators' self-efficacy perceptions, student discipline practices, and school climate perceptions.

If you agree to participate in this study:
- I will collect information about any changes to the following perceptions and practices before and after student threat assessment training and implementation:
  - Your self-efficacy perceptions regarding addressing student threats and threatening behaviors.
  - Your student discipline practices.
  - Your school climate perceptions.

- I will ask you to complete:

- Brief pre- and post-surveys regarding school climate. Surveys may be completed electronically or with paper and pencil. Each survey will take fewer than five minutes.
- From UGA IRB's Policy on Internet Research: "This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed."
- A one-on-one interview at your school. The interview may take between 45 minutes and one hour. Not all study participants will participate in an interview.
- A focus group interview with 3-8 other study participants at a school within Habersham County. The focus group interview may take between one hour and two hours. Not all study participants will participate in a focus group interview.

- I will follow up in one month by email.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty.

Potential Risks of Research:

The greatest risk involved with this research is that of a breach of confidentiality. In order to protect the identities of all participants and the school district, I will use pseudonyms for individuals and the school district. All paper files will remain in a locked filing cabinet, and all electronic files will remain on a password-protected computer. I will retain all research files for a minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study.

Participation in focus groups creates an additional layer to protecting participants' confidentiality. Even though I will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Every effort will be made to avoid questions that create discomfort. However, the surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews may include questions that make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Information collected during this research study will not be used or distributed for future research.

Potential Benefits of Research:

Your responses may help us understand more about any positive or negative consequences associated with student threat assessments. Specifically, your responses may shed light on school administrators' experiences with student threat assessments and resulting effects on self-efficacy perceptions, student discipline practices, and school climate perceptions.

Audio Recordings:

I will audio record all one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews in order to ensure accuracy for data collection. Due to the nature of focus groups, I will be unable to accommodate potential participants of focus groups who do not consent to audio recordings. Therefore, if individuals wish to participate in the study, but do not consent to audio recordings, they will participate only in an interview that will not be audio-recorded. They will not participate in the focus group. I will destroy audio recordings at the conclusion of the action research study.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have interviews audio recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

_____I do not want to have interviews recorded.
_____I am willing to have interviews recorded.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Walker Swain at 706-542-2214, walker.swain@uga.edu, or you may contact the co-investigator, Adam Bagwell at ████████ abagwell@██████████. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix D – Intervention 1 Interview Items

Name:

Date:

- Elementary School   Middle School   High School

- Principal   Assistant Principal

- Years in Current Position:

- Years in Educational Leadership:

- Years in Education:

1. Tell me how you came to be involved in school leadership.

2. What is your current role in school leadership regarding school safety and student discipline?

3. Describe any training you received in preparing you to fulfill your current obligations regarding school safety and student discipline.

4. In five years, what do you expect to be doing in your work as an educational leader?

5. When you first began to work directly with school safety and student discipline, what did you know about dealing with student threats and threatening behaviors?

6. 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 an act of violence…Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat and the circumstances surrounding it in order to uncover any evidence that indicates the threat is likely to be carried out" (Cornell, p. 1)

    a. Based on this definition, how frequently do you conduct threat assessments in your current position?

7. Has anything changed about student threats during your time as a school leader?

8. In general, when you encounter a situation involving a student making a threat of violence, how confident are you in your capacity to properly address the threat?

    a. What factors influence your degree of confidence?

9. In general, describe your process for conducting threat assessments.

10. Threat assessment scenarios:

    a. Scenario 1: An angry student tells a classmate, "I'm going to kill you." The student is brought to your office. Student immediately accepts responsibility and apologizes. No discipline history. How do you proceed?

        i. How confident are you in your ability to handle this situation successfully?

        ii. What would be a successful outcome? An unsuccessful outcome?

    b. Scenario 2: A student is found with a list of students under the heading "Scheduled to die." Student is sullen and quiet. He appears angry and not remorseful. How do you proceed?

        i. How confident are you in your ability to handle this situation successfully?

        ii. What would be a successful outcome? An unsuccessful outcome?

    c. Scenario 3: A student writes the following on a bathroom wall, "I am going to blow up this school!" This event creates a major disruption.

        i. How confident are you in your ability to handle this situation successfully?

        ii. What would be a successful outcome? An unsuccessful outcome?

    d. Scenario 4: A student posts a video of himself on snapchat. In the video, he points a gun toward the camera and says, "Bye, bye Losers"

        i. How confident are you in your ability to handle this situation successfully?

        ii.   What would be a successful outcome? An unsuccessful outcome?

11. Take me back to an experience you had with a student making a threat or demonstrating threatening behaviors. What happened?

12. Before participating in threat assessment training, what did you know about student threat assessments?

13. What are the kinds of things you would like to continue to learn about student threat assessments?

14. Tell me about the policies that guide implementation of student threat assessments in your school.

15. Describe general discipline practices and patterns at your school.

16. Describe any changes in student discipline patterns you have observed since you started in your current position.

17. Zero tolerance policies are "severe and uncompromising punishment…that rely heavily on the use of exclusionary practices like suspension and expulsion" (Curran, p. 320)

    a.   Based on this definition, describe the status of zero tolerance policies at your school. Are there any such policies or practices in your school, and, if so, what are they?

18. How do zero tolerance policies or practices come into play in the threat assessment process?

19. Did the student threat assessment training have any influence on how you approach student discipline when addressing student threats of violence?

20. What types of additional training or support would be useful for you in your work of conducting student threat assessments?

Appendix E – Intervention 2 Data Collection Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions:

- Answer questions 1-5 below before viewing the module.
- Access module here http://www.schoolthreatassessment.com/
- Enter the code vm6dbt
- Click "Begin" under the Discipline Module.

Please answer the following 5 questions **before** viewing the module. Select a rating of 1-9.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 5 = Not Sure
- 9 = Strongly Agree

1. The disciplinary practices at my school are effective.

          1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

2. Zero tolerance policies/practices make a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.

          1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

3. We need zero tolerance policies/practices for student threats of violence.

          1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

4. Out of School Suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining order at my school.

          1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

5. Immediate OSS is necessary for a student who threatens an act of violence.

          1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

Please answer the following 5 questions **after** viewing the module. Select a rating of 1-9.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 5 = Not Sure
- 9 = Strongly Agree

1. The disciplinary practices at my school are effective.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

2. Zero tolerance policies/practices make a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

3. We need zero tolerance policies/practices for student threats of violence.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

4. Out of School Suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining order at my school.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

5. Immediate OSS is necessary for a student who threatens an act of violence.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

1. What are some things that would need to be in place for you to effectively prevent violence through the threat assessment process?

2. How confident are you in your ability to prevent violence through the threat assessment process? Why?

3. Describe any changes in your confidence in your ability to prevent violence through the threat assessment process since your training in the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.

4. Describe discipline practices at your school. In your response, consider use of OSS/ISS, restorative justice, PBIS, etc.

5. What are some types of fair and appropriate discipline measures for students who make threats of violence?

6. How do you decide which discipline measures to implement for students who make threats of violence?

7. How confident are you in your ability to implement fair and appropriate discipline measures for students who make threats of violence? Why?

8. Describe any changes in your confidence in your ability to implement fair and appropriate discipline measures for students who make threats of violence during your time as a school administrator.

9. Did the information in this module influence how you think about student discipline for students who make threats of violence? If so, how? If not, why not?

10. Describe a threat assessment that you have completed this year (if applicable). Include information about violence prevention measures and discipline measures.