

ASSOCIATION HELPS SCHOOLS SEE WARNING SIGNS FOR GUN VIOLENCE



BY

/ FEB 26, 2018

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After the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, a new association set out to help schools stop gun violence before it happens. This month's school shooting in Parkland, Florida, lent fresh urgency to its mission to help schools adopt a system of early intervention.

For more than a decade, the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association has partnered with K-12 schools and colleges worldwide to help prevent tragedies like the Valentine's Day shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School that killed 17 people. NaBITA, which was established after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, provides training and certification in a system of early intervention.

The basic system involves convening cross-functional teams at schools and on campuses that may include professionals from law enforcement, counseling, or psychology and student conduct or discipline, among others. On campuses, for example, staff from residential life or academic support will also be a part of the team.

NaBITA espouses a three-part system. “We gather information from the community,” said Brian Van Brunt, executive director of NaBITA. “We apply a risk rubric that tells us how concerned we should be, then we develop intervention strategies. ... Our interventions really line up with the severity of what we’re seeing in front of us.”

Practically, it works like this: A student tells a professor that he’s going to kill himself, and a few peers also see that he’s posting threats about gun violence on social media. The professor and those peers would report that behavior to the school’s team, who would then try to assess the student by asking questions. Among them: Is he involved in clubs or extracurriculars? Does he have friends? How are his grades?

After rating his behavior on a risk rubric, which goes from mild to extreme, the team would come up with a plan to address his behavior, whether it’s meeting with law enforcement or connecting him with a counselor.

“These teams are not punitive; they are preventative,” Van Brunt said. “We’re not looking to get people in trouble, we’re not looking to lock people up, we’re not looking to expel folks—but when we notice or identify someone who is a concern, we’re trying to find ways to connect them to services.”

NaBITA also believes that having a formal process in place will help prevent future tragedies. Not only does it help schools identify troubled kids and connect them with help, but it also documents each incident and allows schools to track students’ behavior and others’ complaints over time.

Although there’s a lot of talk about whether violence in schools is a mental health issue or a gun issue, Van Brunt said it’s both.

“It’s a mental health issue in that people who are suicidal are going to be more of a risk to carry this out, and it’s a gun issue because if you give easy and unfettered access to weapons to individuals who are disturbed like this, then the likelihood of the attack becomes higher,” he said. “This idea of a coordinated approach ... is what we’ve found is effective in reducing this violence.”