



# CSPV POSITION SUMMARY

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## Student Profiling

In the aftermath of the recent suburban school shootings, educators and community members alike are struggling with the possibility of further violence. When innocent students and teachers die on school campuses, school administrators look for ways to prevent such events from occurring again. In an effort to identify violence-prone students before a violent incident erupts, administrators are trying to identify the early warning signs of violence.

The identification of potentially dangerous students, or student profiling, has become a source of reassurance for some administrators and teachers, as well as parents. Checklists and computer software programs have emerged as tools to assist in the identification of potentially violent students. However, it is important to understand that while these systems are intended to protect students, there is a potential for harm in labeling persons as dangerous.

To date, no scientific research has been conducted to determine the efficacy of profiling, and evidence of the success of past profiling efforts by law enforcement has not been encouraging. Despite this, profiling seems to remain popular with law enforcement authorities and educators alike. The checklists and software that are currently available do not facilitate a means for finding help and resources to address the students' needs beyond the identification. There is a real danger in profiling if there is a high false positive rate and no mechanism in place for acting on the early warning signs. [A high false positive rate refers to a high proportion of those fitting the profile who never become involved in violence.]

In *Early Warning Timely Response*, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education outline the early warning signs of violence but emphasize the principle of "do no harm" when conducting any type of student assessment. The identification of early warning signs should not be used as a process to label children.

The FBI has published the common traits of the suspects in the last 6 multiple school shootings. However, caution is given that none of these characteristics alone necessarily describes a potential shooter. As the FBI points out, the number of incidents is so small it is not possible to predict future events from these characteristics alone. The FBI also states that a thorough, accurate behavioral assessment is complicated, time-consuming and requires experience in criminal investigative analysis. In July 1998, the U.S. Secret Service issued a guide regarding threat assessments. In it they outline the fact that there is no profile for an attacker or an assassin. "Attackers and near-lethal approachers do not fit any one descriptive or demographic profile or even several descriptive or demographic profiles."

In an effort to address the needs of students at risk of violence, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence suggests establishing a group of professionals (Social Support Team) to receive referrals from school staff, parents and others who work with children. This team should be composed of professionals who possess the training and expertise necessary to identify and evaluate warning signs, explore the likelihood of potentially dangerous situations, and then make collective recommendations for treatment or intervention programming. The members of the team may include school psychologists, counselors, social workers, school resource officers, healthcare and mental health professionals, local law enforcement, and a legal advisor. The Social Support Team should include at least three non-school professionals who are able

to contribute objective assessments due to their removed relationship with the school. Through information sharing, team members can work together to help identify high-risk students more accurately than a simple checklist or a student profile. Team members can then make referrals within the schools or to appropriate services within the community.

Several school systems presently have referral teams that might function similar to a Social Support Team. However, few are as comprehensive as the Social Support Team, in that they are not comprised of experts from the community that have the capacity to share information vital to making legitimate recommendations for treating potentially violent students and even to enforce those recommendations.

One of the lessons learned from the recent school shootings is that, though some persons did in fact notice peculiar behaviors or overhear disturbing remarks made by the perpetrators, and were aware of threats, no one person or group had access to all of this information. If there had been a way for students, teachers, parents, or others to report those isolated comments or actions to an authority for follow-up with other prevention specialists, who would maintain confidentiality, then perhaps the whole picture would have been more readily discernable and imminent warning signs of violence would have been detected.

There is some value in the use of checklists and student profiling if the information is used responsibly. However, student profiling alone is only a Band-Aid for the wounds our school communities are suffering today. A change in school climate that includes a Social Support Team as well as the support of the entire community in promoting positive youth development, is the best means to approach this societal problem.

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