

## **MID-VALLEY STUDENT THREAT ASSESSMENT SYSTEM: MAKING SCHOOLS SAFER THROUGH A MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATION [9505]**

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### **Introduction**

School violence is a serious problem because of the obvious danger involved and the fear and tension it causes for students and staff alike. In 1998, the truth of this statement became a harsh reality when Oregon experienced the anguish of a school shooting. In response to this tragedy, public concern for the safety of our children created enormous pressure for schools and public safety agencies to prevent, intervene, and, if necessary, respond effectively to future tragedies. In 1999, the Oregon Legislature passed legislation that mandated schools to form alliances with law enforcement, mental health, and juvenile justice agencies to build policies and procedures that would promote safe and caring school climates. Consequently, our communities invested substantial planning time and resources to building collaborative systems to maintain school safety. This paper will describe the Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment Team (STAT) protocol designed specifically to prevent and defuse threats to the physical and emotional safety of students and adults in our schools.

Figure 1 summarizes the Oregon Legislation requiring a multi-agency response to situations that present threats to school safety.

Figure 1. Oregon Legislation on Multi-agency Coordination Requirements for Safe Schools

### **Oregon Legislation**

**1999 Oregon Laws, H.B. 3047** Encourages school districts to form a safe school alliance composed of schools, law enforcement agencies, juvenile justice agencies, and district attorneys to promote safe school environments.

**1999 Oregon Laws, H.B. 3444, Chap. 576**

Requires school boards to develop policies that manage students who threaten violence or harm in public schools. States that the policies adopted by a school district shall include staff reporting methods and shall require immediate removal from the classroom any student that threatens physical harm. Schools must place removed students in an alternative setting and give a mental health evaluation before returning to the classroom. Requires parent notification.

### **STAT Goals and Objectives**

The Student Threat Assessment Team (STAT) is a unique partnership between judiciary, law enforcement, schools, mental health, and juvenile corrections to promote safe school environments. The primary goal of

STAT is to develop and oversee quality implementation of a multi-agency protocol that outlines response procedures for potentially violent situations in schools. The STAT protocol ensures an immediate and systematic response to youth who have committed or pose a serious threat to commit a violent behavior toward another student or teacher. Moreover, STAT developers hoped to reduce over-reactive school responses to Zero-Tolerance Policies that resulted in an inflated number of students identified as potentially dangerous and, in turn, an over reliance upon expulsion to resolve school safety concerns.

## Objectives

1. Identify and assess threats of potentially harmful or lethal behavior and determine the level of concern and action required.
2. Organize resources and strategies to manage situations involving students that pose threats to other students and/or staff.
3. Maintain a sense of psychological safety among our students, teachers, and parents.
4. Reduce incidents of school violence.
5. Increase support for students who engage in violence to encourage school engagement, increase protective supports (inhibitors), and decrease aggression.

The Mid-Valley Partnership Student Threat Assessment protocol provides screening and assessment procedures for students who commit or may commit aggression or violence directed at other people. STAT procedures guide the investigation of potential violence by identifying circumstances and variables that may increase risk for student aggression. Moreover, the STAT process assists schools and agency partners to develop a management plan that minimizes risk factors and increases protective factors for the student at school, his or her home, and in the community.

It is important to note that STAT, like all assessment procedures, does not predict future violence nor is it a foolproof method of assessing an individual or group's risk to harm others. Likewise, STAT is not designed for students with suicidal, sexual acting out, or fire-setting behaviors unless they are doing so as an act of violence intended to seriously harm other people. In these situations, team members should always use the STAT protocol in conjunction with risk assessment procedures specifically designed to address fire-setting, suicide, or sexual offending behaviors.

## **Collaboration: Critical Features for Development and Sustainability**

The foundation for development, institutionalization, and sustainability of the Student Threat Assessment Team protocol was and continues to be a community collaboration of key stakeholders committed to school safety. The MVP collaboration is an interdependent stakeholder group characterized by high trust levels, well-developed communication systems, and open decision-making with equal input from all partners. STAT collaboration team members include representatives from schools, law enforcement, juvenile corrections, mental health, district attorney's office, and community resource agencies. The process for building the Mid-Valley Partnership (MVP) collaboration embraced essential features critical for achieving fundamental changes in the way agencies share information, resources, student referrals, and responsibility for public safety. Like most community collaborations, the MVP Student Threat Assessment Team encountered multiple barriers to integrating services, for example:

- lack of available services,
- differences in agency philosophy and mission,
- lack of policies to address issues related to record sharing, confidentiality, and information storage,
- lack of technology and resources to support information needs, and
- funding limitations

The process for overcoming these barriers and building a sustainable, functional community collaboration required development of an infrastructure to accomplish systems change and implementation of a strategic planning process to ensure the collaboration maintained a disciplined approach to completion of the STAT protocol.

**MVP Collaboration Infrastructure.** The MVP process for developing the infrastructure required for systems included five critical components with proven effectiveness in achieving change in social service systems (SAMHSA, 2003). The following paragraphs describe these components.

#### Choose a Change Agent or “Champion”

The “change agents” selected for the MVP urban and rural geographic areas were school employees who enjoyed strong relationships with their school and community partners. Both “change agents” were knowledgeable about his community, respectful of agency differences, and deeply committed to development of a school violence protocol.

#### Build a Coalition of Key Stakeholders

The next step in the process was selection of key representatives from school administration, law enforcement, mental health, juvenile justice, judicial, and community agencies. The representatives selected were knowledgeable about their own agencies policies, practices, and funding structures. Equally important, the collaboration partners allowed their commitment to development of a functional Student Threat Assessment Team to supersede their individual interests as needed. Finally, key stakeholders had the decision-making authority necessary to conceptualize and approve changes in practice required by the STAT protocol.

#### Engage in Strategic Planning

The MVP collaboration engaged in a disciplined and task-oriented approach to developing the STAT protocol. The steps of the MVP strategic planning process follow:

1. Assess resources and define the issues. The development process for STAT began with the help and example of the Marion County Threat Assessment Team that provides assessment and consultation about threats against public figures, threats in the workplace, domestic violence, and stalking. Next, the STAT development team conducted a thorough survey of current research and best practices. They also sought input from local practitioners who assessed or encountered potentially violent situations involving youth on a regular basis within their community.
2. Create a shared vision: Marion and Polk County organized the Student Threat Assessment Team (STAT) in response to Oregon Legislative mandates and community concern regarding school violence. Each of the agencies involved agreed to address school violence as a community responsibility and that sharing resources through collaboration was the best way to fulfill this responsibility.
3. Develop and implement a plan. After several focus groups, research, and extensive training, the members of this team developed a protocol that identifies and helps manage potentially violent circumstances in schools and local communities. Fundamental to the STAT protocol are procedures to investigate, intervene, and manage potential threat situations using the resources of a multi-disciplinary team.
4. Monitor progress and refine process. The final step of the strategic planning process is development of a monitoring system that includes clear and measurable outcomes, a data tracking system, and a formal evaluation process to refine the STAT protocol. The MVP evaluation process analyzes school, law enforcement, and student change data. Additionally, the MVP collaboration gathers survey and qualitative feedback from school administrators, agency, and community representatives.

## **Description of the Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment Team STAT**

STAT is a unique collaboration between judiciary, law enforcement, schools, mental health, and juvenile corrections to promote safe school environments. The STAT protocol ensures an immediate, systematic response to youth who *make* or who *pose* a threat to commit violent behavior toward another student or teacher. Unlike many risk assessment protocols, STAT relies upon a multi-level, team-based decision-making process to determine the seriousness of the *threat* situation as opposed to profiling students who appear to have characteristics that predict future aggression. A guiding principle embedded in the MVP protocol is the belief that no single person has the skills required to conduct a comprehensive Student Threat Assessment. Moreover, no single person should have the sole responsibility to assess the potential risk of a student threat situation and ensure sufficient interventions to protect the safety of students and school personnel are in place.

The MVP STAT process is a multi-gated system that gathers the different perspectives of a multi-disciplinary team to complete a Level 1 Screening and a multi-agency team to complete a Level 2 Assessment. This two-level process helps to maximize efficient use of school and community resources by determining the intensity of intervention(s) required to neutralize the threat situation and ensure the student receives the support he or she needs. See Figure 2 for a schematic describing the Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment protocol.

School administrator investigation. The first “gate” or step in the STAT protocol occurs when a student engages in an act of violence or implied threat of violence. Immediately following the incident or reported concern, the school administrator investigates the concern to determine if the concern requires a Level 1 Screening.

Considerations for determining if a Level 1 Screening is warranted include:

- threat, aggression, or violence that is specific to a particular student with motive and plan
- threat, aggression, or violence is causing considerable fear or disruption to school activity,
- there is continued intent to carry out threat,
- a history of threats, aggression, or violence,
- staff, parent, or student bystanders have a heightened concern regarding the potential threat or violent situation,
- administrator is unable to determine if a situation poses a risk to students, school personnel, or members of the community.

Administrators should not refer those threat situations for a Level 1 screening that prove to be unfounded following the initial school investigation. Generally, the school administrator assigned to coordinate the STAT response in each school building is also responsible for managing discipline concerns.

### **Level 1**

Typically, a multi-disciplinary team at the school level typically initiates the STAT procedure. The STAT Level 1 multi-disciplinary team includes a school administrator, school counselor, law enforcement officer, and a school staff who knows the student. The parent is included whenever possible; however, the timeliness of the Level 1 team meeting is critically important and may prevent direct parent involvement in the Level 1 meeting. If the parent can not attend the meeting due to schedule conflicts or other barriers, the school should assign a Level 1 team member to gather relevant information from the parent and to keep the parent informed about the process and team recommendations. At Level 1, the multi-disciplinary school team gathers and analyzes relevant information related to the threat or potentially violent situation.

Figure 2 (next page) presents a flowchart of the MVP Student Threat Assessment Process.

Specifically, the Level 1 Team hopes to determine if the situation involves reactive violence i.e., an immediate, emotionally-based response to a given situation or provocation. or targeted violence. In these situations, the Level 1 multi-disciplinary team gathers the necessary information to develop and implement school-based interventions that will prevent further aggressive behavior. For example, the school may develop one or more of the following supports for the students: (a) “no harm” contract, (b) arrange daily check-ins with an informed staff, (c) increase school supervision, (d) conduct a Functional Behavioral Assessment, (e) implement a Behavior Intervention Plan, and (f) referral to family resources agencies.

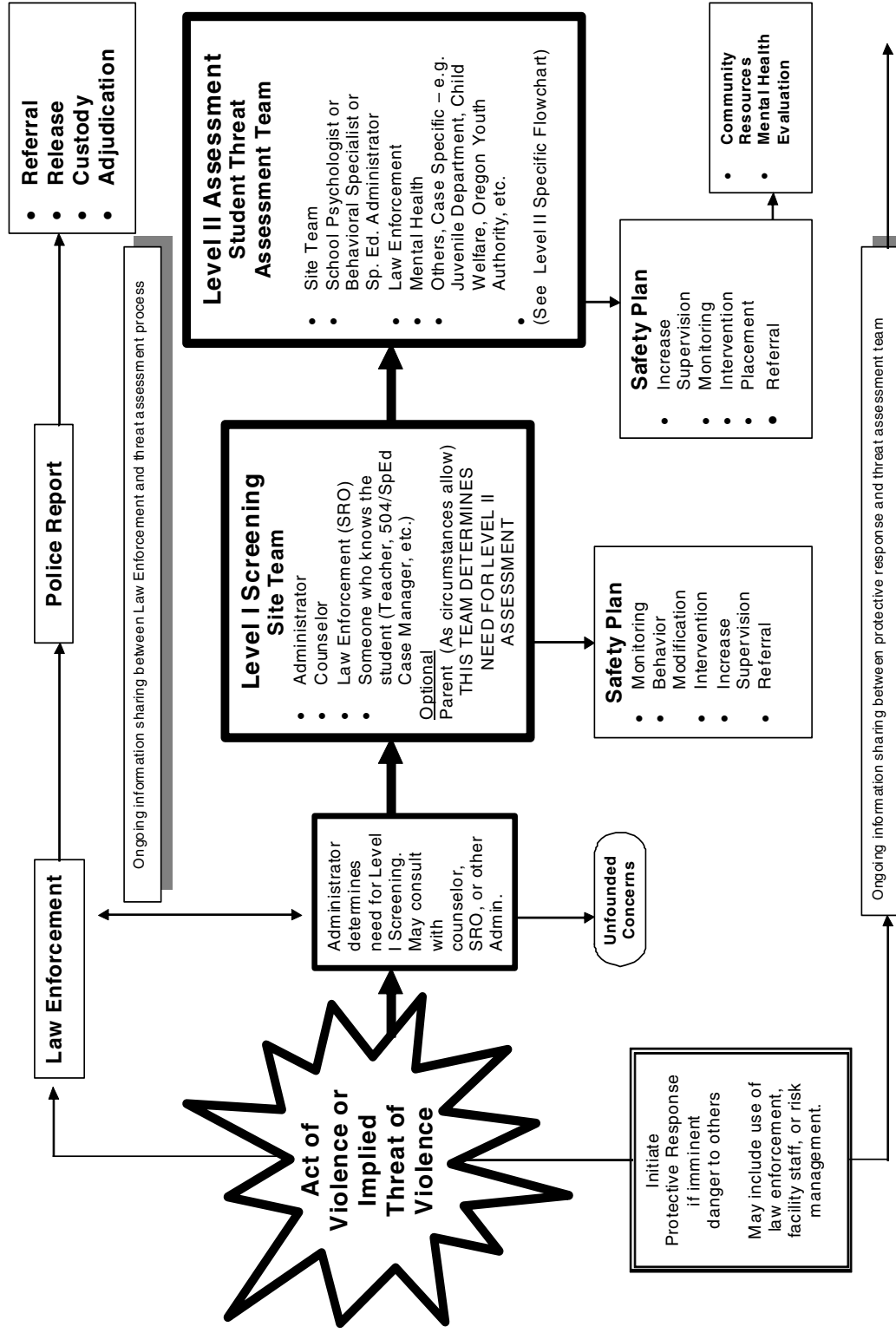
The Level 1 multi-disciplinary team should refer the student to a STAT Level 2 Assessment if the school-based team is (a) can not confidently complete the information required for the Level 1 screening, (b) concerned about their ability to manage the threat situation within their building or the student’s behavior, and (c) exploration of community resources is needed to assist in supervision.

Table 1 shows risk level and criteria definitions for the Mid-Valley STAT assessment.

Table 1. Risk Level and Criteria Definitions

Targeted Violence or Aggression	Reactive Violence or Aggression
<p><b>LOW OR MINOR RISK FOR HARM</b>                      threat is implausible or lacks detail                      context of threat suggests that action is unlikely                      little history of serious risk factors or dangerous behavior</p>	<p><b>LOW OR MINOR RISK FOR HARM</b>                      responsive to interventions                      little to no history of affective hostility or violent reaction</p>
<p><b>MODERATE RISK FOR HARM</b>                      indication of some planning or premeditation that may include a short detailed plan                      no strong indication of preparatory steps                      student appears to desire help</p>	<p><b>MODERATE RISK FOR HARM</b>                      interventions are effective but student is resistive and hostile                      requires extra staff effort to manage student’s aggressive behavior</p>
<p><b>HIGH RISK FOR HARM</b>                      threat appears to pose serious danger to others                      threat is direct, specific, detailed and plausible</p>	<p><b>HIGH RISK FOR HARM</b>                      student impulsively and effectively reacts in aggressive or violent ways                      interventions are frequent and requires considerable effort to manage student’s aggressive behavior</p>
<p><b>IMMINENT RISK FOR HARM</b>                      threat situation is clearly close to dangerous and student has possession or access to weapons</p>	<p>student is unresponsive or has limited response to intervention</p>

Figure 2. Mid-Valley Student Threat Assessment Flowchart



## Level 2

The Level 2 STAT *process* ensures that experienced mental health, law enforcement, juvenile department, and education staff review the threat assessment to determine interventions that may include but are not limited to (a) preventing the student’s access to guns or other weapons, (b) increasing supervision and monitoring across school, home, and community settings, (c) creating opportunities for the student to participate in positive school and after school activities, and (d) linking the student to mental health and other appropriate community resources. Consequently, STAT members develop interventions that will increase school safety as well as protective factors (inhibitors) that promote the student’s success at school, home, and in their community. Finally, the STAT protocol ensures multi-agency monitoring of the student’s progress and timely implementation of selected student support strategies. This monitoring system consists of regularly scheduled multi-agency STAT meetings that review implementation of recommended supports, school status of the student, probation/parole status if appropriate, updated law enforcement information, and relevant information from community agencies.

## Local Evaluation

The primary goal of STAT is early identification of potent threats and violent behaviors to protect school safety. In short, the purpose of STAT is to prevent an event that may or may not happen as opposed to finding students who present characteristics that predict a high likelihood of violent behavior. Consequently, the outcomes for the STAT are twofold. First, schools will identify, assess, and implement adequate support strategies that will reduce behaviors, prevent expulsion and improve the identified student’s school functioning. Second, schools will perceive STAT as a beneficial and accessible system important maintaining safety in their schools.

### Student Demographics and Outcomes

Originally, the planners developed the Mid-Valley Partnership Student Threat Assessment for implementation in a large urban school district. During the past three years, the Mid-Valley Partnership expanded STAT to an additional 13 rural school districts across two Oregon counties. To date, MVP STAT services are available to 135 schools in Marion and Polk counties.

Table 2 summarizes student demographic information for MVP STAT schools

Table 2. Student Demographic Information for MVP STAT Schools

Demographic Characteristic	Marion County		Polk County	Total
	Urban	Rural	Rural	
<b>Student population</b>				
Elementary	17,727	7,982	2,793	28,502
Middle	9,014	4,222	1,524	14,760
High school	11,854	5,130	2,074	19,058
Free/reduced lunch	45 percent	58 percent	40 percent	48 percent
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
White	23,124	10,975	4,830	39,929
Black	533	80	62	674
Hispanic	8,380	5,915	1,128	15,423
American Indian	609	235	135	979
Asian	1,216	172	94	1,482

STAT training and dissemination.

The local evaluation administered a paper and pencil survey to school principals, vice principals, and school counselors to gather information about the MVP STAT protocol. Overall, 152 school staff (71 school administrators, 75 school counselors, and 6 teachers) from 75/135 or 56 percent of the schools returned the survey. The MVP STAT survey asked respondents to complete three semi-structured questions reporting (a) their involvement with STAT screening and assessment procedures, (b) the number of students who received Level 1 Screening services at their school, and (c) the number of students referred for STAT Level Two Assessments. Table 3 summarizes survey information regarding staff training and involvement with STAT procedures.

Table 3. Level of School Participation in Mid-Valley STAT Services (in percent)

STAT Survey Item	School Administrator	School Counselor/Teacher
None	3	9
Training only	6	6
Level 1 Screening only	17	26
Level 1 and Level 2 Assessments	73	54
Missing response	1	4

Table 4 shows demographic information for students referred for STAT services.

Table 4. Demographic information for students referred for STAT

Characteristic	Urban Referrals		Rural Referrals	
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 1	Level 2
Grade Level				
Elementary	82	8	<sup>a</sup>	3
Middle School	32	22	<sup>a</sup>	11
High School	76	18	<sup>a</sup>	12
Male	190	48	<sup>a</sup>	23
Female	0	0	<sup>a</sup>	3
Special Education	<sup>a</sup>	18	<sup>a</sup>	15
Probation/Parole	<sup>a</sup>	12	<sup>a</sup>	8
Total	190	48	n/a	26

<sup>a</sup> Information unavailable for local evaluation.

The behavioral situations that caused schools to refer students for Level 2 Assessments vary in type, intensity, and risk level. Staff, students, or community members reported both verbal and written threats to students. These threats may have occurred between students, directly to school staff, on the internet, notes, or in written diaries of the students. Additionally, a subgroup of student referrals had engaged in potentially dangerous behavior e.g., choking, fighting, bringing weapons to school, or storing bomb-making materials in lockers.

The local evaluator reviewed the cases of 35 urban students who received Level 2 monitoring for one or more years. Table 5 summarizes characteristics of 35 urban students who received STAT Level 2 assessment, interventions, and monitoring. Table 5 summarizes types of threat situations and current status of students who received STAT Level 2 services.

Table 5. Threat Situations and Outcomes for STAT Level 2 Student Referrals

Characteristic	Urban
<b>Type of Threat</b>	
Targeted Aggression	25/35 or 71 percent
Reactive Aggression	10/35 or 28 percent
Weapons/bombs	18/35 or 51 percent
<b>Current Status</b>	
Maintained in School	27/35 or 77 percent
Expelled	2/35 or 6 percent
Moved	3/35 or 9 percent
Unknown	2/35 or 6 percent

#### Perceptions of School Staff

The MVP STAT Survey asked questions regarding the relative value of STAT services to the school respondents as well as pragmatic questions regarding referral, timeliness of service, and utility of the STAT reports. The survey asked respondents to use a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, and 1 = strongly disagree) to rate their perception of Student Threat Assessment Team services. Overall, school administrators and counselors strongly endorse the STAT protocol. The vast majority of respondents believed STAT plays an important and valuable role in maintaining safety in their schools and provided valuable support for referred students. Nearly all the respondents stated STAT procedures were respectful of the student and his or her family. Equally important, 95 percent stated that the assessments provided timely information essential for support, referral, and service decisions. Finally, over 90 percent of the survey respondents believed that MVP STAT procedures increased coordination with both law enforcement and mental health services have improved student functioning. The anecdotal information from respondents reported high satisfaction with “the collaboration between school and agency specialists” as well as the ability to “access community resources, networking, getting variety of ideas and perspectives of potential help and services available.” Some administrators noted that the forms did not “fit as well at the elementary level” and wished the “outside agencies had more ‘teeth’ for acting out students.” Table 6 summarizes the MVP Student Threat Assessment Team Survey Results.

Table 6. MVP Staff Survey Results for STAT Services

Survey Question	Agree to Strongly Agree (percent)	Strongly Disagree to Disagree (percent)	No Response (count)
STAT procedures have a positive effect on the safety in our schools	94	6	10
STAT procedures effectively identify potentially dangerous students	94	6	10

Survey Question	Agree to Strongly Agree (percent)	Strongly Disagree to Disagree (percent)	No Response (count)
STAT Level One screenings provided information essential for support, discipline, and placement decisions for students	92	8	10
Level One screenings are effectively conducted	94	6	12
Level One screenings resulted in adequate support for referred students	92	8	13
STAT Level TWO assessments were done in timely manner	96	4	44
STAT Level TWO assessments provide information essential for support, discipline, and placement decisions of students	93	7	43
STAT Level TWO consultations were helpful	94	6	43
STAT Team staff support was timely and helpful	95	5	19
STAT procedures are respectful and supportive of families	96	4	17
STAT procedures increased efficient coordination with law enforcement	93	7	21
STAT procedures increased efficient coordination with mental health services	91	9	17
Overall, STAT fulfills a valuable and important role in our school	95	5	17

## Summary

The MVP STAT services provide support to school in managing dangerous and potential threats to their school. The system in place today includes a site-based Level 1 screening completed by a trained multi-disciplinary team at the student’s local school. Students who present a serious risk to the safety of others and/or who require more resources than the local school can provide receive a comprehensive and in-depth Level 2 assessment. The STAT process provides a framework for effective communication with outside agencies such as law enforcement, juvenile department, mental health, and child welfare. STAT also provides clear procedures for school and agency staff to ensure an immediate and coordinated response to violence or threats of violence in school. More importantly, the STAT process helps school and multi-agency teams develop interventions that will assist the student to remain engaged in positive school experiences. Despite this, it is important to remember that STAT is not a “stand alone” violence prevention strategy. Instead, STAT is most effective when schools use this protocol in conjunction with universal violence prevention strategies that create a safe and caring school culture.

## References

- Miller, E. (1996). *The evolution of integration: Federal efforts from the 1960s to present day*. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services.
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