

# STOP the Threat: A School's Mission for Mental Health Promotion

*Texas has experienced the highest number of incidents related to gun violence on school campuses of any state since 2013 (Every Town for Gun Safety, 2020). To address this concern, schools have started augmenting their mental health programs. In the 2018–2019 school year, the state education agencies and independent school districts in Texas were eligible to apply for Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grant through the Department of Justice. Utilizing a descriptive case study design, this study examined the perception of a single school counselor regarding promoting mental health programs to reduce school violence at a school that received a STOP School Violence grant. The findings indicated there are several strategies school districts can implement to minimize school violence threats.*

**Keywords:** *mental health, public schools, violence, training*

**According to a** National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillete et al., 2018) report, 3% of students in U.S. secondary schools reported being afraid of other students, while 10% of teachers reported being threatened by students during the 2015–2016 school year. Despite the report revealing a decrease in the number of students reporting harm or violence by another student between 1995 to 2015, students and teachers continue to feel threatened by other students within their school. To address school threats, state and national offices are continuing to create initiatives to provide school districts with funding support to implement evidence-based safety programs within school districts. The increased funding to address threats and prevent school violence within the state of Texas may be due to both increased student enrollment and a higher frequency of incidents of gun violence on school campuses in the state over the past decade.

Since 2013, Texas has experienced the most incidents of gunfire on school campuses out of any state, with a total of 55 incidents (Every Town for Gun Safety, 2020). Further, in the state of Texas, 1,022 public school districts served over 5 million students during the 2015–2016 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2017). As schools grow and students experience more autonomy, there may be an increased risk of school violence (Baird, Roellke, & Zeifman, 2017). With the goal of reducing the increased risk of school violence, school districts recognize the need to promote mental health as a major focus in the hopes of decreasing the number of students threatening other students and teachers.

In Texas on October 29, 2018, the Department of Justice (DOJ) authorized an amendment to the U.S.C §10551, Title 34, to provide grant opportunities known as the Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Act of 2018. In addition to the amendment of Title 34 of the U.S.C. § 10551, Chapter 161.325 of the Texas Health and Safety Code also addressed the needs of the best practice-based programs and research-based practices, which can include promoting mental health programs by school districts. In the 2018–2019 school year,

state education agencies and independent school districts in Texas were eligible to apply for the STOP School Violence grant. The STOP School Violence Prevention and Mental Health Training Guide (Texas Education Agency, 2018) listed the areas the grant addressed:

1. Train school personnel and students to address threats and prevent student violence.
2. Develop and operate anonymous reporting systems against threats of school violence, including mobile telephone applications, hotlines, and websites.
3. Develop and operate school threat assessments and crisis intervention teams that may include coordination with law enforcement agencies and school personnel.

In addition, the program may fund specialized training for school officials in intervening and responding to individuals with mental health issues that may impact school safety.

While there are many strategies related to reducing violence on campus, including security measures, zero tolerance, threat assessment interventions, and a multi-tiered safety approach (Carter, Hicks, & Lee, 2019), this study focused on mental health programs' role in reducing school violence. This study primarily focused on school threats but was not limited to discussing school violence, suicide, and bullying. This study examined school districts in Texas that have implemented best practice-based programs and research-based practices that promoted mental health within their school district to eliminate threats. The study focused on the specific interventions utilized by school leaders in promoting mental health as well as how the interventions' progress was monitored. The findings of the study will provide other school districts within the state and nation strategies to continue reducing possible threats toward students and teachers. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did partnerships help establish a mental health program that supports the needs of the school district in reducing school threats?
2. How has the mental health program impacted the overall well-being of the school and its stakeholders?

## **Literature Review**

Threats in schools include but are not limited to bullying, harassment, fighting, and gun violence. When a potential threat occurs, the student who learns about the threat may ignore it instead of reporting it to school officials (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Llorent, 2017). Lindstrom Johnson, Waasdorp, Gaias, and Bradshaw (2018) provided a survey to parents and found that when a threat was witnessed, their children were more likely to talk to them rather than the school. Additionally, after parents heard these reports of threats, only 30% of them would direct their children to tell a school counselor or school administrator if they were victims of bullying (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2018). More specifically regarding the threat of gun violence, Slovak et al. (2007) surveyed students in four rural schools to explore their attitudes toward threats and gun violence. Slovak, Carlson, and Helm (2007) found that 80% of students witnessed someone being threatened, and three out of seven students reported that they received some sort of threat while at school. If several students have witnessed or experienced some type of threat, but only a small percentage report the incident to a school official, then schools may not have the information they need to respond to these threats.

Another question to consider, following a student report of a threat, is if teachers are adequately trained in preventive measures. According to an online survey from Ginicola (2008) with 313 participants, of which 206 were principals and administrators, 90% of participants felt that teachers are not prepared to handle mental health problems with school children. Prince, Khubchandani, and Thompson (2016) provided a questionnaire to a random sample of U.S. principals in 800 public and private schools on practices to reduce the violence of firearms in a high school setting. The data indicated that approximately 60% of the high schools lacked professional development on addressing active shooter situations on their campus (Prince et al., 2016). Therefore, students reporting threats may be severely limited, and administrators' ability to respond to these reports may also be impaired.

To address potential threats, school personnel need to be able to conduct effective risk assessments. Barzman et al. (2017) suggested there is a lack of risk assessment in schools, and most adolescent risk assessment occurs in hospital settings and juvenile justice system settings. Goodrum, Thompson, Ward, and Woodward (2018) "explored threat assessment with a specific student of concern" (p. 124), and the findings indicated that the threat assessment failed because of inadequate training. One possible reason for this failure in the assessment was that the assessment training did not include hands-on practice or the utilization of case studies. In the study, the student's threat was made to several different personnel in different environments, and ultimately, the school failed to contact multiple personnel or assess his behavior in different settings (Goodrum et al., 2018).

In addition to risk assessment programs, other interventions that address school violence mental health programs, such as computerized assistance programs, have students independently work on their mental health issues. Kuosmanen, Fleming, and Barry (2018) examined the use of computerized mental health programs and found that students wanted applicable advice for the content that was being delivered electronically. To address the challenge of determining an effective training program for school personnel to identify and respond to potential threats, Schultes, Stefanek, van de Schoot, Strohmeier, and Spiel (2014) examined a yearlong program in 20 Austrian schools designed to prevent violence and bullying and found that principals played an integral part in supporting mental health programs aimed at reducing school violence.

To identify the principal's role in assisting with mental health issues, Berry, Blanchard, and Gruttadaro (2017) moderated a roundtable discussion with a high school principal and a director of advocacy at the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Responses included teachers and staff needing to be aware of early warning signs, such as observing any behavioral changes that may include mood swings, difficulty in concentrating, or fearing an event (Berry et al., 2017). Some reasons for teachers' lack of preparation in assisting with mental health problems included limited education in mental health, school culture, and climate; insufficient resources, including financial support; and a lack of support from the community (Ginicola, 2008; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). Ringeisen et al. (2003) advocated for: (1) a deeper understanding of factors relevant to school context since context factors are often ignored, (2) a modification of organizational structures to support interventions, and (3) relevant interventions that must align to the context of the school.

Overall, the literature suggests that communities and schools need to work collaboratively to advance mental health promotion efforts (Berry et al., 2017; Adelman & Taylor, 2006). Further, a focus on partnering with parents is essential because parents may have insight into facts that school personnel is likely to miss (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2018). In order to tackle the issue of school threats, building relationships with the community and parents is vital.

## **Methodology**

This study focused on the perceptions of school counselors in establishing mental health programs and partnerships that support the needs of the school district in reducing school threats and the impact of these programs on student well-being. The study used a descriptive case study to examine the perception of a single school counselor on the best practice-based programs and research-based practices that promote mental health within the school district and the community. A thorough interview was conducted with the school counselor regarding her perception of mental health promotion and her real-life experiences in the school setting (Yin, 2017). The case study provides an in-depth, rich, informative description of the counselor's perspective on the impact of the mental health programs in today's schools.

## **Data Source and Analysis**

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, we conducted a virtual interview with a school counselor in an independent school district in Texas that was awarded the DOJ STOP School Violence grant for the school year 2019–2020. The rural school district consists of an elementary and secondary school campus. Within the school district, there are two principals, one for each campus, and one counselor that serves both campuses. The format of the interview consisted of semi-structured questions allowing for the participant to elaborate on any question provided (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The audio portion of the interview was recorded and then transcribed for the researchers to conduct a thematic analysis.

Themes were analyzed based on thematic analysis techniques developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This study utilized an inductive approach where the data determined the themes as opposed to using a deductive approach where predetermined themes are established (Boyatzis, 1998). The researcher disaggregated the interview transcription following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. These phases include (1) familiarizing ourselves with the interview transcript, (2) generating initial codes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes for relevancy and accuracy, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up the analysis.

## **Emerging Themes**

The pilot study with one rural public-school district yielded rich information to further examine the impact of other mental health programs within school districts in Texas. To address the first research question, the results of the thematic analysis indicated that the partnerships did support the needs of the school district in reducing school threats through collaborative teamwork. To address the second research question, the findings indicate that mental health programs positively influenced the overall well-being of the school and the stakeholders in the school. This finding is consistent with previous research (U. S. Department of Defense et al., 2018; Schultes et al., 2015). Further, the results of the thematic analysis indicated the following themes regarding the mental health programs were the framework of the program, the roles of each team member, and the interventions of the program.

## Teamwork

Teamwork was the common theme throughout the interview, which can be defined as having a strong connection with all the stakeholders. The counselor has multiple duties, including serving all students in the district, arranging and facilitating dual credit courses for the high school students, creating graduation plans, and even teaching a class at the secondary level due to the limitation of teachers in a small, rural school. The counselor played a vital role in the mental health program as she was primarily the first line of defense for addressing any student, teacher, administrator, or even parent on mental health concerns. At the elementary level, the counselor provided support on handling stress, time management, getting along with others, and anger management. The overall theme was to focus on the growth mindset of the students. The counselor provided opportunities for students to talk through their struggles together. She believed this prevented the boiling or breaking point that could potentially lead to violence.

The principal was considered an important team member. The counselor defined the principal's role as being present and supportive for all students. This perception was in direct opposition to the stereotypical vision of a principal being the *bad guy* who only enforced the rules. The counselor further denoted that the principal's role is not to be consumed by paperwork and other office duties, but rather to be present in the hallways and classroom. Most importantly, the participant indicated that the principal should have an open-door policy. Through the principal being present in students' daily routines, students can feel comfortable going to the principal if they have a concern.

Another teammate the school counselor identified was a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). The counselor explained that the DOJ grant provides funding for the school district to contract external partners to assist with counseling. The grant also establishes that anyone in the community can be a part of the mental health program and receive counseling. If personal funding is not available, the school district will fund up to six counseling sessions.

Another team member that was funded within the grant was the resource officer. The resource officer was also part of the county sheriff's office. The resource officer reported twice a week to the school district and supported both campuses. The role of the resource officer was similar to the principal's role in that they provided support to all the students. The school resource officer was not there to enforce discipline. Instead, the officer conducted welfare checks, assisted with notifying parents if a student was truant, and provided training for students and teachers. For example, the resource officer provided training on safety during Halloween. The resource officer also visited classrooms and participated in class for the purpose of building relationships with the students and teachers. In fact, the counselor and the resource officer co-taught classes to students and teachers often.

The frontline teammates were the teachers and staff members. Every school employee was important and included in the program, including ancillary and auxiliary staff members such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and janitors. Teachers were able to overhear conversations of students and report any mental health concerns to the counselor and/or principal. Sometimes teachers heard severe mental health concerns and reported accordingly to Child Protective Services (CPS). The school counselor was there to assist teachers in filing their reports. Further, teachers could report concerns to the counselor and/or principal through email. If the concern required more support, then the school counselor could arrange an appointment with the LPC.

The final teammate was the superintendent. The superintendent spearheaded the mental health program by writing the grant and ultimately supervising all components of the mental

health program. The superintendent communicated with parents about the mental health program and communicated consistently with the other team members. The superintendent also provided training to parents throughout the school year.

### **Framework of the Mental Health Program**

The mental health program was established through the DOJ STOP School Violence grant. During the first year, the school developed interventions and monitored their progress throughout the school year. In year 1, the school district focused on the emotional quotient (EQ) element because of the diversity of the students' culture. The school demographics have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Several live with only one guardian; therefore, due to their home life instability, they may lack a stable and developed EQ. Initially, the school invited guest speakers to talk about different components of the emotional quotient. The counselor believed the emotional quotient element was important. The school offered some external counseling that was mostly provided by the school counselor. During the first year, the team members monitored the interventions and revamped the mental health program for the following school year.

During year 2, major changes occurred. The school contracted external counseling services from an LPC. The LPC was available to anyone in the community. Community members did not have to have a child enrolled in the school to receive these services. If insurance did not pay for the service, then the school grant funded the services. Publicity efforts promoting the mental health program increased through the use of community meetings, social media outlets, emails, newsletters, and mailed items. Further, the school website posted information about the program and had a link to report mental health concerns anonymously. The school promised to respond within 24 hours of receiving a report and address any concerns. The school counselor believed that the students felt comfortable using the reporting system, and she did not think the students abused the reporting tool. Referrals to the program could be received from anyone. Advertising the program was important.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, according to this pilot study, the mental health program funded through the DOJ STOP School Violence grant allowed several school personnel, law enforcement, and community agencies to collaborate to offer mental health assistance to students, teachers, parents, guardians, and the community that aimed to reduce school violence. The school counselor in this study indicated a belief that the mental health program addressed the social and emotional needs of students in order to prevent school threats and future violence before more severe issues arose. This study offers several areas that schools should consider addressing to reduce school threats and violence, including offering training related to mental health concerns, resources concerning mental health needs (e.g., an externally funded counselor), and collaboration with law enforcement regarding behavioral concerns.

This study suggests that school counselors seeking to implement future programs to reduce school violence may offer training to school personnel, students, parents, guardians, and the community that describes potential reportable threats and has several options for reporting the threat including an anonymous website. Further, school counselors could offer training to help improve mental health to teach appropriate coping skills to reduce the stressors that might cause

violence. When a threat is reported, school counselors, principals, teachers, law enforcement, and parents should work as a team to mitigate the threat and assist the student or individual in meeting their underlying reasons for the threat.

Future research should continue to seek to understand the impact of mental health programs on reducing school violence and threats of school violence. Specifically, both qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted to continue to understand current mental health programs' role in reducing school violence. While this study described one school counselor's perception of reducing school violence and threats through mental health programs, future research should assess other school counselors' perceptions from other schools both receiving a STOP the Threat grant and from schools without this funding. In addition to understanding school counselors' perspectives, future studies should consider principals, teachers, other school personnel, students, parents, guardians, and community perceptions of mental health programs impact on reducing school violence. Additionally, in order to assess the success of mental health programs in reducing school violence, data should be collected to determine the number of individuals utilizing these programs, the number of threats reported, the number of individuals that received additional interventions to meet their needs, and the number of violent incidents at school. Through assessing the success of these programs and sharing this information, school violence may be reduced.

**Dusty Palmer** is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership. He can be reached at [dusty.palmer@ttu.edu](mailto:dusty.palmer@ttu.edu).

**Nicole Noble** is an Assistant Professor in Counselor Education. She can be reached at [nicole.noble@ttu.edu](mailto:nicole.noble@ttu.edu).

**Kumudu Witanapatirana** is a third-year doctoral student majoring in Counselor Education. She can be reached at [kumudu.witanapatirana@ttu.edu](mailto:kumudu.witanapatirana@ttu.edu).

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