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## School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences and Respond to School Violence

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## Chapter 15

# School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences and Respond to School Violence

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, the authors introduce and identify current issues, controversies and problems that influence school safety and counselor preparedness. A brief overview of school violence in America, counselors' training to deal with school violence, and factors that influence school violence are provided. Following this, the authors present a multitier system of supports (MTSS) as a recommended model for counselors to (1) prevent, (2) prepare and plan, (3) respond, and (4) lead recovery efforts as related to school violence. Finally, a case study is presented in which the authors apply best practices within the American Counselor Association's national framework to handle a crisis.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Perceptions of school safety and violence have changed in recent years as the result of school shootings (Eklund et al., 2018). As a former Superintendent of a large school district, one of the authors of this chapter remembers that school safety focused on “no running in the hallways” because a student could get hurt. Unfortunately, school safety has now become “no shooting in the hallways” because a student or educator could get killed. Perceptions have changed due to a disturbing trend of school violence and school shootings from Columbine in 1999 to Sandy Hook in 2005 to Parkland in 2018 (Eklund et al., 2018). The 2018 Parkland shooting, which resulted in tragedy and 17 individuals losing their lives (Carter et al., 2019), is the most extreme form of school violence that has potential to change schools, families, communities, and our nation. However, in addition to these massive incidents of school violence, other forms of violence, which have potential to transform into larger forms of destructive behavior, include bullying, in-school fighting, harassment, racial microaggressions, and dating violence (Toomey & Storlie, 2016). The impact of these forms of violence in schools can be seen in the following ways: (1) racial or sexist comments based on appearance; (2) verbal insults; (3) backbiting; (4) fear of not speaking up in class; or (5) fear of being ridiculed (Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Toomey & Storlie, 2016). These subtle forms of school violence are important because the Constitutional Rights Foundation (n.d.) reported approximately 2 million incidents take place in schools each year, with approximately 36% of adolescents in secondary schools experiencing at least one incident of peer victimization (Wang et al., 2009).

School violence has impacted students' learning and educators' teaching by creating fear and anxiety (Agnich, 2015). This fear for potential school violence undermines the goal of education and disrupts teaching and learning by creating negative school climates (Agnich, 2015; Borum et al., 2010; Cornell, 2006). For example, Minor and Benner (2017) found that Black adolescents' perceptions of school climate were related with enrollment in postsecondary education. Because of the relationship between school safety and student success (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015), school safety is everyone's responsibility, including counselors, who can use strategies to prevent, mitigate, and respond to violence. While predicting school violence is impossible, counselors can implement strategies to improve school climate and teacher-student relationships, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will recognize and report potential violent acts to their teachers or other school personnel.

In this chapter, unless otherwise specified, “counselor” will refer to “school counselor.” We have four objectives with this chapter: (1) present a model of school safety for counselors that includes prevention/mitigation, preparedness and planning, response, and recovery (Cowan et al., 2013); (2) identify current issues and challenges that influence school violence; (3) provide considerations for best practices when working to reduce and prevent school violence; and (4) present a case study and apply best practices within the American Counselor Association's (ASCA) national framework (2019).

## **BACKGROUND**

Σχηροολ πιολενχε χαν βε χονχεπτυαλιζεδ ιν διφφερεντ ωαψς: ψουτη πιολενχε, ρανδομ σχηροολ πιολενχε, ταργετεδ σχηροολ πιολενχε, σχηροολ σηοοτινγς, σχηροολ τερροριςμ, σχηροολ μασς σηοοτινγς, χομπλετεδ σχηροολ πιολενχε, απερτεδ σχηροολ πιολενχε, σχηροολ ηομιχιδε, σχηροολ συιχιδε, αιδ σχηροολ σεξυαλ ασσαυλτ (Ηενρψ, 2000). Μορε ρεχεντλψ, σχηροολ πιολενχε ηασ βεεν δεαδλψ: Παρκλανδ, Φλοριδα, ωιτη 17 κιλλεδ αιδ 17 ινφυρεδ; Χολυμβινε Ηιγη Σχηροολ ωιτη 15 κιλλεδ αιδ 21 ινφυρεδ, αιδ

## ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

Σανδης Hook Ελεμενταριω Νεωτωων, Χουνεχιχτυ, ωιτη 28 τοταλ δεατησ 20 χηιλδρεν (Σχηροολ Σηροστιγσ βψ Στατε Ποπυλατιον, 2020). Βεχ αυσε οφ τησε τραγιχ ινχιδεντσ ιν ρεχεντ τιμεσ, Αγινη (2015) εμπηασιζεδ ρισιγ φεαρ αμογ παρεντσ, στυδεντσ, ανδ τεαχηερσ. Ωηεν οπερ 50 περχεντ οφ τηε Υ.Σ. ποπυλατιον ισ χουνεχτεδ το α σχηροολ (Ωονγ, ν.δ.), τηε ρισε ιν φεαρ ανδ ανξιετψ αμογ στυδεντσ ανδ αλλ σχηροολ περσοινελ ισ α χριτιχαλ ισσυε τηατ χουνσελορσ νεεδ το αδδρεσσ.

Diliberti et al. (2019) completed an examination of violent and nonviolent incidents in U.S. public schools. Across the United States, they found an estimated 962,300 violent incidents and 476,100 non-violent incidents in public schools, with 71% of schools reporting at least one violent incident and 65% reporting having at least one nonviolent incident. Violent incidents included physical attacks as well as fights without a weapon, and non-violent incidents referred to theft, possession of firearm, or vandalism (Diliberti et al., 2019). Further, they found that 66% of schools reported at least one physical attack or fight without a weapon; 3% of schools reported at least one physical attack or fight with a weapon; and 3,600 incidents involved the possession of a firearm or explosive device (Diliberti et al., 2019). Finally, in a recent study on school violence, the National Threat Assessment Center (2019) made several important findings: (1) most attackers had experienced psychological, behavioral, or developmental symptoms; (2) most attackers had a history of school disciplinary actions; and (3) most attackers were victims of bullying, which was often observed by others. These findings underscore the importance of counselors' awareness of their students' social and emotional needs, which are clearly related to violence.

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

The focus of this chapter is to present a model that counselors can use to prevent and respond to school violence. We propose a **multitier system of supports** (MTSS) to structure counselors' roles in prevention, preparedness and planning, response, and recovery (Cowan et al., 2013). Multitier models of behavioral prevention programs have experienced “varying degrees of success as a result of interventions in academic, behavioral, and social domains” (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 187). In one of the most comprehensive and collaborative frameworks on safe and successful schools, the following organizations recommended an MTSS to structure safe school experiences: American Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and National Association of School Resources, among others (Cowan et al., 2013; National Threat Assessment Center, 2019; Reeves & Brock, 2018). They posit that a MTSS involves prevention and wellness promotion, screening for barriers to learning, and implementation of evidence-based programs. Additionally, essential strategies for implementing a MTSS strategy include positive behavior interventions, evidence-based practices (Weist et al., 2018), and support (PBIS) and research-based programs that can be integrated throughout prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Cowan et al., 2013) to respond to current issues, controversies, and problems. Additionally, this response incorporates **trauma-informed care interventions**.

## **Issues, Controversies, Problems: School Safety and Counselor Preparedness**

One current issue is prospective and current counselors' training to deal with violence. Bacioglu and Kocabyik (2019) used a news story to explore future counselors' perceptions of school violence. As one of the few studies to look at prospective counselors' attitudes toward school violence, these researchers contextualized their findings around prevention within the importance of **school climate**. In a gradu-

## ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

ate counseling course, students were given a news article in which they analyzed the case of school violence as if they were the counselor working in the school. More specifically, students reflected on what actions they would have taken to prevent and intervene when faced with violence. Following data analysis, several important themes emerged, including prejudice, definition, prevention, and intervention. Prejudice referred to the potential counselors' attitudes and beliefs toward students who would be more likely to engage in school violence such as vocational high school kids in which students were perceived to have lower academic performance. Definition referred to participants' beliefs about behaviors that accounted for school violence. There was a diverse range of beliefs such as physical violence, proactive aggression, and reactive aggression, which is like all the various forms of violence mentioned earlier (Henry, 2000). Other important themes within the study also involved prevention and intervention. Most participants mentioned that prevention activities needed to include students, teachers, administrators, and families, and focus on anger and conflict management as well as counseling services. Participants also indicated prevention needed to include training teachers and administrators in stress management and **school climate**.

Although researchers have investigated administrators', school psychologists', and school resource officers' roles, training, and experiences, only a few researchers have explored counselors' knowledge and preparedness to respond to school violence (Chambers et al., 2018). Chambers et al. (2018) found that a group of counselors were "somewhat prepared" to handle school violence. Counselors also indicated there was "little problem" with school violence at their schools, respectively. Given the pervasiveness and prevalence of school violence throughout the United States that was mentioned above (Carter et al., 2019; Diliberti et al., 2019), these counselors' perceptions that violence was not a major problem and that they were somewhat prepared to handle violence was noteworthy. Perhaps counselors did not receive training in graduate school and did not receive professional development in crisis interventions as part of their continuing education as counselors. Also, because counselors play an important role on school safety teams and counselors indicated that they were somewhat prepared to handle school violence (Chambers et al., 2018), increasing counselors' awareness of their roles and responsibilities related to school violence is important.

### **More Issues, Controversies, Problems: Other Forms of School Violence**

Another important issue are the various forms of school violence, including incidents of harassment, dating violence, and bias-based incidents. In a study about educators' reports of incidents of harassment and advocacy toward Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) students, Dragowski et al. (2016) found 90% of educators observed harassment toward LGBTQ students. Given that these forms of harassment are negatively related to **school climate**, findings such as these paint a picture of schools with a negative **school climate**, which could lead to more incidents of school violence. Perhaps even more alarming than the findings indicated above was that the researchers found 44% of educators in the study reported they heard other colleagues make derogatory comments toward LGBTQ students.

Dating violence and abuse also have potential to lead to major forms of violence among adolescents. Although dating violence is common and can result in other forms of violence, researchers found that counselors do not feel prepared to prevent or intervene when dating violence occurs (Khubchandani et al., 2012). In a national study on the assessment of counselors' perceptions and practices with adolescent dating violence, Khubchandani et al. (2012) identified that (1) 81% of the participants reported their school did not have protocols to respond to this type of violence; (2) 83% of participants reported their

## **School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences**

school did not conduct surveys to ask students to provide insight about the prevalence of dating violence; and (3) 90% of participants reported trainings to assist survivors of dating violence were not available. Taken together, these findings showed that most counselors were not trained to respond to incidents of dating violence and did not work in schools with protocols to respond to violence.

*Even More Issues, Controversies, Problems: School Climate.* One important factor related to school violence is **school climate** (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). Pompelia found students' perceptions of **school climate** are positively correlated with perceptions and feelings of safety at school (2019). Using the American Counselor Association's (2019) national model as a conceptual framework, counselors can influence adolescents' personal/social development, which in turn can create a safe **school climate**. When students perceive a positive **school climate**, they are more likely to have positive perceptions of school personnel, which can lead to positive perceptions of school connectedness and **school climate**.

## **MODEL OF SCHOOL SAFETY**

In the current chapter, we propose a **multitier system of supports** (MTSS) to structure counselors' roles in prevention, preparedness and planning, response, and recovery (Cowan et al., 2013). In one of the most comprehensive and collaborative frameworks on safe and successful schools, the following organizations recommended an MTSS to structure safe school experiences: American Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and National Association of School Resources, among others (Cowan et al., 2013; National Threat Assessment Center, 2019; Reeves & Brock, 2018). They posit that a MTSS involves prevention and wellness promotion, screening for barriers to learning, and implementation of evidence-based programs. Additionally, two essential strategies for implementing a MTSS strategy include positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) and research-based programs that can be integrated throughout prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Cowan et al., 2013).

### **Step 1: Prevention-Mitigation**

Part of a counselor's role related to school violence is prevention and wellness promotion (ASCA, 2019). In addition to playing a critical role in the response to school violence, counselors must engage in prevention activities. We agree with other researchers (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2018) who commented that prevention is just as important as postvention when dealing with violence. In other words, just as attention must be given to responses to school violence so must attention be given to those strategies that seek to reduce or prevent school violence. As such, there are several strategies counselors can use such as advocating for counselors' roles and responsibilities, maintaining a visible presence, implementing research-based programs on wellness, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, and creating a positive climate. By implementing these activities, counselors will likely increase positive perceptions of **school climate**, which might reduce and prevent the likelihood of school violence (Lesneskie & Block, 2017).

*Advocate for counselor's role.* An important step in prevention efforts is to make sure counselors are given time and support to perform the work they were trained to perform. A recent report suggests approximately 57% of counselors spend less than 60% of their time on counseling-related tasks (Marsee, 2019). This is likely because counselors have excessive administrative duties, test proctoring, and

excessive caseloads by principals who do not understand counselors' roles (Hanna, 2019). The success of counselors in school safety depends on the principal providing resources, training, and time to fulfill responsibilities in preventing school violence and promoting wellness (Robbins & Alvy, 2009). Engaging in non-counseling duties is not only disconnected from ASCA National guidelines but also prevents counselors from performing activities that would enhance school safety and a positive **school climate** (2019).

The counselor-student ratio is important and directly related to student learning, behavior, and perceptions of campus climate, which are all linked to incidents of school violence (NASP, 2019). As one example, Marsee (2019) reported Kentucky fell short of ASCA recommended guidelines and would need "an additional 1,156 counselors to meet the goal of one counselor for every 250 students per school" (p. 1). Additionally, in a study regarding the impact of small ratios among Connecticut professional counselors, Lapan et al. (2012) identified an important relationship with school suspensions. For schools with 158 to 204 students per counselor and aligned with ASCA's (2019) recommendations, there were 12 suspensions per 100 students. However, for schools with more than 298 students per counselor, there were 26 suspensions per 100 students. This finding suggests when there are enough counselors at a campus to provide counseling services and individual attention to students, the potential for destructive behavior and school violence is lowered. Thus, an important part of prevention efforts is for counselors to advocate for their schools to meet ASCA's recommended student-counselor ratio and support the work they were trained to perform.

*Maintain a visible presence.* Despite large counselor-student ratios, counselors can maintain a visible presence on campus. The counselor's notion about visibility and presence is important because researchers (Barile et al., 2012; Bulach, 1994; as cited in Center for the Study of School Climate, 2011) found students' perceptions of having access to at least one adult for support is critical for perceptions of **school climate** and well-being. Bray (2016) described the important concept of leakage that involves a student informing another student of possible violence. When students are victims of bias-related incidents, harassment, or other forms of discrimination, students should know that they can seek out their counselor for emotional support and advocacy.

Another strategy to maintain a visible presence is to connect with teachers. When counselors develop positive relationships with teachers, then teachers will be more likely to not only trust counselors but also more willing to sacrifice instructional time for classroom instruction focusing on wellness and school violence. In a study of teachers' perceptions of support when facing school violence, Turkum (2011) found counselors were not mentioned as personnel who provided forms of support. Families and spouses were mentioned but not counselors. This finding is important because teachers have responsibilities to create a positive **school climate**. Because teachers play an important role in creating a positive **school climate**, they need emotional support just like students when facing school violence. Based on these findings, it is important for counselors to let teachers know they can support the entire school community, including teachers, when facing school violence. School counselors also can let teachers know mental health and perceptions of school culture/climate, which are related to school violence, have a direct relationship with academic achievement and performance on standardized tests. By maintaining a visible presence on campuses, counselors will let students, teachers, administrators, and parents know they are available to assist students in crises.

*Improve School Climate.* One important and powerful predictor of school violence is students' perceptions of **school climate** (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). Although the mass shootings that take the lives of so many innocent adolescents and children are devastating, it is important to remember that the subtle

## ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

forms of violence have potential to influence a negative **school climate**, which can impact more severe forms of violence. Researchers found that positive **school climate** correlates with high or improving attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates, and graduation rates (Pompelia, 2019). Moreover, negative **school climate** correlates to lower student achievement and graduation rates, as well as opportunities for violence, bullying, and suicide (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE], 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) defines **school climate** as the extent to which a school creates a safe school campus; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships (NCSSLE, 2018; USDOE & Office of Safe and Healthy Students to the American Institutes for Research, 2018). The National School Climate Center (2007) also postulated that **school climate** encompasses five interrelated domains: (1) safety, (2) relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (4) institutional environment, and (5) the school improvement process. Because school violence can create a climate of fear and emotional unbalance that can diminish learning (Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Wong, n.d.), counselors must focus on developing a positive **school climate**, which has potential to reduce the likelihood of violence.

*Implement research-based program on wellness.* Counselors also can use research-based programs to improve students' emotional well-being and academic success, which will improve perceptions of **school climate** and reduce the likelihood of school violence. One research-based program is **positive psychology**, which focuses on strategies that increase happiness, positive emotions, and well-being by encouraging adolescents to reflect on past experiences, develop positive emotions about the present, recognize and capitalize on strengths, and develop hope and optimism about the future (Seligman, 2002). Counselors can use a three-part **positive psychology** intervention (Savage, 2011; Suldo & Michalowski, 2007) that integrates the following into school experiences: positive emotions about the past, positive emotions about the present, and positive emotions about the future. Part 1 focuses on gratitude letters, gratitude journals, and gratitude visits to help students understand and develop positive emotions about their past. Counselors can work with teachers to assign students assignments where they reflect on their gratitude as well as express gratitude to significant others. Part 2 focuses on positive emotions with the present including joy, zest, flow, and kindness. Counselors can help teachers integrate assignments where students perform acts of kindness. Finally, part 3 focuses on positive emotions about the future such as optimism and hope. By implementing a program to enhance wellness and character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2008), counselors will prevent and reduce the likelihood of school violence by helping improve students' perceptions of school connectedness and **school climate**.

*Foster positive teacher-student relationships.* Part of counselors' roles and responsibilities to prevent school violence is to foster positive teacher-student relationships. When students have positive perceptions of teacher-student relationships or positive connections with their peers, they are more likely to speak up and report potential violence acts (Daniels et al., 2007; Volungis & Goodman, 2017). Silver et al. (2018) examined 30 separate active shootings in the United States that occurred in 2017. They found peers and teachers were more likely to observe concerning behaviors than family members. This is important because of leakage (O'Toole, 2000) which refers to the idea that adolescents who engage in violence typically share their plans with a peer. If they shared information with a peer who has positive perceptions of teacher-student relationships as well as peer relations, they are more likely to report the potential violent act. These findings support the great role counselors have in preventing school violence by fostering positive teacher-student relationships.

One way to build positive relationships is through intentional relationship building between students and teachers. Counselors can support teachers to use counseling skills to validate, support, and be genuine



with students, particularly with those students who might be more likely to either succumb or produce violence. Also, Silver et al. (2018) surmised: “There is no single warning sign, checklist, or algorithm for assessing behaviors that identifies a prospective active shooter. Rather, there appears to be a complex combination of behaviors and interactions with bystanders that may often occur in the days, weeks, and months leading up to an attack” (p. 21). While predicting school violence is impossible, counselors can implement strategies to improve teacher-student relationships, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will recognize and report potential violent acts to their teachers or other school personnel.

## **Step 2: Preparedness and Planning**

Counselors also must be prepared through intentional planning to handle school violence. Some strategies for preparedness and planning include conducting a **needs assessment**, developing an emergency operation plan, and developing a **multidisciplinary threat assessment team**.

### **Conduct a needs assessment**

One of the first steps in preparedness and planning efforts is to conduct a **needs assessment** (Furlong et al., 2005). Counselors need to determine student, parent, teacher, and administrator perceptions of **school climate** and school safety, and they need to make recommendations to improve **school climate**. As previously discussed, perceptions of **school climate** are linked with school safety and school violence. Therefore, students can complete a **school climate** scale, and teachers can complete a teacher **school climate** scale (Kohl et al., 2013; National School Climate Center, 2007), which will provide important information about perceptions of **school climate**. Results from this **needs assessment** can be disaggregated by gender, grade level, ethnic background, or age groups to influence data-driven prevention efforts. For example, perhaps 6<sup>th</sup> grade students within a school perceive a safe school environment, but the 8<sup>th</sup> graders have different perceptions and attitudes. Such information can be shared with all stakeholders to inform evidence-based decision making and create a plan to improve perceptions of **school climate**. Once information is shared with stakeholders, counselors can lead conversations to create goals, objectives, and performance measures to improve perceptions of **school climate**. Counselors need to assess perceptions of **school climate** on an annual basis in order to address different needs each academic year and to recognize and celebrate successes with **school climate** (NASP, 2019)

### **Develop an Emergency Operation Plan**

Counselors also need to be part of the team to create an emergency operation plan. In 2013, the Federal Emergency Management Agency published a guide to support schools to develop and improve their school safety plan. FEMA outlined six steps in developing an EOP: (1) create a collaborative planning team, (2) identify the situation, (3) create goals and objectives, (4) identify plans of action, (5) plan and prepare, and (6) implementation and maintenance (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, & Office of Safe and Healthy Students, 2013). Counselors need to be regular members of the EOP team because of their knowledge, skills, and professional connections to community resources.

## Develop A Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team (MTAT)

One task of the EOP team is to create and implement a multilevel strategy to reduce and prevent school violence. FEMA describes a Threat Assessment Team, also called a **multidisciplinary threat assessment team** (MTAT), as a separate group from the EOP team mentioned above. The National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC, 2018) produced an operational guide regarding how to prevent incidents of targeted school violence which begins with threat assessment “to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk” (p. 1). To develop a threat assessment plan, the school should form a **multidisciplinary threat assessment team**, establish central reporting mechanisms, establish assessment procedures to maintain documentation for evaluation, identify behaviors of concern, define the threshold for law enforcement intervention, identify risk management strategies, promote safe school climates, and provide training to stakeholders (NTAC, 2018). Although all stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and administrators have important roles to improve **school climate** and reduce school violence, NTAC identifies counselors as potential MTAT members. Because the MTAT team needs to understand behavior and determine interventions to prevent school violence, counselors need to have a role because they have knowledge and skills, as well as knowledge of the school community and community mental health providers and first responders, to be effective (Cowan et al., 2013).

### Step 3: Response

Counselors also must be prepared to be among the first responders to numerous types of school violence. During the response stage, counselors should provide counseling to students, provide **psychological first aid**, and provide trauma-informed practices.

#### Provide direct counseling services

Depending on the nature and type of school violence as well as the impact on the school community, counselors might have to provide individual and/small group counseling to many students. In the event of a crisis, the professional counselor’s primary role is to provide direct counseling service during and after the incident (ASCA, 2019b). Teachers, school staff, and administrators can assist counselors in identifying students who might need counseling services by using an assessment tool called BASIC (Slaikeu, 1990). Examples of symptoms to look for include the following:

- B – Behavioral (e.g., sleeplessness)
- A – Affective (e.g., anxiety, sadness)
- S – Somatic (e.g., sleep problems)
- I – Interpersonal (e.g., isolation)
- C – Cognitive. (e.g., self-blame; Slaikeu, 1990)

When working with students using the BASIC framework, counselors can count the frequency, duration, and severity of symptoms using a Likert scale ranging from one to ten with ten indicating the most frequent, long-lasting, and severe symptoms, and one indicating the most infrequent, brief, and

## *School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences*

minimal symptoms (Basham et al., 2000). When all members of an MTAT or crisis team are trained to use BASIC, they are able to communicate students' level of need and support.

### Provide Psychological First Aid

Counselors also can provide **Psychological first aid** (PFA) to help school personnel and students recognize and respond to people experiencing crisis-related stress (Brymer et al., 2006). PFA can help any distressed person, including students, teachers, school staff, administrators, parents, and counselors, and it is appropriate to use before, during, or immediately after a crisis. In times of crisis, individual stress-levels have potential to rise to life-threatening degrees. Thus, providing PFA is helpful to create a compassionate school environment for adolescents and provide immediate support to cope in the face of stressful events.

It is also important that the counselor assist adolescents to develop problem-focused coping strategies to change what they can. For example, a student may report feeling scared to return to school after witnessing violence. A counselor should normalize the fear and then ask the student what would help them feel safe again to return to school. A counselor can also work with students to develop emotion-focused coping strategies to manage their feelings of stress. Setting a routine that includes eating three balanced meals a day, light exercise, healthy social interaction, and getting a full night rest can significantly improve an individual's emotional wellness (Hosker et al., 2019).

### Provided Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma informed schools recognize the impact a traumatic event can have on students' physical health, cognitive learning, behavior, and social/emotional state of being (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017). NCTSN define all trauma-informed child-and family-service systems as

one in which all parties involved recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on those who have contact with the system including children, caregivers, staff, and service providers... using the best available science, to maximize physical and psychological safety, facilitate the recovery or adjustment of the child and family. (2017, p. 2)

NCTSN developed a framework for creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools. The goal of the framework is to provide guidance for how to identify those who are at-risk or might need additional support to address their traumatic stress (NCTSN, 2017). Counselors can use trauma-informed practices in the response phase of school violence.

The framework identifies three tiers that create, support, and sustain a trauma informed school. Tier one focuses on creating a safe environment by promoting healthy and successful students (NCTSN, 2017). This is achieved by promoting a positive **school climate**, emergency management, **psychological first aid**, bullying prevention, secondary traumatic stress (STS) education, and general wellness support and education. Tier two focuses on early intervention and identifying students and staff at-risk. Important strategies include (1) screening students, (2) delivering group intervention using cognitive behavioral therapy and STS support, (3) identifying threat assessment, and (4) fostering peer support. Finally, tier three focuses on intensive support through individual and family therapy with a focus on trauma-specific treatment (NCTSN, 2017). While school principals, administrators, teachers, and staff can use

## ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

trauma-informed approaches when working with children, only a counselor can provide trauma-specific treatment for students and families. The NCTSN (2017) described several evidenced-based treatment approaches in working with children who have experienced trauma. For example, one treatment approach for students exposed to school violence is CBITS (Jaycox et al., 2012). It is crucial for counselors to use evidenced-based treatment for trauma and continue to provide counseling services to students in the recovery phase as symptoms may develop and change over time.

### **Step 4: Recovery**

The final phase in the MTSS is recovery. In the recovery phase, educational and business operations in schools and school districts return to normal and are restored following an incident (Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools [REMS], 2019). Recovery is an ongoing process that includes not only the mental, emotional, and physical healing process of students, faculty, and staff, but also a school's physical, fiscal, and academic functioning (Laird, 2006). Given that it is not the counselor's sole responsibility to restore the emotional wellness of an entire school body, counselors can continue to work with the MTAT team, administrators, teachers, staff, and community members to restore wellness.

Researchers identified that exposure to violence is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including posttraumatic stress disorder, issues with substance abuse, helplessness, anger, and poor emotional and psychological outcomes (Buka et al., 2001; Hammond et al., 2009; Ludwig & Warren, 2009; Volungis & Goodman, 2017). Counselors play a vital role in recovery, and they must apply their expertise in postvention activities that may include providing counseling to victims and others within the school (Daniels, 2002), providing psychoeducational information to members of the school and community (Shen & Sink, 2002), coordinating community mental health workers (Riley & McDaniel, 2000), providing critical incident stress debriefing immediately after the incident, and providing post-traumatic stress interventions to survivors (Daniels, 2002).

### **Provide Trauma-Focused Counseling Services**

Recommended practices for counselors to implement following violence include outlining service delivery systems and providing mental health services (Stone, 2013). A counselor can conduct a crisis assessment with a student and use it as a way to communicate to parents the urgency to monitor their child at home and help them find more extensive counseling with a counselor in the community (Stone, 2013). Further, the counselor can recommend and refer an individual to a social worker to help them regain some basic needs like food and shelter in the aftermath of a natural disaster. In addition, it is helpful when schools develop a letter addressing the incident and plans for recovery to distribute to parents. Because of their background on mental health, the counselor should help write this letter which should include a list of resources for parents to access such as crisis hotlines and local medical and mental health agencies who have partnered to support recovery efforts (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2015).

In the recovery phase, counselors may juggle several tasks as they want to work as quickly as possible to provide relief. However, it is important to remember the significant impact volunteers can also have in aiding the relief efforts. Thus, there should be a process in place to screen and register volunteers so they can begin helping as soon as possible. Counselors can be part of the team to lead this effort. And finally, a school should develop and practice a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) at the school and school district level so employees understand what they are supposed to do in a situation with school

violence. A COOP supports continuation of essential functions during and after an emergency (REMS, n.d.). The counselor's role during the recovery phase is specified in the COOP and contingent on the nature of the violence.

Like the response phase, counselors should continue to use trauma-informed interventions to help those students who might continue to struggle with trauma in the recovery phase. Briefly mentioned earlier, one intervention that has research support to help students with trauma is Cognitive Behavior Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS; Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018). With evidence to support its effectiveness with various populations, CBITS consists of 10 group sessions that are designed to help adolescents improve depression, anxiety, or other symptoms related to trauma. Because this program is available for use and counselors are trained in CBT principles, counselors should be prepared to use this intervention to help adolescents in the recovery phase of school violence.

### Support Teachers to Use Counseling Strategies

One final strategy to help students recover from school violence is training and supporting teachers to use counseling strategies (Volungis & Goodman, 2017). As mentioned earlier, the counselor-student ratio in many schools throughout the United States is much larger than ASCA's recommended ratio of 1:250. Thus, while counselors' training in counseling skills put them in an ideal position to lead recovery interventions, they may need assistance to serve larger number of students. Therefore, counselors can support teachers to use counseling strategies and deliver class-based interventions to help students process their feelings and concerns. Also, counselors can train teachers to use relationship skills, multicultural competence, and communication skills (Volungis & Goodman, 2017). Counselors can support teachers to use Roger's (1956) core conditions when talking with students after school violence. By being genuine, empathic, and authentic, teachers will be able to listen to their students without judgment and communicate their understanding of the situation and feelings. Also, counselors can train teachers to develop communication skills such as attending and listening, open-ended questions, reflection, validation of feelings, reframing, and self-disclosure. Teachers need to use these counseling skills when communicating with students who witnessed school violence. As one example, a teacher can self-disclose any previous experiences or feelings with incidents of school violence. This will help them be authentic and relatable with students (Volungis & Goodman, 2017). Because teachers interact with large groups of students in the recovery phase, they can work with counselors to facilitate small group interactions to provide space for reflection.

The following case study is based on actual events and depicts how one school principal intervened with school violence. Please note that in the scenario, the **school climate** was negative due to lack of counselors' and administrators' positive interactions with students. Following the case study, we describe how the counselor could have used the MTSS model to improve **school climate** and student learning.

### CASE STUDY

Dr. Aguirre was hired as principal of a high school with low academic achievement, poor student attendance, low school morale, and student discipline problems. There was no evidence of a college-going culture, with many students not given access to college information and college preparatory coursework. The counselor to student ratio was 1:850, and counselors did not have time to engage in activities to help

### ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

students prepare for higher education. Students fought with school police officers in the hallways and stairs. During his first year, Dr. Aguirre made it clear he was there to ensure all students and staff members were successful. He was always in the hallways between classes to interact with students and staff. After a short time, the students and staff knew Dr. Aguirre was available. Because Dr. Aguirre was accessible and students trusted him, students shared with him school and personal issues they were facing. In turn, he helped them or found someone who could help. In contrast, counselors stayed in their offices away from student daily activities, serving students only by appointment. They were busy completing state testing responsibilities. The counselors were happy staying in their offices and working on administrative duties, but they did complain about the high caseload. Dr. Aguirre noted first year and multi-year 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who had given up and headed to dropping out; few staff members and counselors cared.

One day, a student informed Dr. Aguirre that a student in school was carrying a weapon and shared the name of the student with the gun. Dr. Aguirre was familiar with the reporting and the suspect student. Dr. Aguirre asked the student why the suspected student brought the gun to school. The student responded he did not know why but saw the gun before school. He thanked the student for sharing the information. After taking security precautions, Dr. Aguirre entered the classroom where the suspected student was seated. Since Dr. Aguirre was often in classrooms monitoring instruction, the teacher and students were not surprised when he entered the classroom. Dr. Aguirre walked around the classroom, then stopped behind the suspected student, placed his hand on the student's shoulder, bent down to the student's ear, and whispered, "Please stand up and come with me outside." Once outside, Dr. Aguirre and the security staff escorted the student to the office.

When they arrived at the principal's office, Dr. Aguirre asked if the student had anything he should not have, and the student admitted he had a toy gun. The police officer retrieved the toy gun from the student. Dr. Aguirre asked the student why he brought the gun to school, and the student said it was irresponsible of him to do so. Dr. Aguirre provided appropriate discipline to the student. Dr. Aguirre asked the assistant principal and counselor who were assigned to the student how well they knew the him. Both stated they did not know the student. Dr. Aguirre was not surprised because he never saw counselors or assistant principals in the hallways interacting with students. The next day, a different student informed Dr. Aguirre of a student with a gun on campus. The student suspect was similarly processed to the principal's office. However, this time the student admitted he had a gun inside his pants. The police officer retrieved the gun—the gun was real. Dr. Aguirre asked the student why he had brought a gun to school. The student said he was absent from school the day before but heard a student he was having problems with had brought a gun to school that day. So, he brought the gun for protection. Dr. Aguirre provided appropriate school discipline to the student, and the student was arrested.

Dr. Aguirre felt bad about what happened to the second student, so the next day he talked to the police officer and assistant principal in charge of school safety. He learned the school had no emergency plan, threat assessment team, or emergency planning team. He also learned no counselor or designated administrator contacted the first student to gather more information. No one had any relationship with the student or even cared. After the incident, students and teachers expressed fear and anxiety. Despite students experiencing trauma-like symptoms, none of the counselors facilitated any counseling activities. Dr. Aguirre realized how lucky the school, staff, and students had been that no violence occurred on school grounds. He realized luck may not be there the next time, so he began to make changes in the school's climate and safety planning.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is apparent the **school climate** inherited by Dr. Aguirre was negative. School administrators and counselors not connecting with students negatively impacted **school climate**. The counselors' high caseload and overload with administrative responsibilities also limited opportunities for interaction with students. Counselors accepted and preferred their focus on administrative duties and staying in their offices away from students. If school administrators, counselors, and teachers connected with students and created a positive **school climate**, then maybe the first student would have shared why he truly brought the toy gun—to scare his nemesis—with a school staff member. Then, the second student could have been stopped from bringing the real gun and would have avoided being arrested.

Using the 4-phase MTSS model and guidelines presented above, counselors could have engaged in actions to have created a more positive **school climate**. First, counselors must focus on prevention and establish a positive **school climate** that includes caring and helping relationships between and among staff and students. To support this, counselors must be visible because maintaining a presence is critical to let students, teachers, and parents know that they are available for support. Second, school preparedness and planning are critical because prevention is not perfect. It is important the principal advocates for appropriate counselor-student ratios aligned with ASCA guidelines. When counselors must work with 850 students in their caseload, it is difficult to connect with students, particularly those students who might need additional support and mentoring. Also, the counselor should conduct an annual **needs assessment**, lead workshops for teachers and students, and work with the principal to establish an emergency operation team and a MTAT team to prepare for school violence. Third, every staff member and student must be trained and prepared to respond to and recover from any emergency. Training is critical for every staff member and student. Counselors can deliver **psychological first aid** and trauma-informed practices to assist and support trauma victims in the response phase of a crisis. Finally, the school must be trained and organized to help the school and its community recover from a crisis and return to normal. Training, planning, and creating the right mind sets are important to help every staff member, student, and community member recover from school violence.

In Dr. Aguirre's improved school, counselors used their expertise to help resolve safety issues before they happened. In the case above, neither student would have brought a "gun" to school because they would have talked to their counselor who would have helped them resolve their issue before it escalated. Also, advocacy and productive actions promoted further training for counselors so they could be prepared to respond if a crisis happened. Counselors were better prepared to provide individual and group counseling, **psychological first aid**, and create a trauma-informed school. Improved training developed counselors who supported and promoted successful school recovery. Through active engagement in school safety planning, counselors were better integrated into the community to identify and recruit the best resources to support school recovery. When students and staff identified safety concerns, counselors had community resources to help them overcome their fears. Teachers and staff witnessed counselor actions and were more willing to learn and apply basic counseling techniques when the need arose for students and the school. In the improved school, counselors helped develop a much safer and better prepared school that promoted greater student learning and a positive **school climate**.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In this chapter, the authors highlighted the problems of school violence and the need to improve counselor preparation to address school violence. A school safety model was presented that included four phases: Prevention/ Mitigation, Preparedness and Planning, Response and Recovery. There are several directions for future research. First, future research may focus on assessment of perceptions of engaging in school safety by current and future school counselors before and after using the MTSS model proposed in this chapter. The following organizations recommended an MTSS to structure safe school experiences: American Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and National Association of School Resources, among others (Cowan et al., 2013; National Threat Assessment Center, 2019; Reeves & Brock, 2018). They posit that a MTSS involves prevention and wellness promotion, screening for barriers to learning, and implementation of evidence-based programs. However, researchers need to examine the impact of this model on students' perceptions of **school climate** as well as counselors' preparation to mitigate and respond to school violence. Another future direction is for researchers to conduct qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys regarding counselors' perceptions of their preparedness to prevent and respond to school violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Because schools affect our present and future lives as a community, all school personnel should be aware and actively involved in ensuring school safety. Critically, every school should include appropriately allocated counselors who, if properly prepared through professional training, can have an immense impact in making our schools safer for every child and for our nation. Drawing on research-based literature, we propose counselors can use the MTSS framework (Cowan et al., 2013) to structure activities around prevention, preparedness/planning, response, and recovery to reduce school violence. After reading this chapter, counselors will identify strategies to (1) design and implement activities to improve **school climate** and prevent school violence, (2) identify activities to prepare and plan for school violence, (3) create interventions to respond to violence, and (4) lead recovery efforts to help the school return to normal.

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## ***School Counselors' Use of a Multitier System of Support to Foster Safe School Experiences***

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### **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team (MTAT):** A group of individuals to identify students who are at risk for violence and to implement strategies to reduce violence.

**Multitier System of Supports (MTSS):** A model to create efforts in prevention, preparedness and planning, response, and recovery regarding school violence.

**Needs Assessment:** A strategy to learn about individuals' beliefs, attitudes, or feelings related to a specific idea.

**Positive Psychology:** The scientific study of positive events and emotions.

**Psychological First Aid:** An evidence-informed approach that can help children and adolescents reduce distress from traumatic events.

**School Climate:** The quality of school life based on perceptions of teaching and learning practices, interpersonal relationships, and school structures.

**Trauma-Informed Care Interventions:** An intervention to support children with trauma from an injury or illness.