



# PENNSYLVANIA THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAMS

## Threat Assessment & Suicide Risk Policy and Practices in Pennsylvania

### Guidance Note

June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023

This Guidance Note is intended to provide school-based threat assessment practitioners with clarity on how threat assessment and suicide risk assessment and intervention relate to each other in the Pennsylvania public K-12 context. This document focuses on the provisions of Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment) of the Pennsylvania Public School Code.

### **What are the requirements of Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment) related to suicide risk?**

Article XIII-E requires that *“Each school entity shall establish at least one [threat assessment] team... for the assessment of and intervention with students whose behavior may indicate a threat to the safety of **the student**, other students, school employees, school facilities, the community or others.” (Emphasis added.)*

Article XIII-E further specifies that threat assessment teams are responsible for *“assessing and responding to reports of students exhibiting self-harm or suicide risk factors or warning signs.”* Thus, it is indicated in Article XIII-E that school entities should establish procedures for the assessment and intervention of students who may have suicide risk. It is noted that the terms assessment and intervention are used broadly here.

Assessment may include screening and/or assessment and may be conducted in-house by school-based professionals or youth may be referred to community-based professionals for screening and assessment. Intervention may include all levels of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention.

### **How does Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment) intersect with Act 71 of 2014 (Suicide Awareness and Prevention)?**

First, let’s start with the requirements of Act 71 (passed in 2014) relevant to threat assessment teams. Act 71 states that each school entity shall adopt an age-appropriate youth suicide awareness and prevention policy which shall include the following: (1) A statement on youth suicide awareness and prevention. (2) Protocols for administering youth suicide awareness and prevention education to staff and students. (3) Methods of prevention, including procedures for early identification and referral of students at risk of suicide. (4) Methods of intervention, including procedures that address an emotional or mental health safety plan for students identified as being at increased risk of suicide. (5) Methods of responding to a student or staff suicide or suicide attempt. (6) Reporting procedures. (7) Recommended resources on youth suicide awareness and prevention programs.

Act 71 required the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to develop a model policy including the information listed above. Within this model policy, it is stated that any school personnel who observes a student exhibiting a warning sign for suicide, or who has another indication that a student may be contemplating suicide, shall refer the student for risk assessment and intervention in accordance with the school entity’s referral procedures.

Circling back to Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment), school entities should establish these procedures for assessing and intervening with students at risk for suicide in concert with their broader threat assessment procedures and protocols. Information on [Act 71](#) and [PDE’s model policy](#) include strategies for comprehensive school-based suicide prevention, including policy, training, screening and assessment, interventions (e.g., safety planning), reentry, and postvention.

### **Are threat assessment teams responsible to assess and intervene with situations involving suicide risk?**

As Article XIII-E states that school entities’ threat assessment teams are responsible for the assessment of and intervention with students whose behavior may indicate a threat to the safety of the student as well as to others, school entities should screen, assess, and/or respond to suicide risk if a student exhibits warning signs for suicide / self-harm, such as concerning statements or behaviors. However, the identification and screening/assessment of suicide risk is not something that will explicitly be conducted by the threat assessment team. Rather, threat assessment teams should divert to the Act 71 pathway (see threat assessment flowchart [here](#)). So, where an individual is identified, through the threat assessment process, as at risk for suicide or self-harm, this should activate a school entity’s Act 71 policy and protocol, and the student should be referred for next steps (e.g., suicide risk screening or assessment) performed only by team members or community-based mental health professionals qualified to do so. School mental health

professionals (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers) could act as a *pivot*, as they are frequently on the threat assessment team and are also responsible for suicide risk screening or assessment within a school entity. Threat assessment teams should establish effective pathways for communication with other school teams (e.g., Crisis Response Team, Student Assistance Program (SAP) team(s) that may help carry out Act 71 policies and procedures.

The threat assessment team may not be the initial point of contact/pathway for a student who first presents with risk of suicide / self-harm. In this instance, the Act 71 / Crisis Response Team will immediately follow Act 71 procedures and interface with the threat assessment team as soon as is feasible.

For students that are initially referred to the threat assessment team following a threat of harm to others, threat assessment teams should observe for suicide warning signs throughout the process, including during the **intake and initial inquiry stage**. Further, suicide risk screening should occur at the **triage** stage as a high proportion of those posing a threat of violence to others are often also at risk for suicide. As a standing protocol, given the increased risk of suicide among students that pose a risk of violence toward others, any student referred to the threat assessment team should be screened (at a minimum) for risk for suicide.

If, however, a student was initially referred for suicide risk through Act 71 procedures – and there is not risk of threat toward others – then the Act 71 / Crisis Response Team will follow the Act 71 procedures, and this does not need to be funneled through the threat assessment team. As always, collaboration and communication amongst various school-based teams is essential.

### **Should school entities use the threat assessment team case management form for suicide risk screening or assessments?**

The [case management form](#) delineates that threat assessment teams should conduct the suicide risk screening or assessment for youth at risk, but the threat assessment team case management form is not sufficient to identify youth suicide risk. A suicide risk screening or assessment is distinct from a threat assessment inquiry. School entities should have suicide risk screening or assessment processes and procedures in place, including associated screening/assessment tools and documentation forms, and all school staff responsible for conducting these assessments should be competent to do so properly.

### **Are suicide risk assessment procedures different than threat assessment procedures?**

Suicide and self-harm in school-age populations is a large and complex policy and practice domain in its own right. If suicide risk screening/assessment procedures do not currently exist at a school entity, it is essential for school teams (e.g., Crisis Response, SAP) responsible for overseeing or having involvement in the school entity's Act 71 policy and procedures to collaborate as soon as possible to determine the protocols and/or referral procedures they will follow for the screening/assessment and intervention with students at risk for suicide, and to ensure their efforts are aligned with the threat assessment process. School personnel and school teams should also ensure that their suicide identification and response efforts are not duplicative or in conflict with the threat assessment process.

Suicide risk screening and assessment is a skill that requires specific training, and established methods for follow-up / intervention be outlined in a school entity's policies and/or protocols. This process may be undertaken by school entity personnel who are suitably qualified to do so (e.g., school counselor, school social worker, school psychologist).

Threat assessment teams should establish protocols for information sharing and follow-up regarding the outcome of a suicide risk screening or assessment for a student involved in the threat assessment process, with full consideration of confidentiality and the relevance to case management within the school threat assessment process.

### **How do I document information related to suicide risk assessment and intervention?**

School entities should have mechanisms for documentation included within their procedures for suicide risk identification and intervention. Having consistent procedures and forms/documents ensures continuity across

the school entity, allows for appropriate communication and follow-up, and helps to ensure forms are completed and procedures are followed with fidelity. All steps followed should be documented, including parent/family contacts. If a student was referred to the threat assessment team and then suicide risk is indicated, this should be documented on the threat assessment team case management form to understand the referral pathway **and** complete appropriate suicide risk procedure documentation. If the referral was suicide risk only, then only the suicide risk forms prescribed by the school entity's policy and/or procedure are required.

**What if a student has made a threat of violence AND a threat of suicide or only a threat of suicide?**

If the student is identified as posing a risk for targeted violence against others and of suicide, the student may undergo both a threat assessment inquiry and a suicide screening/assessment simultaneously. If a student was referred for a threat assessment and suicide risk is indicated either because of a statement the student makes or because other suicide warning signs are present, the student should be referred to the Act 71 pathway to screen/assess suicide risk. This should be documented on the threat assessment case management form.

If the initial inquiry step of the threat assessment process finds no indicators of threat to others are present (i.e., only those indicative suicide risk), or if the student is referred directly to the Act 71 pathway (no threat toward others), then only Act 71 procedures need to be followed and the threat assessment team is not responsible for further screening and assessment. As noted earlier, suicide risk screening/assessments do not need to be overseen by, or routed through, the threat assessment team unless there is an indication that a potential threat to others is present in a given scenario. However, teams should be cognizant of the fact that situations can change, and the intent is to create collaborative practices. Thus, it is advised that Act 71 teams ensure ongoing communication and collaboration with threat assessment teams, such that, were the individual to re-enter the threat assessment 'channel', this information would be included in the initial inquiry.

**Model Threat Assessment Process Flow showing Intersections with Act 71 Pathway and Procedures**

