

Statement of Marisa Reddy Randazzo, Ph.D.  
before the  
Federal Commission on School Safety

U.S. Department of Education  
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Secretary DeVos, Secretary Nielsen, Secretary Azar, and Attorney General Sessions, good afternoon. My name is Marisa Reddy Randazzo and I currently serve as Director of Threat Assessment for Georgetown University and as the co-founder of Sigma Threat Management Associates. I previously served as the Chief Research Psychologist and Research Coordinator of the U.S. Secret Service, assigned to the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC). In my position at the U.S. Secret Service, I also served as Co-Director of the *Safe School Initiative*, a behavioral research study on U.S. school shootings and school shooters that was jointly conducted by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. I am here to discuss what we learned in the *Safe School Initiative* about how school shootings are carried out and, most importantly, how we can prevent them. Before I get into major findings from the study, I want to recognize the vital contribution to this research from my fellow Co-Directors, Bryan Vossekuil and Dr. Robert Fein, as well as our study co-authors, Bill Modzeleski, who is also speaking here today, and John Berglund, Dr. Randy Borum, and Dr. William Pollack.

### Overview of *The Safe School Initiative*

The *Safe School Initiative* is still considered to be the landmark federal study on school shootings in the United States. I am here to share with you what we learned from that study and the model we created to prevent school shootings in the US, the federal school threat assessment, which is what we know works to prevent school shootings. The findings I'll discuss are detailed in *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the U.S.*

A number of years ago, after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, the Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, and the Director of the Secret Service, Brian Stafford, started a series of discussions to see if there was anything that could be done to figure out how prevent U.S. school shootings. The reason the Secret Service was involved in that conversation was because the Secret Service had recently completed a study on another type of targeted violence: attacks on public officials and public figures. Much like school shootings, attacks on public officials and public figures are low base rate, high impact events – meaning that statistically they happen infrequently but each one carries a significant impact. The study that the Secret Service conducted on attacks on public officials and public figures yielded findings that have significantly enhanced the way that the Secret Service evaluates threats toward the President and other public officials.

As low base rate events, attacks on public officials required a specific behavioral research approach to learn something from studying them. In discussions between Secretary Riley and Director Stafford, they recognized the value of using the same behavioral research design the Secret Service used to study attacks on public officials and public figures in order to study school shootings, another type of low base rate, high impact event. So, in the fall of 1999, the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education launched the *Safe School Initiative*, an aggregated case study analysis of all school shootings in the United States that were carried out by a student or former student. The study focused on acts of targeted violence in school, where the student or former student chose the school on purpose as the

location of the attack. For example, when we asked one school shooter why he chose his school as the place he carried out his shooting, he told us that his school was where all of his pain and suffering came from. He felt his life at home was okay, but the bullying he had experienced at school for over a year felt inescapable and he felt there was no way out of his suffering at school.

Our data collection included not only extensive reviews of the criminal justice investigation of each shooting, as well as primary data collection through review of student records, journals and diaries, and other materials – but also interviews with ten school shooters serving time in prison. We included information from the prison interviews within The Final Report where we were able to corroborate the information that the school shooters told us in person. I want to underscore that we released the Final Report in 2002, along with the companion report *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates*. However, time and again we have seen school shootings since 2002, follow the same progression of behavior, with school shooters engaging in the same detectable pre-attack behaviors. In the immediate aftermath of school shootings since 2002, we have seen news anchors reading on air from The Final Report and Findings of the *Safe School Initiative*.

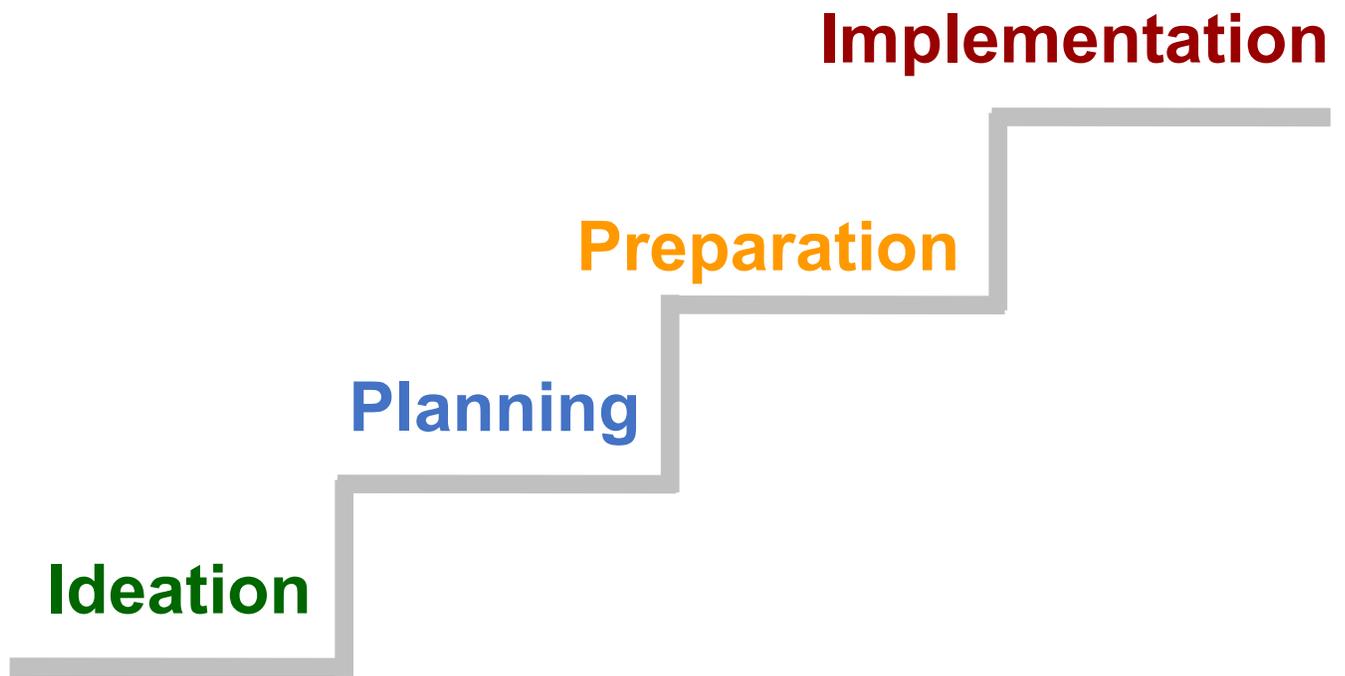
### What We Know About School Shooters

So what did we learn studying school shootings throughout the United States and talking with school shooters in prison? Here are the major findings:

1. The school shooters we studied did NOT “just snap” and engage in a school shooting. Even though media reports may describe school shootings as occurring “out of the blue,” in reality they do not. Instead of “just snapping”, school shooters think about and plan their attacks in advance – sometimes a few days in advance, sometimes months or more in advance. And they engage in planning behavior that was either known to others around them or was potentially detectable. The school shooters we studied followed an understandable and potentially detectable progression of behavior before carrying out their school shootings:
  - School shooters typically come up with an idea to carry out a school shooting.
  - They then develop a plan for how to carry out their idea. Sometimes the idea and plan look similar; but sometimes the would-be shooter changes their original idea after researching how to carry out their shooting. They may switch targets, or methods, or means.
  - They then have to develop the capacity to carry out their school shooting – including gaining access to some means of mass lethality and other preparatory behaviors.
  - Finally, they move to implement their attack plans.
  - We refer to this progression of detectable behavior as “the pathway to violence”: idea, plan, acquisition, implementation.

The fact that school shootings are planned out in advance means that it is possible to prevent them --when we can determine if someone is on the pathway to violence and find ways to move them off that pathway.

Pathway to Violence (from Deisinger, Randazzo, O'Neill & Savage, 2008):



2. Prior to most of the school shootings, the would-be shooter told other people that they were planning a school shooting. The would-be shooters typically told classmates and friends, but almost never told an adult. We continue to see school shooters engage in this pre-attack communications – what the FBI has referred to as “leakage.” Sometimes school shooters leak their ideas directly to friends in person, sometimes through posts on social media, sometimes in homework assignments handed in to teachers, sometimes in other Internet postings, or through other means. This finding underscores that students can be a vital component of efforts to prevent school shootings because students will likely know about plans for violence or other threatening behavior before adults in school may ever become aware of concerning behavior.
3. Although all of the school shooters in the *Safe School Initiative* were boys, there is in fact no accurate or useful profile of a “school shooter” – meaning there is no set of traits that described all–or even most–of the attackers. Instead, school shooters varied considerably in demographic, background and other static characteristics. The demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially. Knowing that a particular student in your school shares demographic characteristics or traits with prior school shooters does not help in determining whether that student in your school is thinking about or planning for a violent act.
4. However, we can tell a lot by looking at that person’s behavior about whether there is reason to be concerned about their potential for violence. Nearly all of the school shooters in the *Safe School Initiative* engaged in behaviors--prior to their attacks—that caused concern or alarm to at least one person, usually an adult, and most seriously concerned or alarmed at least three different people. Would-be school shooters were not invisible – or even of little concern - to adults in their life. Instead, most school shooters were already on multiple “radar screens” before they engaged in their shootings.
5. Almost all of the attackers had experienced or perceived some major loss prior to the attack. These losses included a perceived failure or loss of status; loss of a loved one or of a significant relationship, including a romantic relationship; and a major illness experienced by the attacker or someone significant to him. In fact, most attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts at some point prior to their attack. In many cases, school shooters planned to kill themselves during their school shooting or were hoping to be killed by police responding to the shooting – they were hoping for a “suicide by cop.” One young man had even researched the laws in his state and thought if his attack did not end in suicide by cop, that if he killed at least two people then he should get the death penalty. He went beyond planning for a suicide by cop to plan for “suicide by criminal justice system.”

It is important to understand that just because we know someone has experienced a major loss or even that they are suicidal, it does NOT mean they are on the pathway to violence. Many people experience losses or may even become suicidal, but they will NOT be a risk to anyone else. However, when we determine that someone is on a pathway to violence, finding ways to solve that person’s underlying

problems and get support to cope with overwhelming circumstances is the key to getting them off the pathway to violence and keeping them off the pathway to violence.

Taken together, our findings about school shooters and school shootings show us that it is possible to prevent school shootings and that students are a vital component of successful prevention. Using our research findings, we developed the Secret Service / Department of Education school threat assessment model to prevent school shootings – which is also known as the federal school threat assessment model.

### How We Prevent School Shootings

We can prevent school shootings using by:

- gathering information about a student or other person of concern
- determining if that person is planning a school shooting or otherwise on the pathway to violence
- determining why the person is on the pathway to violence – i.e., what personal problems, situations, and/or conditions have left them feeling that violence is a good way to solve their problems, or perhaps the only option they have left to solve their problems – and help them solve their problems through non-violent means.

The problems that have overwhelmed school shooters and led them on to the pathway to violence were often personal situations that were fixable – or mental health conditions that were treatable. When I work on active threat investigations now, for schools, colleges, workplaces, and high-profile individuals, we regularly look for why the person is on the pathway to violence and find ways to help them solve their underlying problems. When we connect them with appropriate resources, we get them off the pathway to violence – and keep them off the pathway to violence. Once the underlying problems are solved or lessened, their interest in or need to engage in violence typically goes away.

The Secret Service / Department of Education school threat assessment model – which is detailed in *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* – provides a how-to guide for school personnel, law enforcement professionals, mental health professionals and others how to set up and operate school threat assessment teams and a step-by-step process for investigating and evaluating threats and prevent school violence.

### Conclusion

Secretary DeVos, Secretary Nielsen, Secretary Azar, and Attorney General Sessions, I want to leave you with a sense of hope. It is possible to prevent school shootings, if we give our school professionals, law enforcement professionals, mental health professionals, and others the necessary tools and training to implement threat assessment programs in schools and the school and community resources to make intervention successful. We have known how to prevent school shootings since we completed the *Safe School Initiative*. Now we just need to get this information into the hands of those on the front lines of this problem. As a threat assessment professional, I thank you for the opportunity to share this information with the Commission. And as a parent, I thank you for the work you are doing to keep our children, our schools, and our communities safe.