

WHITEPAPER

The Identification Gap

Why Reactive Threat Assessment Models Miss the Students Who Need Help Most — and How SBTAM Closes the Gap

A Comparative Analysis of Proactive vs. Reactive School Safety Frameworks
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Key Finding:

Traditional threat assessment models that wait for a reported incident identify approximately 0% of at-risk students before a crisis event. Districts implementing universal behavioral screening through SBTAM identify up to 22% of at-risk students proactively — and connect more than 59% of them to services within 7 days.

This whitepaper is intended for school district administrators, safety coordinators, school counselors, and school resource officers. All research citations refer to FOCUS Research Foundation findings.

The Problem with Waiting

For decades, school threat assessment has operated on a reactive model: a student makes a threat, someone reports it, and a team investigates. This approach — codified in frameworks like the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) and NTAC investigative protocols — has done important work. It has helped schools respond more effectively to reported threats.

But it has a fundamental blind spot: it only activates when someone makes a report.

Research consistently shows that the students who represent the greatest long-term risk are often the ones who never say anything. They do not make threats. They do not act out. They withdraw, isolate, and deteriorate — quietly, invisibly, until something breaks.

The Identification Gap

Under a referral-based system, a student must first be noticed by someone, who must then decide to report a concern, which must then be escalated to the right person. Each step is a filter that removes the students least likely to be seen. The result: nearly 0% identification of at-risk students before a crisis event.

What Is CSTAG — and What Does It Do Well?

CSTAG (Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines), developed at the University of Virginia, is one of the most widely adopted threat assessment frameworks in American schools. It provides a structured approach to evaluating and responding to reported threats — and it does this well.

CSTAG strengths include:

- Structured, research-based threat evaluation protocols
- Clear decision trees for determining threat seriousness
- A strong emphasis on support over punishment
- Documented outcomes showing reduced suspensions and improved student outcomes

SBTAM does not replace CSTAG. For districts that use CSTAG, SBTAM adds the proactive layer that CSTAG by design does not provide: the universal screening that identifies students before they ever make a reportable threat.

What SBTAM Adds: The Proactive Layer

SBTAM (School Behavior Threat Assessment and Management) operates on a fundamentally different premise: don't wait for the report. Ask every student. Find the suffering before it becomes a threat.

The core mechanism is universal screening through the FOCUS Universal Adaptive Screener — a 25-item instrument administered to all students in grades 6–12, three times per year. FOCUS identifies both internalizing risk (depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation) and externalizing risk (aggression, anger, access to weapons) simultaneously and systematically.

The 10-Dimension Comparison

Here is how SBTAM and traditional reactive models compare across the dimensions that matter most for student safety and district compliance:

Dimension	Traditional BTAM / CSTAG	SBTAM
Activation trigger	Reported threat or incident	Universal screening — every student
Student population reached	Students who make a report or are reported	100% of students in grades 6–12
Identification rate (pre-crisis)	~0%	Up to 22%
Primary data source	Staff observation, peer reports	Direct student self-report (FOCUS)
Referral bias	High — quiet students go	Eliminated — data-driven

	undetected	routing
Internalizing risk identification	Limited	Systematic via SRA module
Externalizing risk identification	When reported	Systematic via BTA module
MTSS/PBIS alignment	Partial	Full — built on tiered framework
HB 268 compliance (GA)	Partial	Full compliance roadmap
Time to intervention	Days to weeks after incident	Within 7 days of screening flag (59%+ of cases)

The Right Way to Think About This

CSTAG is a response framework. SBTAM is an identification framework. The most effective school safety ecosystems need both.

Think of it this way: CSTAG is your fire department. It responds superbly when there's a fire. SBTAM is your smoke detector system — it finds the smoldering conditions before the fire starts. Both are necessary. Neither alone is sufficient.

For districts that use CSTAG:

SBTAM does not ask you to abandon your existing threat assessment process. It asks you to add a proactive identification layer upstream of it. When FOCUS flags a student, that student enters your existing BTAM review process — now with data, not just a report.

Implementation Path for Districts

Most districts can add the SBTAM proactive layer within a single semester without disrupting existing safety infrastructure:

- Month 1: Appoint SBTAM Coordinator, build team, download free starter resources at sbtam.com
- Month 2: Schedule and administer first FOCUS screening window
- Month 3: Review results with SBTAM team; activate interventions for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students
- Ongoing: FOCUS administered 3x/year; team meets monthly; cases documented for HB 268 compliance

Conclusion

The question every district leader should be asking is not "do we have a threat assessment process?" Almost every district does. The question is: "does our process find students before they become a threat?"

If the answer is no — if your system only activates when someone makes a report — then you have an identification gap. SBTAM closes it.

See the Identification Gap in Your Own Data

Schedule a free FOCUS demonstration. We'll show you what universal screening reveals in a district like yours — and what your current system is missing.

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