

**MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT  
VIOLENCE RISK ASSESSMENT (VRA) PROCEDURES**  
For responding to Violent Behavior or Serious Threats

**I. INTRODUCTION**

No one can completely predict the behavior of any other human being. The most accurate predictions of violence are based upon known “risk factors” for groups of individuals who have been violent. Clinical judgment that fails to focus on specific risk factors is not a particularly good predictor of violence. Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) has developed a set of procedures entitled Violence Risk Assessment (VRA) that is based upon known risk factors for violence.

The VRA consists of a violence risk checklist, the gathering of mental health information, and a summary report. The checklist is completed by the principal (or designee) and focuses on the events and the safety of the student in question and others. Mental health information is gathered and reviewed by members of the Student Services team. The tools used in the VRA process are not normative instruments. They are to be used to assist the VRA team in thoroughly assessing various risk factors.

Ideally, a VRA is conducted by a team of school and security staff that collectively assesses risks and makes recommendations based on their findings.

Teams are comprised of:

1. Administrative staff
2. Law Enforcement and Security, and
3. Student Services

**II. VRA DESCRIPTION**

**A. What is a Violence Risk Assessment?**

A VRA is a set of tools and a procedure to use when the members of the school staff determine that a student may pose a risk to the safety of others that requires immediate action. The term ‘VRA’ refers both to the process of gathering the information and to the written documents that are produced as a result of an assessment.

When there is probable risk of harm to students, staff or school property, a VRA is recommended. Certain factors increase the level of risk. ‘Red Flags’ would include the specificity of the threat, e.g., time/date, access to weapons, target, location and/or an articulated plan. Impulsivity and lack of control, poor reality testing or lapses in judgment, a history of violence and/or anger, and antisocial behavior patterns are additional factors that increase the level of risk.

Examples of types of serious violence threats or behavior include:

- Acts of aggression toward others
- Threats of aggression or harm to others
- Intimidation of others

- Pattern of behaviors that raises the suspicion or risk for violence (violent poetry or stories, drawings, or internet communications).

The **VRA Checklist**, completed by the School Principal or designee, documents the behavior or threat and provides initial findings and recommendations. Completion of the checklist will require:

1. Personal knowledge of the student's behavior and circumstance
2. Review of school records
3. Information from the student, parent, staff or school security.

Additionally, student services staff gathers mental health information to assess social, emotional and personal factors. This can include the following sources of information:

- Review of school records
- Student interview
- Parent interview(s)
- Staff Interviews
- Law enforcement information
- Community agencies, social services, mental health providers, with written permission

#### **B. What is the purpose of a Violence Risk Assessment?**

- To determine the risk of harm posed by the student: high, moderate, low
- To gather information critical to maintaining a safe school environment
- To develop a relationship with the student who is suspected of being at risk for school violence
- To guide the development of appropriate interventions for the student

#### **C. When is a Violence Risk Assessment initiated?**

The school principal determines when it is necessary to implement the VRA, with input from school staff. The VRA procedures are initiated with any student who exhibits potential serious violence risk BEFORE the student is allowed to continue his/her usual school program. If a principal is not sure whether a VRA is necessary, consultation with the MMSD Safety Coordinator and members of the school's Student Support and Intervention Team is recommended. This allows risk to be shared amongst the members of the VRA team.

The student who has engaged in violent behavior or threats is often suspended or removed from school. If possible, the VRA should be completed prior to the student's departure. Efforts are made to obtain parental permission for the student interview, as well as consents to exchange information with non-MMSD providers. If unable to conduct the interview immediately, arrange for meeting at a neutral site, or have the student brought to school under supervision for an assessment appointment. In some cases, if the student is in police custody, interviewing may not be possible. In these cases, decisions are made based upon existing data.

#### **D. How do we complete a Violence Risk Assessment?**

1. The principal notifies the MMSD Safety Coordinator's Office of serious violent acts or threats that endanger school safety. The purpose of this notification is

for the Safety Coordinator to track violence trends, assist in the deployment of security resources, and provide security consultation.

2. The principal (or principal designee) completes the **VRA checklist of risk factors**. Indicate what information is already available, and what information still needs to be gathered. Determine whether this information will be collected through a record review, and/or through the use of a student interview, parent/staff interviews, and interviews with community agencies. Assign tasks and responsibilities to appropriate members of the team.
3. The assigned student services staff completes his or her assessment using the **Mental Health checklist, interview(s)** and record reviews. This is done by an individual or by a team of individuals. These professionals (primarily school psychologists and school social workers) need to have knowledge about normal child and adolescent development and behavior, personality and emotional disorders, and violence risk. They must have clinical interview and rapport-building skills, observational skills, report writing skills and ability to develop/recommend interventions. They must also have understanding of how mental health issues, school climate, interpersonal relationships at school, family dynamics and prior experiences may influence behavior, in particular, violent behavior at school. In most instances, MMSD Student Services staff are qualified by their licensure, education and training to perform these assessments. Student Services staff in each school who are qualified to complete the MHI are identified at the beginning of each school year. Training specific to violence risk and the procedures and guidelines for completing the MMSD Violence Risk Assessment must be provided on a regular basis.
  - a. In order to interview the student in emergency situations involving potential harm, parent notification is good practice, but not required by law or professional ethics. If the parent refuses to grant permission for the school to conduct a student interview, or the student refuses to cooperate with the VRA process, this is noted and decisions are made based on existing data.
  - b. Use records and collateral information as well. Other sources of information include:
    - school records
    - parents/guardians
    - community providers
    - staff
    - law enforcement
    - county social services, mental health providers

Parent permission is not required for the student services staff to review existing data or to interview other individuals at school. Consents to release information must be obtained in order to gather or exchange information with non-MMSD agencies and service providers.

4. VRA Team Decision-Making: The team meets to:
  - A. Review findings from multiple professional perspectives;

- B. Formulate a safety plan; and
  - C. Formulate intervention plan.
5. Summary Report and Dissemination of Information
- A. The team uses a template to write a summary report
  - B. A representative, or team of representatives, meet with the student and family
  - C. Outcomes are communicated to appropriate staff using “need to know” guidelines.

**E. Who completes the Violence Risk Assessment?**

The principal determines whether or not a VRA is necessary. This decision is made with input from Student Services and Safety and Security. The principal or designee completes the VRA checklist. The gathering of mental health information is completed by members of the student services staff who are trained in the VRA procedures. Once the information is collected, the VRA team meets to share information, analyze the data, assign risk level and make recommendations.

**F. What are some possible outcomes of the Violence Risk Assessment?**

In situations where the VRA is unable to rule out serious violence risk, the principal may be required to take steps to protect the safety of the student and of the school through the development of a safety plan, until the threat is resolved. The principal has a range of options including:

- arranging alternative transportation to and from school
- modifying school starting and ending times
- temporarily reducing the academic schedule and developing a reintegration plan
- delivering instruction in a separate room
- providing greater student supervision
- scheduling regular meetings with a member(s) of the student services staff
- conducting searches of student, locker or backpack
- seeking additional resources\*
- off campus programming\*
- referral to community based mental health providers

\* The principal makes a request in writing to the Area Assistant Superintendent should these options be considered necessary. A summary report of the VRA findings and recommendations is included in the request.

**G. Special Situations**

**1. What if a parent refuses to make his/her child available for the interview?**

The information is collected from other sources and a decision is made without the interview information. It is documented that parents did not allow the interview.

**2. What if the student has an IEP?**

Having an IEP does not preclude completing a VRA. The student’s case managers should be interviewed if possible. Results of the VRA may be included in the IEP document, or used in completing a Functional Behavior Assessment.

### **III. VRA DOCUMENTATION AND NOTIFICATION**

#### **A. How are VRAs documented?**

The VRA team produces a written summary report that incorporates the information obtained and the recommendations of the team. This summary report is written with parents, teachers and other readers in mind and is attached to the VRA checklist. Both documents are stored in the Behavioral File. The Mental Health Information worksheet, interview notes, record review notes and other personal notes used in completing the VRA are not part of the student record and are kept in the personal file of the individuals who produced them.

It is not necessary to send the complete report to the Safety Coordinator. However, the Safety Coordinator Office is noticed as to the completion of the VRA and the outcome.

#### **B. Who has access to the written reports?**

Copies of the findings and recommendations are distributed to the following individuals:

- Parents
- School Principal
- Staff members that work closely with the student and have responsibility for implementing the recommendations.
- Parents must give written permission for the VRA report to be sent to agencies/persons outside the school.

#### **C. Where are the VRAs filed?**

The VRA checklists and the summary report are filed in the student's Behavioral File.

#### **D. What happens to the documents after a student is no longer enrolled in MMSD?**

Copies of the VRA findings and recommendations are destroyed as per student record guidelines.

#### **E. How is the information in a VRA disseminated?**

The VRA team decides what information is disseminated and to whom the information should be given. Parents have access to the report. Findings and recommendations related to safety risk are included in the report. It is not necessary to include personal family information that is not related to the safety risk.

#### **F. How are decisions made about the notification of staff, students, victims, and families of victims? Who should be notified? What are procedures around this?**

Notification is required to those individuals that are at risk. The VRA team collectively decides who is considered to be at risk. This sharing of information is determined to be appropriate and within legal parameters as specified in Wisconsin Statute 118.125.

### **IV. LIABILITY**

MMSD has Legal Counsel to assist and consult regarding specific situations. When school professionals know there may be a risk for violence, doing nothing can be a

liability risk. Professional organizations and the courts have supported professionals who are following current best practice in carrying out violence risk assessments. Best practices include following agency procedures and guidelines, reviewing available records and information, interviewing the threatening person, and documenting the work and recommendations.

Student right to confidentiality is no longer applicable when there is a threat to safety and the threatened targets (and parents) need to be notified. When in doubt about the appropriate action, work with your principal, safety coordinator, professional support person, colleagues, and/or MMSD legal counsel.

### V. DECISION MAKING

Decisions about the actions to take after the Violence Risk Assessment is completed should be made by a team of people, rather than an individual. It is best practice to have representatives from administration, police or security, and student services represented on the decision making team.

