

Tipping the balance: Moving toward school safety while considering student needs

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Abstract

This is a composite narrative about a comprehensive safety assessment for a 7th grade Black adolescent who was referred for assessment because he had made an email threat in which he said that the only way to get attention was to blow up the school. This case illustrates a comprehensive assessment and problem-solving approach which begins with a safety assessment but also widens the lens to explore how other conflicts and school climate may be impacting the students. This process has the potential to not only help the child and his or her parents but also to motivate educators to improve the climate for learning for the entire school.

KEYWORDS

mental health, safety assessment, school climate, school safety, threat assessment

1 | INTRODUCTION

This is a composite narrative about a school consultation for a 7th grade Black adolescent who was referred for assessment because he had made an email threat in which he said that the only way to get attention was to blow up the school. This case illustrates a comprehensive assessment and problem-solving approach developed by Dr. Rappaport, based on guidelines developed by Cornell et al. (2009).

The approach begins with a safety assessment, which evaluates the level of the threat, whether the student should return to school, and if so, what kind of safety plan might be needed. It assesses whether the student's threatening behavior is a symptom of a mental illness and addresses relevant family factors. However, the assessment also widens the lens to explore any conflicts between the staff and the student that may be contributing to the adolescent's behavior as well as examining the ways in which school climate – including racism, sexism, and bullying – might be fueling the crisis. This process has the potential to not only help the child and his or her parents but also to motivate educators to improve the climate for learning for the entire school.

2 | THE SCHOOL

The Baker School is a K-8 school with approximately 400 students located in an urban school district in the northeastern United States. The child psychiatrist overseeing the services (NR) had consulted with the district for over 20 years providing trainings for faculty and administrators and treating some of the high-risk students at a school-based health center. The school system serves approximately 6000 students enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Nearly half of the families served by the district are low-income, as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch. About 25% speak a first language other than English.

On average, 25–40 students in the district (about 0.5% of the student population) are referred for the in-depth safety assessments described above each year. Cases can be referred for a safety assessment for many reasons: the case is complicated due to legal issues or special education needs, has created panic or uncertainty among staff, or requires outside mental health consultation. The above cases do not include students who are at immediate risk for harm to themselves or others, as these cases are handled by immediate referral to law enforcement and/or psychiatric emergency services.

3 | THE REFERRAL

I was asked to conduct a psychiatric threat assessment for Steven. Steven is a 7th grade adopted Black adolescent receiving special education services in a mainstream educational setting. During a period where students were working on computers, a teacher witnessed a concerning email exchange between Steven and a classmate and wanted a determination of whether it would be safe for Steven to return to school.

4 | THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

From all appearances, the Baker School had a strong, positive climate with a caring attitude towards students. The physical structure was welcoming, with flags of many nations hanging in the lobby, and circular tables in the cafeteria encouraging lunch conversation. The school psychologist was extremely invested in the school's families and students, often providing support and in-services to teachers about how to address students' difficult behaviors. A family support counselor had been working for over 15 years in the school and had developed a strong afterschool community program to provide engaging activities for students and provide extra childcare for working parents. The school had implemented the socially- and emotionally-informed Second Step curriculum (www.secondstep.org), a research-based universal social and emotional learning curriculum (though I later learned that it was a "watered down version," as there were other competing and prioritized demands). A School Resource Officer (a police officer assigned to the school) often reached out to connect with the most troubled students in a non-punitive way.

However, when I walked into the school to begin my evaluation of Steven, I overheard a secretary calling out loudly to a student in a sarcastic, and contemptuous manner, "You're coming back to the principal's office again? Get your act together."

Over the past 7 years, Baker had experienced severe interruptions in leadership continuity, with three principals during that time. Staff were skeptical that significant change to address persistent discipline challenges, to deal with academic setbacks, and to improve flagging morale was possible given the frequent leadership shifts. Distrust between the new principal (of 2 years) and the faculty was palpable, with a divide between the younger staff who were energetic and the veteran staff, who felt blamed for the intractable problems. Veteran faculty generally attributed these impasses to not getting intensive enough resources to adequately alter the trajectory of struggling students. The principal appeared to vacillate between imposing his ideas and making efforts to engender collaboration.

According to several teachers, the older staff had become suspicious that the principal had a hidden agenda and at times they tried to subtly undermine his authority.

School leaders did administer a school climate survey every year. However, my impression was that Baker's use of these school climate survey was somewhat cursory. There was some staff discussion about issues like goals and core values, order and discipline and expectations for academic success. However, it was not clear how this discussion translated into decision-making, direction to the staff, or concrete targets for improvement. Even more worrisome, the results were only reviewed by the principal and the school's leadership team and were not used as a tool for school improvement planning.

The most recent data had also revealed some disturbing racial disparities: A disproportionate number of African American students were being suspended and/or expelled. There was a persistent gap in academic achievement for African American students, who comprised 60% of the student body. And despite efforts to diversify, the staff remained predominantly white.

5 | THE INCIDENT THAT PRECIPITATED A SAFETY ASSESSMENT

The threat that initiated the referral for a safety assessment had occurred the previous week when one of Steven's teachers happened to see an email conversation between Steven and another classmate. Steven had written, "The only way to get attention is to blow this school up. And, I could make a hit list." This frightened the teacher as well as others in the school. The teacher had talked with her fellow teachers to find out whether they had concerns about Steven, and she had reported the incident to the school principal.

When the principal, school resource officer, and psychologist called Steven in to discuss the email, he had become agitated and angry about "being accused." At this point, the principal sent Steven to the local hospital emergency room for an evaluation. The ER doctor had recommended that it would be safe for him to return to school, based on the fact that he was remorseful and did not seem agitated.

The principal and school psychologist had asked for a safety assessment to determine whether it would be safe for Steven to return to school and to have a safety plan in place if he did return. The principal and staff were apprehensive about Steven's returning to school. The recent murder of a teacher in a neighboring school by one of her students undoubtedly contributed to this anxiety. The principal also felt that Steven's parents were minimizing the danger signals that Steven was showing.

Steven's parents were upset that this teacher was "investigating" their son and went to the superintendent who talked with the Director of Special Education and the principal and they initiated an outside child/adolescent psychiatric evaluation (my safety assessment) to expand on the ER doctor's recommendation. The assessment also needed to establish whether Steven's behavior was secondary to his psychiatric diagnoses, in order to determine if the alleged behavioral infraction leading to possible suspension is related to or caused by disability, as required by his IEP. The school also wanted help determining whether Steven's needs were adequately addressed by current supports and assistance dealing with Steven's family, who, they said, believed this was a racially charged incident with an exaggerated school response.

6 | THE EVALUATION PROCESS

My evaluation included the following:

- Review of Steven's academic and behavioral (including disciplinary) records and the threatening email, neuropsychological testing
- Meeting with relevant staff to learn about their concerns and understandings

- Meeting with Steven
- Meeting with Steven's parents
- Assessment of staff-student conflict and school climate
- Report writing
- Sharing my understanding and recommendations with the principal and a small group of staff

6.1 | Record review

Steven had struggled with reading and writing for 5 years, since second grade. He had received Orton-Gillingham instruction from a reading specialist for a few months, but this was discontinued before the end of second grade. Neuropsychological testing was performed in fourth grade to establish if his fluctuating mood, aggressive behavior and impulsivity was secondary to learning disabilities and executive functioning. The testing revealed that Steven had strong verbal skills and above average non-verbal visual processing skills. He had slightly below average decoding skills and passage reading skills. He struggled with writing in a linear manner, had difficulty writing about complex material and was slow to process ideas.

School records showed that Steven often required one-on-one attention to stay on task in class. He did well with highly structured, consistent, and nurturing teachers. Math was a clear interest and strength, and he had an aptitude for drawing (and often got in trouble for doodling during class). He had difficulty getting the big picture when reading. Teachers reported that he often avoided reading, that he often became distracted in class and frequently asked to go to the bathroom and missed chunks of academic instruction.

Steven's teachers saw him as "not consistently present" in class. Several felt he was not producing the quality of work he was capable of. The record noted that Steven "often rejects help and support from others" and "feels insulted that the school thinks he's 'stupid.'" He was noted to have poor executive functioning and struggles with transitions, low frustration tolerance, and excessive restlessness.

Steven's records also revealed a history of significant self-regulation difficulties beginning in preschool. In fact, he had to leave one of his preschool placements. The record showed an ongoing history of impulsivity, concentration problems, and conflict with other kids, including an incident in 3rd grade where he had put another student in a head-lock and flipped a table. Of interest, this increased aggression appeared in third grade, which is also the time when the curriculum requires that students be able to read more independently.

When Steven was 10 he had been given a pharmacological trial of a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressant medication. However, the family had attributed an aggressive incident to the SSRI – he had picked up a knife during an altercation with his parents. The antidepressant was discontinued. Steven had taken a prescribed stimulant medication. However, he had taken it only intermittently and then stopped. He had reported that, even after adjusting his dose, he did not like the way it made him feel. Steven had an individualized educational plan (IEP) that had been put in place in the fifth grade. The IEP identified impulsive behavior, high anxiety, and a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Reading issues were not mentioned.

Instructional modifications in Steven's IEP plan included "previewing material, assistance with structuring tasks, and support with metacognitive approaches to material." Apparently, a point system had been implemented with a token economy in the fifth grade where he earned "snack tickets," but this had only exacerbated outbursts and meltdowns and was discontinued. His behavioral plan for 7th grade included "catching him being good" with a "dense schedule of social praise," conversations regarding his behavior and redirection. It was unclear whether he had received enough tutoring support for his writing production. The plan included no remediation to address his decoding difficulties.

The school records also included some background family history that Steven lives with his adoptive White mother and father and their two older biological White daughters. He was adopted when he was 3-years-old. Prior to the

adoption he had lived with his single mother, who had struggled with drug addiction. He had also been exposed to intimate partner violence, including an incident where his father held a gun to his mother's head. Steven had received counseling from a family therapist for the past 5 years. She worked with the family on how to support Steven by recognizing his explosiveness and his keen sense of justice but also holding him accountable.

6.2 | Meetings with staff

As I spoke with staff, I learned that a number of teachers had no confidence in this principal. Several said they felt he was unresponsive to their concerns, indicating a serious climate problem. Additionally, I learned that the principal was upset that the teacher who initially saw Steven's email had not come directly to him. She had first spoken with students involved with the email exchange and had then sent a note asking other teachers about their concerns about Steven. The principal felt this undermined his authority.

Several teachers were also troubled that Steven's parents had gone to the superintendent upset that a teacher was "investigating" their son without their permission.

There were clearly serious climate problems among the Baker staff, and between this child's parents and the school.

6.3 | Meetings with Steven

In our first one-on-one meeting, Steven initially sat slumped in his chair and was not making eye contact. Within 10 min, however, he warmed up and started to share the lyrics of a Kanye West song. As we talked, I was struck by Steven's ability and willingness to honestly engage in the interview process. His relative openness was a positive prognostic indicator. He gave a detailed history of what his parents had told him about being adopted. He described a conflict he had experienced on the day of the interview with some awareness of his part in escalating the tension.

He told me that he had sent the email to his friend, he said, he had not mean to frighten anybody. He said that he immediately felt badly about it. He told me that he believes that the teacher who reported him thinks he is a bad kid, that she often gets mad at him and calls him out for getting distracted while ignoring other (White) kids who are not paying attention. He thoughtfully acknowledged that the very recent school murder in the state had intensified everyone's worry about school violence.

Steven shared that he often felt angry that his older siblings are the favorites and more competent. He lamented that things did not come easier to him. He openly expressed his fear and anger that he was being treated unfairly as a Black student. Almost all of his teachers had noted that he had a worrisome fascination with gangs, wore gang-affiliated clothes, read gangster books, and boasted gang symbols on his notebook. However, Steven was clear that he did not want to end up in jail like his biological father and he resented that some teachers saw him as a "gangster in training." "Why don't they ask me! If they asked me I'd tell them," he said dejectedly, adding vehemently, "I'm not involved with any gangs and I'm not gonna be."

When I asked Steven about his relationships with teachers (identified as "problematic" in his school records), Steven said some teachers did not like him before he even started in their class. At one point during the interview he said with feeling, "Ms. Robbins (a teacher) treats me like I'm damaged goods. What does she think — I'm stupid? I'll show her what's stupid." Often children with learning disabilities carry a pervasive sense of shame. In Steven's case, his learning difficulties were very likely compounded by implicit bias that cast him, as a Black adolescent, as less intelligent. He did describe the one exception, a science teacher who had made a special effort to get to know him and who boxed with him after school. He was angry, though, that another teacher could not pronounce his last name. Similar many kids, he felt that he did worse with teachers he thought were unfair. Importantly, Steven did become decidedly animated talking about the hands-on lab activities in science — a clue that he would benefit from more hands-on learning.

Steven also shared that he had no interest in the Capstone Project, a year-long language arts program which focused on a self-reflection about one's developing identity. His teacher had complained that his participation was poor and that he had failed to hand in his final project. "The whole thing was boring," Steven said. It became clear that, for Steven, this project was particularly emotionally charged. I learned that the Capstone Project involved a lot of peer learning and sharing as well as a significant amount of self-directed reading and writing. Given his intense shame and his insecurity about adoption into a white family, not surprisingly, Steven did not want other kids knowing his business.

Add a possible unremediated language-based learning disability that made reading extremely laborious, significant difficulty writing, ADHD that made it difficult for him to focus, and his trouble organizing himself. It appears that, for Steven, this well-meaning project was a set up for failure.

6.4 | Meetings with Steven's parents

Steven's father seemed relatively comfortable and confident in his relationship with his son. He clearly liked that his son had a keen sense of justice. His mother seemed more preoccupied with Steven's disengagement at school. Both parents were livid that his teacher had spoken to other teachers without their knowledge and involvement. They certainly appreciated the need to conduct a psychiatric/safety evaluation, but they were very upset that they had not been collaboratively included earlier in the process.

In their interview with me, Steven's parents openly wondered if there was an undercurrent of racism at play at Baker. His mother said that what appears as Steven's willful behavior is actually his effort to take control. She noted that talking with a neutral tone and giving him space, verbally as well as physically, works well. His parents shared that before this incident he had been having one of his most productive months at school.

My impression was that this recent event was one of a number of instances that had contributed to a longstanding and serious rupture between the family and the school, some of Steven's teachers, and between the parents and the principal. One particularly egregious example: Steven's parents said they had notified the principal about a Snapchat video of a White student using the N-word at a party. The principal had responded that because it happened off school property, it could not be dealt with at school. Steven's parents were deeply disturbed that the principal had made no move to address the racism they saw filtering through the school's culture and surely impacting their son and other students in large and small ways, day in and day out. Steven had also reported that the school had made no response at all to a racial epithet that had been scrawled in the school bathroom. These examples, sadly, were consistent with the racial achievement gap, the disparities in discipline, and Steven's experience of being treated as "stupid" and a "gangster in training."

Significantly, I also learned that Steven's father had recently been diagnosed with cancer. They had informed Steven, but not the school. Steven had asked his father if he was going to die, and his father had responded by telling his son that he would do everything in his power to see Steven through high school.

6.5 | Diagnostic impressions

Steven struck me as very observant and aware of his challenges. I saw a child who was very charismatic, with a warm smile, a wry sense of humor, and a swagger that signaled he was not easily intimidated by authority figures. However, his outward charm and confidence did seem to mask an underlying vulnerability. The fact that I had no academic expectations may have helped him be open with me. He clearly wanted me to understand how he had landed in this predicament. My hypothesis was that if I had made academic demands or had not engaged him empathically that he might have become more oppositional — particularly if I had reacted in a way that signaled that I was afraid of him.

In terms of formal diagnosis, my impression was that Steven was a relatively vulnerable boy who presented with moderate anxiety, a history of irritability, and significant mood lability. I was unclear whether this reflected an under-

lying mood disorder, and/or, given his pre-adoption history, PTSD (i.e., a trauma history). Steven was also struggling with untreated ADHD. It appeared that ADHD meds had been tried, but perhaps without enough follow through to find meds with fewer side effects.

Steven's neuropsychology test results identified some significant difficulties with writing and some likely unremediated language-based learning disabilities. Without high quality support and structure for his writing Steven was not going to be able to succeed in middle school or high school. Equally critical, without appropriate remediation, reading would remain extremely laborious and difficult, which would severely compromise his learning.

Steven clearly had some unaddressed learning disabilities. What his teachers saw as "avoidance" was likely Steven's attempt to resist exposing his vulnerability about reading and writing. He often anticipated that homework or in-class writing would be difficult and would take him longer to complete. Add ADHD and PTSD to these difficulties, it is not surprising that he had trouble paying attention, frequently asked to go to the bathroom, and did not turn in assignments in a timely way. Add to this Steven's expressed fear and anger that he was being treated unfairly as a Black student and that his difficulties would be seen as further proof that he was "stupid."

The tension between staff and principal was likely only adding stress to an already dysregulated system. Improving school climate would be key not only for Steven, but for all students at Baker.

Finally, and importantly, Steven was likely feeling the impact of inadvertent systemic racism. His feeling of "not being liked" of being singled out for behavior for which there were no consequences for White kids makes sense in this context. Again, although 60% of Baker students were Black, the school had only three Black teachers. And, again, the Black-White achievement gap and disciplinary discrepancies between Black and White students, the nasty dismissive comment I had heard on my first day, and the principal's striking failure to address two clearly racist incidents, make it likely that implicit bias is having a significant corrosive impact on this already vulnerable child.

I began to feel that this sensitive self-aware child, with appropriate reading remediation with the right educational supports to manage his executive function, with teachers who were genuinely interested him, and with more hands-on learning, might be able to do quite well. It also seemed clear that the school needed to address the tension between the principal and his staff. Finally, a major investment was needed to address racism that clearly permeated the school.

6.6 | Report and Recommendations

I prefaced my written report with an overall emphasis on the significant challenges Steven faced while also highlighting his strengths. I tried to translate my formulation into language that would be understandable to the school. I also placed Steven's difficulties in a larger context of school climate issues and significant unaddressed racial bias. I then verbally shared my assessment and my concerns with the principal and school psychologist.

Steven is bright, sensitive, and creative young adolescent who has confronted significant challenges in the development of his core sense-of-self. His major early life losses associated with neglectful pre-adoption maternal care, exposure to trauma, and maternal separation left him in profound need of healing corrective experiences of feeling lovable and safe. This vulnerability has been intensified by an evolving sense of shame associated with unaddressed learning struggles that likely contributed to his apparent impulsivity and dysregulation. All of this has significantly undermined Steven's sense of hope for himself and his future.

Added to this is Steven's experience of racism, which corrodes the self-esteem and hopefulness of so many children of color, affirmed by the school's achievement gaps, the discipline disparities, and the lack of Black faculty and leadership. This was toxically deepened by the principal's striking failure to address two serious incidents of racism when Steven and his family reached out for help. Sadly, in the absence of hope, Steven's ability to keep trying at relationships and learning is significantly diminished as is his ability to calm himself when he is frustrated.

Despite these struggles, there are strong indications within Steven's psychological profile that he is a self-aware young man who can engage with adults who take an interest in him. He has also had many corrective emotional experiences in his loving adoptive family. With the right supports at school, he could continue to grow and heal. Addressing

the systemic racism at Baker and tension in the school climate are also critical for Steven's success and will be a much more daunting task.

7 | RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 | School return

First and foremost, I believe that it will be safe for Steven to return to school.¹ I make this judgment having assessed Steven's statement as a transient threat (impulsive and with no sustained intent to harm). I believe that his email message was an accurate, if unfortunate, reflection of his own desperate need for attention and the fact that students responsible for school violence have received a lot of media attention. His comment was taken out of context. It is clear to me that he was aware that he had inadvertently scared a lot of people and he felt terrible about it.

In addition, although Steven has low frustration tolerance, and a history of impulsivity and aggression, he does not have access to weapons, he felt remorseful, and he did not demonstrate a fixation on violent themes. My understanding is that Steven's email communication was an expression of frustration with academic demands he could not meet, the underlying tension with the teachers, unaddressed tension in the school climate, and the specific requests for help around his experience of racism that also went unmet. With all of this, Steven had reached an understandable kind of "boiling point."

In Dewey Cornell's (2018) well-researched comprehensive school threat assessment, all of this meets the criteria of a transient threat. Transient threats are made in the heat of the moment, the student feels remorse, and there are only vague implausible details for the threat. Indeed, the research finds that the majority of threats meet this definition of "transient."

I believe Steven's remorse and his declaration that he did not have intent to harm others. Although Steven did have a history of disciplinary incidents and had some significant episodes of aggression in earlier grades, there were no further reports of those kinds of incidents. It appears that by adolescence he has clearly learned to better control his impulse to strike out.

7.2 | Individual recommendations for Steven

Steven's history of trauma likely has had a significant impact on his motivation, attention, concentration, and ability to persevere and learn. His sense that his teachers did not like him may have been in part due to his hypervigilance and misinterpreting neutral communication as hostile aggravated by racial bias. Although the school has formally adopted trauma-informed school-wide practices (i.e., <https://traumaawareschools.org>), Baker has not integrated the emphasis on *relationship building* and *restorative justice*. A core element of my proposed safety plan for Steven involves fostering more secure relationships with teachers and peers. Building Steven's sense that school staff enjoy who he is and appreciate the strengths that he brings to the school community will be key to supporting him in healing and gaining confidence.

In order to develop persistence, take risks academically, and ask for help, *Steven must feel safe and connected in his relationships with his teachers*. I recommend that the principal and school psychologist actively work with Steven's teachers to intentionally and actively work to build positive relationships/attachments with Steven (e.g., random acts of kindness, "banking" positive time with him intentionally that outweigh the negative feedback, not taking it personally when he may be irritable).

This requires building teachers' capacity for attuned responses that reflect curiosity and understanding, while helping Steve communicate his needs in a way that ensures his need to be loved and cared for is met. Toward this end,

I will conduct an in-service with the staff introducing Dan Hughes' PACE model.² PACE encourages pausing, playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy on the part of teachers.

Steven's performance and confidence will improve if you can capitalize on his strengths and interests in subjects like math, science, and drawing. Importantly, Steven clearly thrives with hands-on learning. I encourage the school to create multiple opportunities for Steven to shine in these areas – perhaps through involvement in creating a school mural, participation in the science afterschool program, or tutoring younger students in math. Assignments and projects that harness his artistic abilities to show his understanding (vs. writing) would help to motivate Steven. For instance, he could be asked to find books that actively capture Steven's interest in rap music and as a Black kid to help w ADHD (ADHD can hyperfocus on what's interesting and way lower than average focus when not interested).

Academically, I suggest that Steven's neuropsychological evaluation be updated, at least in the areas of reading and executive function, to assist the school in modifying his IEP to more effectively address his unique needs in ways that are both trauma-informed and educationally appropriate.

Meanwhile, audio books can help ease reading load. Steven also clearly needs increased scaffolding for tasks that involve executive functioning and writing. I suggest that what teachers are seeing as "avoidance" is likely a signal that Steven feels incompetent and needs more help. It is important to remember that as Steven feels more vulnerable, he may engage in provocative behavior to distract people from how overwhelmed he is feeling. Treating the behavior as a plea for help, not an opportunity for punishment, may increase Steven's ability to ask for help rather than act out.

In addition, I suggest that the school be reflective about Steven's obstacles to building relationships with and among students and what you can do to help Steven learn more productive problem-solving approaches. Toward that end, he could benefit from an in-school well-trained therapeutic mentor. Therapeutic mentoring is structured, one-to-one strength-based support (<https://child-familyservices.org/therapeutic-mentoring-service/>). Steven will also likely require additional support from the school psychologist and favorite teacher if his father's health continues to decline.

7.3 | Recommendations focused on school climate

It is important to note that Steven's issues are embedded in a school climate that has some significant problems. First, there is palpable tension between staff and the principal. Adult tension generates cortisol for children – stress hormones. Additional cortisol increases dysregulation for all students, but especially for children with ADHD. Equally important there are many indications that, like many institutions, Baker needs to address its systemic racism. A significant, clearly articulated major effort is required to address these issues. In addition to my written report, I met with the superintendent and the principal to discuss the school climate issues I raised in my report.

Although this is not my primary area of expertise, I recognize that it is key to this case. The relationship between school climate and school safety cannot be ignored (Goodrum et al., 2018, 2019). I explained to the superintendent and the principal that trust between the principal and the staff impacts the trust between parents, students, and administrators. I shared James Reason's (1997) elements for a culture of safety. This model begins by increasing trust between administrators and teachers which then increases trust between students and staff. The superintendent was invested in developing the principal's leadership skills.

I also met with the superintendent, the principal, the school psychologist and several of Steven's teachers to explicitly address the conversation about race that needed to happen in this school, and likely in this school district. I began with the specifics of how understandably outraged Steven and his parents were that racially charged incidents at school were not addressed. I tried to help this White staff to comprehend the sense of danger that would have created for Black adolescent and his parents. I urged the school to share with Steven's parents how they had helped students and staff talk about the disturbing incident of the writing of the N-word in the bathroom and created space for students to share other similar incidents. For the school, keeping the family engaged with the school as they monitored Steven's transition back to school was key, as the family had often felt they were only brought in when he was in trouble.

I then suggested that Steven is likely not alone in his experience. I wondered out loud whether Steven was the “canary in the mine” – whether all students of color were experiencing this, and he was just more vocally expressing resistance to feeling less than and seen as sinister.

These incidents, combined with the disparities in academic scores and disciplinary action suggest an urgent need for significant action. Action likely needs to begin with extensive professional development around race, helping staff to examine their own experience with race and to understand the subtle and not so subtle ways that they may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes³. Action needs to include diversifying the staff and leadership of the school.

Training also needs to address the intersectionality of racism and Steven's upsetting behavior. What looks like “misbehavior” may be a student's best strategy for coping with the experience of feeling put down, less than, unseen, or treated as “dangerous” or “stupid.” I suggested designing a series of discussions with students about their experiences of being seen and heard.

I also suggested a staff training on Christopher Emdin's 7C's of reality pedagogy are also pertinent here (Emdin, 2016). Emdin argues that engaging students requires a clear focus on students' cultural understandings to make the learning deeply personal. This means bringing in students' home lives, culture, and experiences. One of the C's, for instance, is curation: a process where teachers study videos to identify practices that optimize student engagement and identify practices that inadvertently silence students, such as turning their back to students or overlooking some students. This can help teachers to try to understand what actions might make Steven and other students like him to feel more and less marginalized.

Finally, I strongly encouraged the school district to adopt a more centralized approach to training staff to use the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment approach so that all staff have a clear protocol to follow when they are concerned about a student. This protocol provides guidance not only for the kind of “transient threat” that Steven posed, but also for the small percentage of cases when there is a serious substantive threat. Despite an earlier suggestion from me, this district had not trained their staff to follow this protocol. One result was that Steven's parents were terribly upset about what they saw as “lack of collaboration” which added unneeded tension for all to an already-fraught experience. One key aspect of the protocol is transparent communication to all stakeholders (staff, students, and parents) about the assessment process. Threat incidents are deeply upsetting to both staff and families (Rappaport et al., 2019). The research about the effectiveness of this protocol is compelling. It shows that when these guidelines are implemented, there are 15% fewer short-term suspensions and 25% fewer long-term suspensions per year than other schools (controlling for school size, the percentage of low income students, and the percentage of minority students) and that they are more likely to hold parent conferences and use mental health services (Cornell et al., 2009, 2012).

7.4 | Recommendations for Steven's family

In addition to sharing my written report with Steven and his family, I discussed with them the possibility of reconsidering medication for ADHD. I suggested that the right stimulant might help Steven be less reactive and impulsive, which would allow him to focus better and not be so quick to misread social cues. This in turn would foster better social relationships with his peers. As a psychiatrist, I let them know that there are many medications for ADHD, so if one doesn't work or has bad side effects they should not give up – there is very likely another that will work. I reminded them that ongoing psychological support will be important for Steven, particularly given his father's current health crisis. I provided the family with referrals in the community for medication and treatment.

I urged them to follow up with the school to make sure they were implementing the academic recommendations for Steven, telling them, “You're his parents. You care the most about him.” The family was relieved to hear that I was advocating that their concerns about racism be addressed. They were grateful when, as a result of this assessment, the school began pursuing more professional development. I encouraged the family to continue advocating for the school to address the rupture between them by using these recommendations to support Steven at school and at home. I also

encouraged them to work with other parents of Black kids to ensure that the school followed through on measures to address the school's implicit and explicit racial bias.

7.5 | Recommendations for follow up

As always, my report included a statement regarding the time-limited aspect of one-time interviews, noting that a safety assessment cannot predict violence but can attempt to enhance understanding of the situation and underlying difficulties.

I strongly suggested that the school follow up with parents and teachers in a month to review what interventions had been implemented to support Steven's academic progress including modifying the curriculum and intensifying his reading and writing support. I also encouraged the teachers to discuss with each other their efforts to connect with Steven in a more positive way and capitalize on his strengths.

8 | TIPPING THE BALANCE

Although the school still has much that needs to change, some of Steven's teachers did make a concerted effort to engage Steven more positively. As Steven forged stronger connections with his teachers, he began to become less defensive and avoidant. His ability to focus was improved with a new medication. This also likely helped make him less of a target for teachers. With a new neuropsychological evaluation, his parents successfully advocated to get him Wilson tutoring for his reading disabilities, so that he could slowly begin to feel more competent and successful. He also began receiving extra one-on-one tutorial support for writing and getting his homework done.

His favorite science teacher helped him to design a science lab for his class. He was allowed to listen, rather than read the autobiography of Malcolm X. Rather than writing a paper, he was allowed to create a mural illustrating the tactics Malcolm X used to empower his movement. One of his teachers helped modify the eighth grade identity project so that he had more control over how much public sharing was required. As his project, he was allowed to use a rap song to explore how anger can fuel necessary change.

When his father's health began to deteriorate at the end of eighth grade, Steven was able to turn to his history and science teachers for increased support, spending extra time in their rooms at lunch time, and working on a special project with his science teacher. Steven truly rallied during the last year of middle school, running a rap competition for the whole middle school. He made no further provocative statements and was not physically aggressive in school. He still had some difficulty with impulsivity and at one point stole a teacher's cell phone which caused another disciplinary action and the teacher's sense of betrayal, feeling that she had invested so much in Steven. The school resource officer had a discussion with him and the school psychologist helped Steven apologize to her.

As the transition to high school approached, teachers noticed that Steven's school performance began to drop off again and he seemed more distracted. He started to be late to school regularly. The school asked for a brief consult with me. An interview with Steven provided the clue that he was not only frightened about succeeding in high school, but he was preparing for the loss that might echo the loss of his biological mother. Staff had a team meeting and made a plan: The school psychologist arranged for Steven to shadow a high school student and connected him to young Black social worker at the high school. The psychologist also arranged for Steven to receive more intensive academic support during the summer so that he could enter his new school with additional support already in place.

As for the school, Steven's parents organized a group of parents of Black children to begin an initiative to examine how the school could support and retain both teachers and school administrators of color. In the process, they learned that previous efforts to recruit diverse staff had failed, partially because minority staff experienced micro- and macro-aggressions and incidents of bias that had not been addressed. Although this was discouraging, this parent group

found several community members with expertise in this area to help support their efforts. The district has now hired a Black Assistant Superintendent and has begun district-wide racial bias training.

9 | CONCLUSION

Steven presented with a toxic combination of inadequately remediated learning disabilities, exposure as a young child to intimate partner violence, physiological hyperarousal, and systemic racial bias. The individual academic and emotional problems can often be addressed rather concretely and, with luck and persistence, immediately. The agony of this case, and so many of the cases that I evaluated during my 23 years in this district, was the corrosive combined impact of a toxic school climate and systemic racism. While ostensibly the evaluation focused on whether Steven was a threat to safety of the school, I actually think Steven struggled with a pervasive sense of danger in how he was perceived, the feeling that his teachers didn't like him, and his likely accurate perception that his teachers were more likely to notice his misbehavior than that of his White fellow students. Throughout the assessment, there were indications of how race was implicitly and explicitly shaping interactions. This was only worsened by the lack of trust between the teachers and their principal.

Addressing a difficult school climate and the insidious impact of racism is a long-term commitment. Making a substantial, whole-hearted, and effective investment in creating and maintaining a school climate that supports *all* students is vital to both student success and school safety.

Often as clinicians when we are asked to evaluate an individual student, we find that the context and school climate is part of the problem. While we can make our best recommendations for support and services for the individual student, influencing organizational change is complex, daunting, and slow. Gaining school buy-in can be difficult, even for an evidence-based protocol such as Cornell's Comprehensive School Threat Assessment. Despite these challenges, it is vital that we continue to highlight the difficult systemic issues, deepen the dialog, advocate for change, and engage parents, school leaders, and teachers in joining us.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ My interview process builds – in part – on the threat assessment research and recommendations of Dewey Cornell and his colleagues (for details, see: <https://curry.virginia.edu/faculty-research/centers-labs-projects/research-labs/youth-violence-project/virginia-student-threat>). Some of the questions that I always ask students include: Do you know why I want to talk to you? What happened today when you were [place of incident]? What exactly did you say? And what exactly did you do? What did you mean when you said or did that? How do you think [person/school community who was threatened] feels about what you said or did? (Probe to see if the subject believes it frightened or intimidated the person); What was the reason you said or did that? (Probe to find out if there is a prior conflict or history to this threat); What are you going to do now? (Ask questions to determine if the subject intends to carry out the threat).
- ² I have found the work of Dan Hughes, Ph.D., on attachment-focused treatment to be particularly helpful in my work with educators (for details, see: <http://www.danielhughes.org/home.html>). His PACE model draws on his work with students with challenging behavior that likely stemmed from underlying insecure attachment.
- ³ Courageous Conversation: <https://courageousconversation.com/>.

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