

New LPS Security Director Positioned to Lead District in Threat Assessment

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[By MARGARET REIST / Lincoln Journal Star](#)

It started with a phone call, on a practical matter in the aftermath of a national tragedy.

The day after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Joe Wright called Lincoln Public Schools Superintendent Steve Joel to see if he wanted police cruisers at schools as an added safety measure and to reassure parents.

But the longtime police captain had another question for the superintendent in the wake of the Newton, Conn., shooting that left 20 students and six adults dead: What did he know about threat assessment, the system of evaluating and managing potential violence before it happens?

Joel said he didn't know much — but knew he should.

That conversation led to a meeting with Wright and Mario Scalora, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor and world-renowned expert in the field — and the beginnings of a threat assessment process at LPS.

Seven months later, Wright has left his 26-year career at the Lincoln Police Department to start a new one as security director at LPS, where he will lead efforts to make threat assessment an integral part of the district.

“Joe has all the training you look for when you're trying to ramp up your security policies and procedures,” Joel said. “Joe's gonna be able to move the needle (on school security).”

From his office at the newly opened LPS district headquarters, Wright said he will spend his first months in the schools, setting up lines of communication with staff, learning their security procedures, from tornado and fire drills to how they check in visitors.

He'll also participate in a plan to put security cameras in all the high schools at some point this year. And he hopes to strengthen connections with other agencies, especially in the area of training.

But one of his central jobs will be bringing his expertise to bear to further establish a process known in the world of security as threat assessment.

Threat assessment isn't profiling — trying to predict who might commit a crime — but focusing on behaviors, identifying situations before they escalate to violence and intervening to decrease that risk.

LPS is in a good position as it starts down this path: Scalora, one of the most well-known experts on the subject, lives here and consults with the district; UNL was one of the first colleges to start

a threat assessment program; and the university's public policy center helps other colleges and school districts around the state start their own programs.

And LPS has Wright, who was instrumental in developing LPD's threat assessment program.

At the police department, Wright got to know Scalora while developing procedures for taking suspects into emergency protective custody.

Officers who deem suspects mentally ill and dangerous can take them into emergency protective custody, though crisis centers are often full to overflowing.

Wright's work focused on distinguishing between those who are mentally ill and those who actually pose threats to themselves or others.

Training officers to distinguish between mental illness and dangerousness dramatically reduced the number of people put into emergency protective custody and allowed officers to get help for those suffering from mental illness who didn't pose a threat, Wright said.

It also introduced him to the ideas of threat assessment: that the best way to prevent acts of violence in the workplace or in schools is to have a way to collect information, evaluate it and de-escalate a situation before it erupts into violence.

Wright sought out training on threat assessment, and he and two other officers created a system at LPD.

At LPS, he's beginning the process of educating and encouraging people to report behavior they find concerning. He did a training session for school leaders before the start of school and has pulled together a team of people including those from human resources and student services to help review information and evaluate it.

Depending on the case, other people such as principals or teachers could be included, he said. The intervention depends on the risk of violence, and many reports do not require any intervention. But managing the cases — reviewing them and checking up periodically — is important, he said.

"This is an organic program," he said. "It will really grow and change to fit LPS."

One of the keys is encouraging people to share concerns, then having a central place to assess those concerns. People may be inclined to dismiss something as an isolated incident, when others have similar concerns.

The threat assessment team can connect those dots, Wright said. The work likely will touch on bullying, he said, though many bullying incidents will be handled by individual schools.

Part of encouraging people to report behavior is making sure information remains confidential and people don't get labeled, Wright said.

“If you ever lose that discretion, you lose the program,” Wright said. “It’s absolutely key.”

It’s also important to communicate with other agencies, because the concerns likely overlap between school, home and work, he said.

Wright said of the concerns that have crossed his desk so far, about 60 percent of them are from people not directly connected to the school.

Balancing privacy concerns with the need to gather and evaluate information is one of the most important and toughest parts of the job, say threat assessment experts.

“What (the LPS security director) needs to be able to do is gather information, evaluate it and not cause harm,” said Patrick Prince, a California consultant and threat assessment expert. “You need an ethical way of evaluating that is accurate but respectful.”

Denise Bulling, senior research director at the NU policy center, said balancing privacy concerns and handling risks is something professionals must do daily. Part of that means pulling from various disciplines including law enforcement and mental health to find the best way to help people control their behavior.

“The goal is not to manage a person, the goal is to decrease the threat,” she said.

Bulling said Wright’s connections and expertise will serve LPS well.

“I think Joe has the expertise and connections to make something really open and transparent enough that people aren’t going to be nervous, that this isn’t big brother, it’s just another way to connect the dots and help people manage their behaviors.”