'Planned school attack' threats in Colorado rose 135 percent in one year

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DENVER -- Reports of violent threats toward Colorado schools are on the rise.

A FOX31 Problem Solvers analysis of Safe2Tell Colorado's "planned school attack" reports shows that between the last two school years, the number of tips connected to such a crime have risen at least 135 percent.

Overall, during the 2017-18 school year, students reported concerning behaviors 16,000 thousand times -- up from just over 9,000 tips the prior year. Suicide threats, drugs and bullying are the top concerns forwarded to the Safe2Tell system by students.

The number of tips specifically regarding planned school attacks rose from 294 to 692, an increase of 135 percent.

A FOX31 review of the month-to-month threat tips for the ongoing 2018-19 school year shows concerns about planned school attacks have risen at least another 30 percent over last year's record number. If those numbers stay on pace, police and school resources officers will be investigating another record number of school threats this year.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the statistics is that, according one of the nation's leading school threat assessors, too many of the threats are not fake.

Executive director of Jefferson County Schools' safety and security team, John McDonald, told FOX31, "We've certainly seen the tips, as you say, increase at an unprecedented rate. We've seen more real threats. We've found students that are fascinated by the thought of a school attack. We find students thinking about, 'How do I get that gun?' That's why those tips are so important: because without that, we operate in a vacuum and you don't know what you don't know."

During her recent tenure, former Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman created an accountability policy which meant that every single tip sent in by a student using Safe2Tell was seen and followed up on by law enforcement and/or school resource officers.

Over the past three years, that led to more arrests of students making both real and false threats, but also required more police resources.

"I think kids are more aware and alert. They're listening for language and pictures on the internet which indicate a threat to their schools

and they're telling us. Those are all good things," Coffman told FOX31. "It costs time. It costs money. And there's also an emotional factor, because this creates a turmoil with the kids who are subjected to the threat and to the parents and school staff."

McDonald, who talked the Jefferson County district into buying an actual school so law enforcement can train on how best to defeat worst-case-scenario school attacks, understands better than anyone the financial and emotional strain caused by chasing down every potential threat.

He also understands that to not respond as if every threat is real is a mistake that could cost lives.

"Our kids... they're heroic in their actions every time they pick up the phone and tell us about a threat," said McDonald. "Whether it's, 'a threat of suicide of my friend cutting.' Whether it's somebody being abused at home. Or, 'Someone I know just found a gun and is planning a school attack.'"

The number of Safe2Tell reports has grown to the point where state patrol dispatchers are starting to get stretched thin. A recent state grant, being implemented this spring, addresses that personnel strain. Safe2Tell has hired five full-time tip takers -- all specifically trained to elicit information from minors. The staff will reportedly work out of the Homeland Security Center in Lakewood.

Safe2Tell has more information on its website for both [students](#) and [parents.](#)

Safe2Tell's data visualization of both its [2016-17](#) and [2017-18](#) reports are available online.