

Death and School Crisis

Take-Home Message

When the death of a student, teacher, or other school staff member occurs, the loss can have a profound effect on the entire school community. It is vital that schools plan ahead to cope with crisis events, including creating appropriate plans and policies and establishing partnerships with community professionals who can help address the needs of students and staff.

Grief Is Different for Each Person

At some level, individuals who are grieving have similar types of needs—such as for acknowledgment, understanding, and support.

At another level, however, grief is quite personal. Variables that can determine the responses of individual students include:

- personal relationship or perceived connection with the deceased
- prior experience with loss
- age and level of understanding about death
- preexisting coping mechanisms
- method of expressing strong emotions
- available support systems
- level of empathy for the needs of others

Each student's personal reactions are likely to be quite varied. Helping students and staff accept the range and diversity of reactions is an important lesson in tolerance that will serve them well in the future.

In the school setting, reactions may also be intensified—



one person crying, for example, may trigger crying in others. Similarly, however, one student's resiliency or act of compassion often serves as a positive role model for others.

Supportive Services

When a death directly affects many people in a school community, a large number of students and staff may benefit from supportive services. Current staff may find it difficult to meet all of these needs, especially if they, too, are grieving. It is therefore critical to have plans in place prior to a school crisis event.

These plans need to outline the steps for staff and students to take in response to the event and to have relevant policies in place. Plans should take into consideration such matters as:

- How will the information be shared with staff, students, and families, as well as the larger community? Draft communications for families should be developed, as well as model press releases.
- Who will provide support to students? To staff?
- If outside consultants or community partners will be used, what agreements are in place about their services? How will they be engaged in providing support?
- What are the school's policies concerning funeral attendance, commemoration, and memorialization?

It is difficult to identify trusted professional partners in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. It is vital that schools establish preexisting relationships with organizations and professionals outside the school who can be called upon with short notice to provide needed support.

In some cases, it may also be helpful to seek the consultation and technical assistance of experienced professionals outside the community. The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (www.schoolcrisiscenter.org) provides such consultation and technical assistance. They can be reached at info@grievingstudents.org or at the phone number listed on the Coalition's website (www.grievingstudents.org).

Informing Staff and Students About a Death

Information about the death of a member of the school community is likely to spread quickly among students and staff. This increases the likelihood of rumors, misinformation, and gossip. This is one reason it is important to notify the entire school community, at the same time, as soon as possible after information is known about a death.

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If a death occurs outside of school hours, it is helpful to hold a meeting of school staff before the start of the next school day. Staff should be informed about what is known and be briefed on how to discuss the event with students. They need to know what supportive services will be available for students and staff, and be informed about any changes in the school's schedule for the day.

Guidelines for making the announcement to students can be distributed. Copies of communications that will be sent to parents and guardians can also be shared at this time. (Sample notification letters and announcements that can be downloaded and adapted by schools are available at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org or by following links within the Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or Staff, or Guidelines for Schools Responding to a Death by Suicide, located in the Additional Resources section of www.grievingstudents.org.)

Students should all be informed at the same time, as soon as possible after the start of the school day. It is best that someone familiar to students provide the notification, in person, in small, naturally occurring groups such as home-rooms or classrooms. Announcements in large assemblies or over public address systems are not recommended. The person giving the notification can observe students' reactions and answer questions as they arise.

Students should be informed in a setting and at a time where immediate support is available to them; schools should avoid notification at dismissal. Even if staff members are available to students after dismissal, not all students are able to stay after school hours to access those supports.

It is important to make sure that students and staff who are off-site for the day—on field trips or home sick, for example—are also notified as soon as possible. If a class is on a field trip, an administrator can call the cell phone of a teacher or chaperone on the trip. Ideally, someone from the school will be available to meet with students when they return from the trip.

Schools might also call or send emails to parents and guardians of absent students, along with information and suggestions about how to talk with their children. (A PDF parent guide on how to support grieving children can be found in the Additional Resources section.)

Schools should also plan a process for notification should a death occur during a weekend, holiday, or vacation period. Over a longer vacation period, the school may decide to open for specific periods of time to offer a supervised location where students can come together and get support.

When a death occurs during school hours, students will often become aware of the event through text messages, cell

phone calls, or postings on social media. Students may know of a death before an organized communication with staff can be arranged. Teachers may first become aware of a death through comments from students and need to respond supportively without prior preparation.

What Information Is Shared

Information about a death should be verified by a reputable source. This includes direct communication with family members, police, or other local authorities.

When talking with family members of the deceased, determine what information they wish shared with students and staff. Grieving families may need guidance about how important it is to share information about a death. Clear information can help prevent the spread of rumors and misinformation.

Sometimes, parents prefer to withhold some information, especially if the death is felt to be related to suicide, substance abuse, or some other stigmatized circumstance.

Keep in mind that any communication sent home to families or posted on the school's website should be considered as available to the general public or media. Content should be written accordingly. Confidential or sensitive material should not be included.

Schools attended by siblings or other relatives of the deceased, or feeder schools the deceased attended in the past, should also be contacted. It may be appropriate to notify all schools in the district, especially after a significant crisis event or in a small community.

Media

Media such as newspapers, radio, and television



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can be a useful way to share relevant information broadly in the community. A district media coordinator or school administrator should be designated as the media contact. Students should be advised to avoid speaking directly with media when they are acutely grieving. In the aftermath of a crisis, it is not generally helpful for students to speak with the media. Such contact should occur only with the permission of a parent or guardian, after careful consideration of whether sharing students' comments or image is in their best interests.

Where Impact Is Deepest

After a death in the school community, it is helpful to identify students who may be at higher risk of emotional distress. This might include students who:

- are friends of the deceased
- had a complicated or difficult relationship with the deceased (for example, someone who recently ended a romantic relationship with the deceased)
- believe they are somehow responsible or contributed in some way, even indirectly, to the death
- may share a relevant affiliation (for example, a situation where a student died of cancer and another student has a family member with cancer)
- are friends of a sibling of the student who died
- have experienced prior losses or emotional difficulties

A school mental health professional might follow the schedule of the student who died and offer additional support to classmates or students who shared extracurricular activities with the deceased.

Peers often know which students are most deeply affected by a death. They might have personal knowledge of the issues or see content posted on social media.

It's also important to identify teachers and other staff who had a closer relationship with the deceased. This might include a current or past teacher. For example, if a fifth-grade student dies, the second graders may have little if any personal relationship with the child, but the second-grade teacher who once taught that student may be deeply affected.

School staff should always speak sensitively about the death, recognizing that in any gathering within the school community there may be students or staff who are deeply affected, even if they do not show signs of distress.

While it is helpful to shift the focus from the crisis event and return to a regular school schedule as soon as is practical, it is also important not to withdraw bereavement support prematurely. Some students who need significant support may be best served through referral to community-based services, but most will have their needs met through general supportive services and school-based bereavement support.

If a Teacher or Staff Member Dies

If a teacher or staff member dies, it is helpful initially to assign a well-known member of the school community to cover that person's classes and activities, rather than bringing in a stranger. This might be another teacher from the same grade level, a teacher from the prior grade, or a well-liked administrator or assistant.

When a colleague dies, teachers and other staff often feel not only grief, but an increased sense of vulnerability in their own lives.

Use Guidance From Other Modules

The module Suicide addresses the unique challenges of suicide and stigmatized deaths in more detail.

Professional Self-Care addresses the importance of self-care and suggests strategies for getting support.

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS



FOUNDING MEMBERS



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to
The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools
by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

