

A Student Dies

First and foremost, it is essential the school treats each student death equally. The school policy should reflect what is done for all students.

When a student dies the challenge for schools today is the rapid dissemination of the news of the death to other students. Texting and social networking sites on the internet provides school staff with little time to confirm the information and initiate the schools crisis plan. BE PROACTIVE.

The first step for school officials when news of a student's death becomes known is to confirm the information. If necessary, utilize law enforcement for confirmation. News may come directly from the family. It is helpful to have an information worksheet, developed by the crisis team, with all the necessary prompts to gather this information.

When talking with either law enforcement or family, stick to the facts. Ask the family what information they want shared with the student body. Ask law enforcement for updates on the case that can be shared with students.

Death Notification

Notifying Siblings and Other Family Members

Immediately identify siblings and related family members within the school district. If in contact with the family ask the family how the school can help these students i.e., does the family want to deliver the news or does the family want the school to do so. Younger children can be brought to the counselor's office. Middle and high school students should have a counselor with them and ask them if they want a friend or two with them.

If the school is assigned the task of telling the sibling and/or other family members consider the following checklist:

- Bring them to a safe quiet location.
- Tell them as directly and concretely as possible the news of the death.
- Example:

"Bobby, I have some sad news to tell you. Your Dad just called and told me your Mom was driving her car to work today and she got into an accident. I'm sorry Bobby, she died." Expect a wide range of emotions and responses. Follow-up by letting the student know who will be picking them up from school and answer the student's questions. It is very important to keep the answers short, honest and concrete. It is best to say "I don't know" unless you have solid information to back up your answer.

- Do not try to make the student feel "better". Be a silent comfort, allow them to cry, scream, yell and respond in their own way. Keep them safe. Do not allow them to leave without an adult with them at all times.
- If the family wants to tell the student, provide a safe quiet location for this conversation. If this adult asks for direction, simply encourage the adult to keep the information simple and concrete.

How the student is told the news about the death of their loved one is remembered by the student for the rest of their life AND plays a role in how they adapt to and grieve this death.

Death Notification

When a Student Dies at School

When a student dies at school, it is imperative to respond as quickly as possible to the needs of those directly impacted and to notify the parents. It is assumed the student would be transported to a local medical facility. Work with law enforcement and the medical staff on notifying the parents.

Understand that when law enforcement or the medical staff delivers the news to the parents that their child has died there is nothing to ease the pain and raw emotion of this moment.

Responding to a Student's Death - During the School Day

When a student has died during the school day, it is imperative for the crisis team to immediately confirm the death, draft an announcement for each teacher to read in the classroom and assign staff to circulate in the halls to support grieving students.

Activate a designated location for students who feel overwhelmed can go to process the information. The designated location should be stocked with Kleenex and water bottles.

NEVER ANNOUNCE THE DEATH OF ANYONE OVER THE SCHOOLS PA SYSTEM.

The Announcement

The announcement should include the following:

- Indicate the time the announcement must be read and that it is to be read verbatim.
- Who died, when and where?
- What happened and who provided the information to the school.
- Additional information will be provided when available.
- Designated locations students can gather. (Students are to sign out of the class, sign into the designated area, sign-out of the designated area and return to the classroom).
- The schools plan to remain in session or dismiss students home.

Teachers will be responsible for reading *only* the information provided by the administration. They cannot waiver from this information. If students have additional information imperative to the investigation of the death, send the student to a designated administrator to share this information. Sticking to the facts helps balance the rumors.

This announcement is also shared with support staff including bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and building and grounds staff.

Parent Information

Prepare parent information to be sent home. Include the statement shared with students, the school's response plan that has been initiated, information about how to support their grieving children and how the school will continue to provide updates on the crisis. Limit the length of the information to one sheet, double sided or two sheets, single sided.

This information can be posted on the school's website, the school's social networking site, parent's e-mail and the information can be sent home, provided the school has a policy in place to address this issue. Never post any information on the internet about a student without the consent of the family.

Debriefing Teachers and Staff

The crisis team should meet with teachers and staff at the end of the school day and follow the suggested agenda of:

- Thank them for doing a great job during a challenging day.
- Ask how things went in the classroom, answer questions, if possible, about the incident.
- Ask them to consider those students who may be at risk during this crisis. Teachers should specifically identify those students who are - emotionally fragile, have recently experienced a death, and students whose initial response to the news was unusual to members of the crisis team.
- Provide teachers and staff with a game plan for the next day.
- Stress the importance of self care and modeling self care to students.
- Establish an opportunity to provide staff with grief education.

Checking in with the Students Family

Through the initial days after the incident, the School Principal is the school liaison with the deceased student's parents.

The school principal should initially check in with the deceased students parents to offer condolences. Follow-up contact includes finding out about funeral services, providing the family with condolence cards from students and to seek direction about cleaning out the school locker or student's desk.

It can be helpful to family for the school to consider sending a "Thinking of You" card on the student's birthday and at the one year anniversary.

Responding to a Student's Death - Outside the School Day

This situation provides administrators and staff time to organize and plan to respond to students reactions to the death the next school day.

If the death occurs during a school break it is helpful to offer support to students and their families as well

Once administrators have been notified and have confirmed the student's death, the crisis team is activated and meets to plan the response.

Response checklist

- ✓ Identify siblings and other family members impacted by the death. Determine plan of action with these students' teachers.
- ✓ Notify teachers, office staff, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and buildings and ground staff.
- ✓ Establish a meeting before classes begins to prepare staff for the day.
Agenda for meeting includes:
 - Student's response to grief.
 - Addressing grief in the classroom.
 - Suggested classroom activities.
 - Guidelines for the day and remainder of the week.
- ✓ Establish a meeting to debrief staff at the end of the school day.
Agenda for this debriefing meeting includes:
 - Thank them for doing a great job during a challenging day.
 - Ask how things went in the classroom.
 - Provide teachers with an update on information about the incident as well as any known funeral plans.
 - Provide teachers and staff with a game plan for the next day.
 - Stress the importance of self care and modeling self care to students.
- ✓ Draft announcement for teachers to read in the classroom. Be sure all staff receives a copy so they know what the response is to be when students ask them questions.

- ✓ Establish a designated area for students to gather, comfort and process the news. This area is used for the first day students return to school after the death. After the first day, the guidance office becomes the go to area.

✓ Gather tools for this designated area. Tools can include:

- Kleenex
- Extra wastepaper baskets
- Condolence card materials
- grief information materials
- Grief tools - materials to make glass stones, healing stones, magic scratch art material, paper for fingerprint poster
- water/juice/cookies/fruit
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- ✓ Establish an area for a memorial wall, place in a location students will see when they walk into the school. Materials include:

- Large pieces of butcher paper
- Tape
- Markers, pens, pencils

- ✓ Prepare parent information to be sent home. Include the statement shared with students, the schools response plan that has been initiated; information about how to support their grieving children and how the school will continue to provide updates on the crisis.

- ✓ This information can also be posted on the school's website, the school's social networking site, and sent to parent's e-mail. (Provided there is a school policy about disseminating this information.)

Initiate plans for day one:

Day One Activities

Consider the student's family structure when creating the activities below. If there are two sets of parents, ask students to create cards, stones and or finger print projects for each set of parents.

Memorial Wall

Instructions:

By the main entrance of the school, or a place with a lot of student traffic, place large pieces of butcher paper on the walls. Students will write messages, poems, and song lyrics or draw pictures to acknowledge the death.

Students must be made aware that the parents of this student will read the memorial wall and in some cases may include it in the funeral. It's important for them to be respectful of what is written on this memorial wall.

Designated Gathering Room

Determine designated area for students to come to gather, talk and process the death. This room is for the first day, after that it is moved to the guidance area.

This designated area should have the following:

- Kleenex
- Refreshments: juice, cookies, fruit etc.
- Tables with paper, pens and markers
- Wastepaper baskets

Gathering Room Projects

It is helpful to have a number of projects students can work on in the gathering room. Provided below are some well received ideas. Instructions for these ideas are located in the activities section of this handbook.

- Glass stones
- Condolence Cards
- Fingerprint project - to be given to the students parents

Day Two Activities

Establishing a new gathering place

By the end of the first day it is important to determine where grieving students can congregate on day 2. The Guidance office is a natural location. Many of the activities used for day one can be moved to the new location for students to continue to work on.

The new location also provides counseling staff with the opportunity to see who is struggling with the death. There should be an ongoing conversation with teachers about how students are adapting in the classroom. It is most helpful to provide teachers with information on how to identify those students who continue to struggle to adapt to the death. (See "A Grieving Student in the Classroom" in the handout section of this manual.)

Closing Ritual for Wall

Plan a "ritual" for taking down the memorial wall. (Leave the wall up for the week of the death). Notify students of the memorial wall removal date. Encourage students to participate in the ritual by reading a poem, moment of silence or other suggestions by students and staff. Roll up the wall, secure the closure of the wall by using school color ribbons. Present the family with the wall.

Funeral and Calling Hours Education

It is very important to educate students on how to attend calling hours and a funeral. **DO NOT ASSUME ALL PARENTS WILL PREPARE THEIR CHILD TO ATTEND THESE EVENTS.** The funeral director of the funeral home that is preparing the deceased student is an invaluable resource for this education purpose.

Students need to know the following information:

- What they will see, hear and smell when they enter the funeral home.
- How to sign the guest book.
- If it is closed or open casket. If open, what does the deceased student look like. (He's wearing his football jersey; there is no sign of trauma etc.)
- How to express condolences to the family. Have them practice shaking hands and telling the family they are sorry for the loss.

Attend calling hours/funeral as a school

Attending calling hours/funeral as a school provides support and strength to the grieving students as well as helps the funeral home/church and more importantly helps the family manage this emotional ritual.

Students should not be forced or required to attend calling hours or the funeral. If the event is happening during the school day make sure there are alternative plans for those students not attending.

Busing Students to Calling Hours and Funerals.

Do not bus students to calling hours and funerals unless it is a school policy strictly adhered to for all student deaths.

Inform parents of the school's plan to attend calling hours/funeral as a group. Include information about time of attendance, suggested attire for the event and anticipated end time of event.

It is not advised to close the school or close early for students to attend the calling hours or the funeral. Again, what you do for one you do for all AND school policy should reflect this decision.