

Informing Students of a Tragedy

There are many ways to announce deaths and tragedies to students. Some schools call an assembly, some use the PA, and some ask teachers to read the announcements and discuss the events with students in the classroom.

There may be times when any of the above may be appropriate, however, it is strongly encouraged that you consider having the announcement read by teachers in the classroom. Often if an assembly is called, students who are most upset will slink off into the nearest bathroom and struggle with their emotions alone rather than being in a classroom where a teacher might give immediate support. Too, when the teacher announces the event, s/he has the opportunity to get students focused. Having the announcement come over the PA may mean that some students are still getting settled or may for other reasons not be attentive. Finally, the teachers know those students both individually and as a group and can manage this sensitive time with them in mind. PA announcements tend to be a little less personal.

Some teachers may want someone else to read the announcement in their rooms, as they may feel unable to do so themselves. Ask Flight Team Members to provide this support, and to lead the initial discussion. Have teachers remain in the room so they're aware of how things unfolded and what reactions students had.

A guideline for such an announcement might be:

Today we received tragic (or sad) news. We learned that one of our students, _____, died by _____. {Give basic appropriate elaboration without too much detail.} When things like this happen, people have all different kinds of reactions, like shock, sadness, fear and anger. Those reactions may rise and fall throughout the day, and even for days to come. Some of us will want to have quiet time alone and others may want time to talk with peers or adults. Some of you who didn't know _____ may be ready for teachers to return to academics (or "lessons") sooner than others. We all just need to practice patience and respect for each other.

*We can take some time to talk about this. When most of you are ready to return to learning, those who still wish time to talk or think about this may go to the _____ (library?) which we've set aside so you can gather with friends. You will have to sign out of your class as you leave and sign in to the _____ as soon as you arrive. (If there are other supervised gathering places, such as the commons, state that here). We recognize the need for you to gather with friends to talk, so we are providing (this place) (these places) for you to be. **It is important that all students be in some setting that has an adult present.** For those of you who wish to talk one-to-one with the school counselor, s/he will be in his/her office and will see students during the day. (Tell how they sign up for time with the counselor.)*

The school day will remain on schedule, but teachers in any class may suspend regular classroom activities in order to allow you to talk about this event.

At this point we know the following about the memorial/funeral arrangements...

At this point, lead some discussion time. The following page has suggestions for openers.

*We will continue to keep you updated as this unfolds. Further news will come by
(give details on how updates will be handled.)*

It is recommended that teachers who read this announcement also look over the handout in the first section on "Crisis Day Guidelines for Teachers" and "Handling a Class When a Student or Staff Member Dies" in this section.

Sometimes it is easier for teachers to use their own words instead of reading an announcement. This list will help you remember many things to cover.

A guideline for announcements might be:

- Begin with one sentence of warning -- "We received sad news."
- Tell who died and basic information on how.
- Acknowledge that these events bring up lots of different feelings for different youth.
- Name some of the expected feelings (sadness, anger, fear, shock)
- Stress that it is important for all to have respect for each other, and compassion.
- Share information about availability of the gathering room set aside for students
 - purpose of the room (to talk, share feelings with others, draw, make cards)
 - what behavior is expected of them in that room
 - that they'll need to sign in and out, that this isn't just a way to wander...
- If you know information about the funeral or family plans, share that
- How will they get updates on information?
- Tell them where the counselor will be for the day (office? gathering room?)
- Mention that they need to be where there is an adult present -- not hanging out in the locker room, bathrooms, etc.
- Predict with students how day might go -- weaving in and out of talking about this and doing their schoolwork.
- Talk about the school day remaining pretty much on schedule
- Share that you can take some time now to just talk about how this is for them.

Discussion starters might include:

- Had any of you already heard of this? How did you hear?
- Some of you had probably had other people in your life die... (let them tell)
- How many of you knew ____ ?
- What do you think this might be like for the family?
- What kinds of things have people done for your family at times like this that helped?
- Are there things we'd like to do for _____'s family?

If a Before-School Meeting Is Not Possible

There are several issues to consider:

- How and from whom students receive difficult news greatly affects how they will respond to and grieve the loss. Students all need to receive the announcement in a tight time frame. There needs to be no chance that students who know about the incident will be talking to those who don't on the playground or in the hallway.
- Teachers will be better able to support the students in their processing of this tragedy if they have a moment's notice. Don't simply send people from class to class announcing the tragedy. If possible recruit several people who can go from room to room. Instruct them to ask teachers to step out into the hall and give them the information in a way that students won't observe. This gives the teachers a moment to adjust to the news. They will then be better able to focus on the students as they are given the news.
- The reason not to give announcements in assemblies is that it is too difficult to watch all of the students' reactions, and those who may be having great difficulty with the news may slip into a rest room or locker room instead of returning to class -- often those students who need support most choose to leave campus or "get lost in a crowd." Giving the news in the classrooms allows the teacher to watch students, and then to lead a discussion about the tragedy with them. It is far healthier for students to have the opportunity to talk in a manageable and familiar group upon hearing the news than it is to have them sitting in bleachers, mulling over what this means in isolation.
- Giving announcements over the PA does not allow teachers to have the benefit of preparing themselves to support the students. The Shuttle Challenger disaster was a great example of what happens when teachers and students learn of a tragedy at the same time... many teachers simply turned off the television and asked students to get out their math (or other) books and get to work.

Following is a suggested note to the teacher:

We will continue the regular schedule for today. During class time you may:

- lead a discussion with your class
- continue lessons as planned.
- allow students to go to Safe Room
- let students talk in small groups

The _____ will serve as the communication center. Please identify any students needing extra support or services and inform the communication center.

The Safe Room will be staffed and ready for students at _____. If you are concerned about a student or if a student asks to leave your classroom because she or he is upset about _____'s death, the Safe Room is the appropriate place for the student to go. If a student didn't know _____, still allow him/her to come to the Safe Room if requested. There may be another death which is troubling this student. If s/he is not really using the service, we will send him/her back to class.

Please do not suggest or support students going home for the day. We will work on those kinds of decisions/issues in the Safe Room.

When some students are going to the Safe Room, you may want to send a buddy along. Make sure they know to come to an adult and let them know they are there and to sign in.