

Death: Dealing with Crisis at School Practical Suggestions for Educators

Unfortunately, at some time all educators will deal with the death of a student or colleague. It is then essential that school personnel prepare in advance so that they can respond in a timely and supportive manner that leads to constructive resolution for all students and staff.

Notification and Announcement Procedures

Get the facts! Verification is very important and administrators should contact the family of the deceased and/or authorities to get the facts before providing postvention. Give everyone the facts as quickly as possible to dispel rumors. Please verify that the student or staff member is deceased and not being maintained on life support systems. Age-appropriate language should be used. Acceptable sources of verification are: 1) School personnel who witnessed the death notification from the family of the deceased. 2) Notification from law enforcement agency.

Get help! Contact the key district administrators for assistance, and do so as quickly as possible. The administrators will also be helpful in interacting with the media. If the death was a suicide, it is essential that central administrators have input into postvention planning.

Establish a calling tree: A calling tree should be utilized to notify district level personnel as well as building staff in the location where the deceased attended or worked. The calling tree can be used to notify all school personnel that a faculty meeting will be held before school to outline postvention plans. If the death occurs during non-school hours or during vacations, this process allows staff members to work through their own issues before they assist their students.

If a death occurs when school is in session:

1. Hand deliver a memorandum to all teachers. The most frequent recommendation is to give all teachers the facts about the tragedy and instructions to share the information with their students, as well as suggestions for assisting students. This memo can also invite all staff to a faculty meeting after school. The majority of students should stay in their classroom. Only those closest to the victim or those with tragic life situations of their own should be sent to the school's support personnel.
2. Use the public announcement system. The administrator is urged to carefully plan and rehearse what he will say. Choice of words, voice tone and inflection are very important and set the tone for management of the tragedy.

Parent Notification

It is very important to inform the parents of students at the school affected by the death that a death has occurred. There is a balance between providing enough information to dispel rumors and protecting the privacy of the deceased. It is recommended that a fact sheet or letter be sent to parents, either by mail or sent home via students. This letter, in most cases, would not contain the name of the deceased, especially when the death involves a student. The name would be used in communications within the school to the faculty, and in most cases with the students. The letter sent home would contain a brief description of the cause of death when the facts are known, but would avoid unnecessary details.

School personnel, especially those who have direct contact with parents either by phone or in person, should be given specific directions about appropriate information to share regarding the death. The letter to parents should encourage them to focus on the needs of their child and not on specific information about the deceased. The letter should clarify what types of services are available at school to help their child cope with the tragedy. This letter should be reviewed by the superintendent or his designee prior to distribution.

Determine the Degree of Trauma

The following questions will help the administrator anticipate the amount of emotional trauma:

- Who was the person and were they a long-time popular member of the school?
- What happened? Murder and suicide are unexpected and violent, and thus more difficult to deal with than, for example, a death from a serious illness.
- Where did the death occur? A death that occurs on school grounds more difficult to deal with. It is important to find out who witnessed the death and provide them with counseling. Students may also reflect concerns with personal safety.
- What other tragedies have impacted this particular school recently? The latest death will cause other unresolved issues to surface for both staff and students.
- Who was the perpetrator? If the person believed to be responsible for the death is also a member of your school community, it

adds to the emotionality.

Roles for School Personnel

There are a number of roles that should be performed by key personnel. It is important to recognize that each person has his or her own unique history with regard to crisis and loss. It is not unusual for old issues to resurface. Each student should be given permission to feel a range of emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Typically, individuals go through a sequence of emotional reactions following a crisis: 1) high anxiety, 2) denial, 3) anger, 4) remorse, 5) grief and 6) reconciliation.

Principal's Role

- Direct intervention efforts
- Be visible, available, supportive and empower staff
- Provide direction to teachers about how much to set aside the curriculum. Tests should be postponed in some classes.
- Communicate with central administration and other affected schools
- Contact family of the deceased
- Inform staff and students about funeral arrangements
- Ensure that memorials are appropriate

Counselor's/School Psychologist's /Social Worker's Role

- Be available
- Cancel other activities
- Locate counseling assistance (check community resources)
- Provide individual and group counseling
- Contact parents of affected students with suggestions for support or further referral
- Follow the schedule of the deceased and visit classrooms of close friends
- Support the faculty (provide counseling as needed)
- Keep records of affected students and provide follow-up services

Teachers' Role

- Provide accurate information to students
- Lead classroom discussions that focus on helping students to cope with the loss
- Dispel rumors
- Answer questions without providing unnecessary details
- Recognize the varying religious beliefs held by students
- Model an appropriate response
- Give permission for a range of emotions
- Identify students who need counseling and refer to building support personnel
- Provide activities to reduce trauma, such as artwork, music and writing
- Set aside the curriculum as needed
- Discuss funeral procedures

What if the Death was a Suicide?

If the death was a suicide, post-vention procedures outlined by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) should be followed, in addition to the recommendations above. The tasks of post-vention are twofold: 1) to reduce the chances of anyone else committing suicide by avoiding glamorization of the deceased and 2) to assist staff and students with the grieving process. Post-vention activities provide an opportunity to teach students the warning signs of suicide so that further suicides can be prevented. It is also important that school personnel receive training to recognize symptoms of depression and warnings of suicide ideation among students well before a crisis occurs. The main recommendations of the AAS include the following:

- Don't dismiss school or encourage funeral attendance during school hours
- Don't dedicate a memorial to the deceased
- Don't have a large school assembly
- Do give the facts to the students
- Do emphasize prevention and everyone's role
- Do provide individual and group counseling
- Do emphasize that no one is to blame for the suicide
- Do emphasize that help is available and that there are alternatives to suicide
- Do contact the family of the deceased

Resources

- American Association of Suicidology, Suite 310, 4201 Connecticut Av NW, Washington, DC 20008.
- Dwyer, K., Osher, D., & Warger, C. (1998). [Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools](#). U.S. Department of Education.
- National Association of School Psychologists, National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT), 4340 East-West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814 (301) 657-0270. Web Site: <<http://www.nasponline.org>>
- [National Organization for Victim Assistance](#) (NOVA), 1757 Park Road, Washington, D.C. 20010; 1-800-TRY-NOVA.
- Poland, S. (1997). School crisis teams. In A. Goldstein & J. Conoley (Eds.), *School violence intervention handbook*. New York: Guilford Press.
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- Poland, S. (1999). *School violence: Lessons learned*. Longmont, Colorado: Sopris West

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