



## Guidelines for Responding to a Student or Staff Death in the School Setting

This document was created for school personnel to help create a response plan for when a child or staff member dies. When a student or a staff member dies it is important to address it at the school. This document will offer guidelines as to how to intervene.

- 1) It is important to verify the information with the family members or local authorities.
- 2) The school must consult with the family of the deceased to determine the information they would like to have disclosed.
- 3) Determine type of support services that will be available to students and staff.
- 4) Notify school personnel, parents and students.

### Notifying the staff, the parents, and the students

- 1) Notify the personnel first:  
Hold a meeting with the school personnel and inform them of the death and what is known. Give them an opportunity to ask questions. It is best that this meeting be held before or after school hours to allow the staff to prepare themselves before seeing their students in class. If a teacher does not feel able/comfortable speaking to their students about the death, then another staff member should step in.
- 2) Prepare and send a statement to the school's parents:  
A letter should be sent to the parents of the school to notify them about the death. Information that should be included are the date the students will be notified of the death at school, guidelines to follow if the parents do not want their child to know about the death and the services being offered to the students and families.
- 3) Prepare a statement for the students:  
It can be difficult to know what to say therefore it is important to have a prepared statement. All teachers should be giving the same information simultaneously to all students. This can be done by having all teachers agree to speak to their students during their first period of classes. It is recommended to avoid terminology such as is asleep forever, or passed away, and rather use the terms died/death. In the statement, information on how to access mental health and support services should be made available.
- 4) Notify the Students:  
If a teacher has died, have a teacher of the same grade or lower grade speak to the class who have lost their teacher. Consider having that same spokes person substitute in that classroom for a couple of days to diminish the impact on the class.  
When notifying the students, it is best to share the information in small groups rather than large assemblies.

### Identifying who is at higher risk for emotional distress

- Teachers/students of the deceased.
- Students with a history of prior losses and/or emotional difficulties.
- Students who were close friends of the deceased.
- Classmates of the deceased.





- Students with similar characteristics as the deceased (Particularly important in the event of suicide).
- Students who had a strained relationship with the deceased
- Siblings of the deceased

### Memorial/Memorial Services

Different cultures use different terms for their end-of-life celebrations therefore the terms memorial and memorial services are used in effort to remain neutral.

Some students and teachers may want to attend memorial services of the deceased student or teacher. It is important to speak to the family of the deceased to determine and respect their wishes.

Students may want to create a memorial at the school. Plans for the memorial should be thought about in advance regarding where the flowers, cards, etc. brought by students will be placed and how long they will remain. Providing a planned commemorative opportunity will reduce the number of spontaneous memorials. The memorials should not take place too soon, as crisis intervention should be the first focus.

Commemorative activities such as naming a building or hanging a plaque should be avoided because the school may be unable to respond in a similar manner in the future and to minimize glamorization of the cause of death. Commemorative activities that are developed through time and involve students will be more meaningful and therapeutic.

