

# Dealing With Death at School

Prior planning, empathic leadership, and teachable moments promote healing among students and staff members after the death of a member of the school community.

BY SCOTT POLAND AND DONNA POLAND

**N**early every principal will be faced with the death of a student or faculty member during his or her career. How schools respond to a death can either help or hinder the healing process, and the principal sets the tone for the level of assistance that is provided following a death at school.

## Planning and Preparation

An effective response to a death requires advanced planning. Effective advanced planning increases the likelihood that the trauma will be minimized and that grieving students receive support, ensures that the psychological equilibrium of students and faculty members will be restored as soon as possible, and teaches parents and members of the school community about the signs and symptoms of posttraumatic stress and how and when to refer people for appropriate

treatment (Dwyer & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

The components of good advanced planning are consistent with those for any crisis prevention response plan and include establishing a crisis response team, delineating plans and responsibilities, being flexible, communicating effectively, providing training for staff members, educating and involving parents, accounting for potential risks or significant cultural issues within the community, and identifying resources, and coordinating with district and community agencies.

The crisis team should be a diverse group that represents several disciplines. It should design a response plan and review it on an ongoing basis throughout the year. A response plan covers how to verify information and notify the school community, what the initial

interventions will encompass, and what long-term actions are necessary.

## Verification and Notification

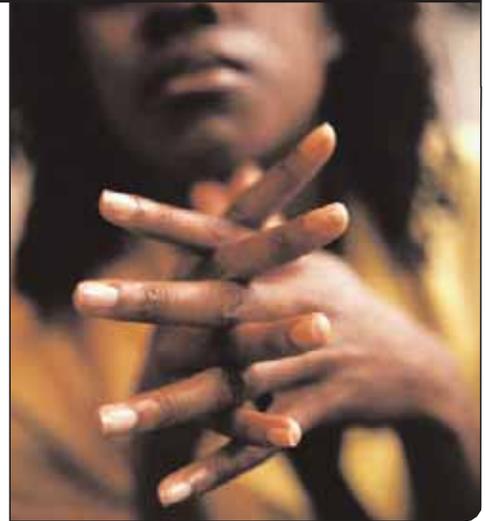
**Verify the facts.** Depending on the circumstances, verifying the facts about a death can be done through the local police agency, the family's faith leaders, or a close friend or relative of the deceased. Do not hesitate to contact the victim's family to get facts and offer assistance; they will appreciate your concern. In the case of an alleged suicide, it is important that the suicide is confirmed by a legitimate source and that the family gives permission to have the death publicly announced as a suicide.

**Convene your crisis team.** Every principal should maintain a crisis file at his or her home that contains updated information and relevant phone numbers. When a member of the school community dies, the principal should convene the crisis team and contact his or her administrative supervisor for support and guidance. Some schools will need the help of additional personnel who have appropriate training because their students may need more support than staff members can provide.

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**Assess the potential effect of the death.** To assess the effect a death will have on students and staff members, the following questions should be answered:

- How well-known was the deceased? The death of a popular student or staff member may generate a lot of attention, but it is important to demonstrate systemwide consistency in the way death is dealt with, regardless of the popularity of the deceased individual.
- What was the cause of death? Deaths by homicide, accident, and suicide are unexpected and often create a higher level of emotion.
- Where did the death occur? Deaths that occur on campus are especially traumatic for students and staff members.
- Have there been prior tragedies that have affected the school community? Issues and emotions from previous losses will likely surface, further complicating the processing efforts.
- Was there a perpetrator who caused an accident or committed a homicide? If students and staff members were acquainted with the perpetrator, many additional issues may surface.

**If possible, provide staff members with advance notice.** If a death is verified during nonschool hours, a calling tree can be mobilized to notify staff members so they can process the information and receive support from their friends and significant others, feel included in the notification process, and request assistance (e.g., a substitute teacher) if they cannot carry out their regular duties.

**Coordinate in-school notification.** If school is in session when a death is verified, we recommend the following notification methods:

- A memo, delivered to all classrooms, that contains the facts of the tragedy and provides specific recommendations or a script for teachers to follow that explains what to say to students
- Carefully worded and previously

rehearsed public announcements to students and faculty members

- Contact information for students and staff members
- A moment of silence in memory of the deceased and his or her family
- A letter for students to give to their parents.

**Limit information regarding a suicide.** If the deceased's family approves it, tell staff members and students the truth about the cause of death without giving explicit details. Make no attempt to explain how the deceased died. Such emphasis runs the risk of communicating to vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention. Focus instead on helping students grieve and learning the warning signs of suicide. Small-group or classroom discussions are better than a large school assembly.

**Schedule a staff meeting as soon as possible.** A morning meeting is a good opportunity to provide addi-

tional details regarding the death. Staff members should receive a reminder about everyone's role in the crisis response plan and all school personnel should receive relevant information. A morning meeting can also be an opportunity to evaluate the effect the death may have had on the staff. There may be teachers who are unable to carry out their scheduled duties or provide grief support to students (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

### Initial Intervention

**Coordinate with the family of the deceased.** Inform the family of the school's plans to provide information and interventions. Make sure that they know what information is being shared and who within the school is designated to answer questions. Determine whether the family would like to be contacted by others and whether and where donations can be sent. Assure the family that they will

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF REACTIONS

Grieving is a process that everyone experiences differently. When individuals grieve, they bring the unique factors of their family and faith support systems, past experiences with loss or trauma, developmental and cognitive abilities, and any pre-existing mental health problems to the grieving process. Although both individuals and the school community at-large may experience the general stages of grief, they may not necessarily experience these stages in the same timeframe or order. The stages of grief include, emotional numbness, anger, disorganization, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

Grief reactions may affect a student's school performance and his or her behavior at home. Reactions to grief may include denial, anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, confusion, inability to concentrate, difficulty sleeping, and guilt.

The death of a peer can be particularly distressing to students. Although most preadolescents and adolescents have a mature understanding of death (e.g., its irreversibility and universality), they often view themselves as invincible and not subject to the "rules" that govern others. The death of a peer may not only constitute the loss of a classmate but also may point out the reality of his or her own mortality. In addition, young people may have had no experience in coping with death or have unrealistic perceptions of what grief entails because of overexposure to death as entertainment in movies and television (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

Grief is a normal and necessary response to loss. However, persistent or very intense grief responses may require attention from trained professionals. Individuals should be referred for extra help if symptoms significantly impair functioning or last for more than two months after the loss (Mauk & Sharpnack, 1997).

## RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Teens [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

National Association of School Psychologists [www.nasponline.org/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/principals), offers handouts on dealing with the death of a member of the school community, including Dealing With Death at School, Responding to Death: Tips for Administrators and Teachers, and Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents.

National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) at the National Association of School Psychologists, [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

National Organization for Victim Assistance [www.try-nova.org](http://www.try-nova.org) or 1-800-TRY-NOVA.

U.S. Department of Education's Project SERV (Schools Emergency Response to Violence) (202) 260-1856

be consulted about plans for honoring or remembering the deceased.

**Provide materials for staff members and parents.** Teachers and staff members should receive information to read to students and guidelines on how to conduct classroom discussions for grieving students. Prepare a packet for parents that includes facts about the death, tips on how to help grieving youth, plans regarding memorial activities, and information about the services the school is providing.

**Be truthful and direct with students.** Students need accurate information and the opportunity to ask questions. They will see through false or incomplete information, which undermines their trust and will not help them grieve or develop long-term coping strategies.

**Protect staff members and students from the media.** Set limits for members of the media and provide them with factual information while protecting the privacy of the victim's family. Also give the media tips for helping grieving students and a list of school and community resources. The media can incorporate these tips into news stories and send positive messages to the community.

**Keep school open during normal hours.** School is a major source

of comfort for most students and staff members in times of crisis. Keeping school open enables students to be together, receive helpful information, benefit from the nurturing and guidance of familiar adults, and maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives. It is important for the principal to be visible and available to staff members, students, and parents, especially during the first few days following the death.

**Establish a support center or "safe" room.** These rooms make it easy for students or staff members to receive support if they have difficulty coping. School-based or community professionals who are trained to work with grieving children and adults should staff these rooms.

**Provide classroom interventions.** Most students can receive all the help they need in the classroom. Teachers can be instrumental in helping students cope with the loss, defuse the effect of the trauma, regain some measure of control, and understand the event. In some cases, it may be necessary to have mental health professionals lead class discussions. Lessons that focus on taking advantage of teachable moments can also help teachers strengthen students' coping skills. Ideally, teachers should already be familiar with these

strategies through staff development training.

**Adjust schedules as necessary.** A death may preempt the regular curriculum in classes that the deceased would have attended. It is not unusual for teachers to want to stick to the standard lesson plan or give a scheduled test. However, this is counterproductive and possibly inappropriate when students are emotionally upset. In many cases, teachers simply need empathic leadership or permission from the principal to allow students and teachers a chance to process the loss.

**Give students opportunities to express their emotions.** Offer a variety of activities because some students will be more comfortable with—and more comforted by—one activity than another. One effective intervention that has been used after school shootings is for the principal to write a letter to each student. The letter gives students permission to express a range of emotions and asks them to write back to let the principal know if they need any assistance. In one school, nearly 100% of the students answered the letter and overwhelmingly asked for more adult involvement in their lives.

**Identify those most at risk.** Students or staff members who were emotionally close to the deceased or were directly exposed to the trauma (e.g., witnessed the death) will need more extensive assistance, preferably separate from those who were not directly exposed. Students who have suffered a previous loss, have a history of mental health problems, or have been exposed to a previous trauma may be particularly at risk. It is important to monitor these students, give them extra support, communicate with their families, and refer them to community resources. Do not hesitate to contact parents of students about whom you are concerned.

**Tailor support services for students with special needs.** Students who have developmental disabilities, emotional disorders, or low self-esteem may require unique forms of support. Some students may have difficulty understanding the finality of death, differentiating their own well-being from that of the deceased, or be disoriented or distressed by the person's absence. It is of primary importance to establish an environment that provides safety and security and reestablishes routine and equilibrium (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

**Reflect cultural and religious differences.** School personnel should understand various cultural and religious perspectives on death so interventions are appropriate. The cultural background of students may affect their reaction to trauma. Failure to take these cultural issues into consideration can alienate

certain students and hinder the healing process.

**Conduct staff "debriefing" sessions.** Principals should hold a staff debriefing at the end of the first day—and regularly during the next few weeks—to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the crisis plan, get a feel for the health of the school, help identify students and staff members who need help, and modify the crisis plan if needed. Even the best plan will not account for all possible scenarios. Regular staff check-up sessions will provide an opportunity to adjust the plan or additional support services as necessary (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

#### **Long-Term Follow-Up**

**Consider a memorial activity.** In many cases, memorials can reduce feelings of isolation and promote individual and collective grief resolution. Plan memorials carefully

and involve a committee in the decision-making process. Activities (e.g., a service or raising money to help others) can be more appropriate than a permanent marker or structure. Participation should always be voluntary. If the death was by suicide, we do *not* recommend public memorial gestures.

**Provide ongoing support as necessary.** Because the effects of a tragedy can persist for an extended time, it is important to provide ongoing support to the close friends of the deceased. Staff members should monitor student behavior and understand symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide risk. Some students or staff members may have a delayed reaction to their grief. In particular, the "anniversary effect" can reawaken feelings similar to those at the time of loss. We recommend continued coordinated communication between the

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## CASE STUDY

By Donna Poland

## The Morning Before

It was the last day of summer, the day before the teachers returned. As a new principal, I had worked closely with staff members to finalize the master schedule, plan a meaningful staff development week, and ensure an efficient registration and orientation process.

I felt ready. Then, the phone call came. A teacher called to tell me that a student from last year's eighth-grade class, the brother of a current student, had committed suicide the night before. Although I believed I was trained to deal with the unexpected, disorganized thoughts and questions flew around in my head. Why would this boy do such a thing? What does this have to do with me? How can I help? How can I help my teachers deal with this?

Abandoning notions of a smooth beginning to the year, I shifted into managing a campus in crisis. After verifying the facts—and having a brief, painful conversation with the deceased boy's mother—I convened my crisis team. Thankfully, everyone had been given an updated phone tree at the end of the previous year. We informed staff members of the student's death and of our plans to provide follow-up information the next morning on staff development day.

Three needs became obvious. We needed to take care of the grieving teachers and coaches. The deceased boy had attended our middle school for three years, was an extremely popular athlete, and attended a church where many of our staff members and students were active. His death was sure to cause a wave of grief and confusion among his peers, and we needed to take care of the students who attended school with him and his sister, which involved both the middle and the high school. We also needed to support his sister.

## The Morning Of

Clearly, the planned training was no longer appropriate for the staff meeting. Our revised schedule included time to discuss the facts and support for the family, plan for attendance at the service, share the schedule of the surviving sister to enable her teachers to coordinate, prepare counselors and school psychologists at both schools, and provide teachers with immediately usable information. The revised plan also included training on building better relationship and suicide prevention and postvention.

I also worked to ensure that we were providing adequate support for the family and students. I met with the boy's mother, the district's director of psychological services, and the school psychologist assigned to both schools. We referred the mother to community-based services for her family. We reviewed our plan for monitoring the boy's sister and friends and discussed strategies to use when talking with students about suicide. The director of psychological services worked with the family's minister to develop a message that, in the minister's words, would ensure that no child or adult in attendance would "think that suicide is an expressway to Heaven." The minister also emphasized that there are many safe and healthy ways to deal with adversity in our lives.

## The Mornings That Follow

Although we are a large school community, we solicited the help of deceased student's former teachers and made a list of his closest friends who would arrive for their first day of high school without their friend. We called the friends' parents (and those of the boy's sister) to inform them of the support we would be providing for their children. One of our counselors spent the first day of school at the high school to provide a familiar face and source of support for students.

The first weeks of school gave me an opportunity to establish trust and credibility in a very different way than I had originally planned. The challenge remained to stay vigilant in our pledge to watch after the staff members and students as they moved through the school year.

school and local mental health professionals.

**Monitor your own processing and support requirements.** Identify your own coping skills as well as sources of comfort and strength in your life. Check frequently with school personnel who are most affected by the tragedy and do not hesitate to discuss the tragedy at faculty meetings as the need and situation dictate. PL

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