

Key Considerations Related to Bereavement and Loss

SCHOOL-RELATED DEATHS

When School is NOT in Session

- If a death occurs during a holiday or summer vacation, the Crisis Response Team should follow the steps outlined in the Communications Annex of your school emergency operations plan (EOP) to notify your school community.
- The principal should consider offering the school as the site to provide support services for students and faculty.
- The Public Information Officer should use the media and other forms of communication to let the school community know about available services.
- When school resumes, the Crisis Response Team should notify the community once again and offer available services.

When School IS in Session

- Teachers should continue to give assignments to students, but consider modifying these according to students' needs.
- Teachers should consider exempting students from taking tests immediately after a loss, or giving the tests less weight.
- Teachers should allow students to take the tests alone.
- Teachers should consider giving students tutoring time before, during, or after class to reinforce material.

SUICIDE

Response

- Get clarification about what information the family wishes to share and what is already public knowledge.
- Identify children who are at the greatest risk of distress.
- Educate students, parents, and staff on the signs and symptoms of a potential suicide and how to get help (e.g., by calling a suicide hotline).
- Encourage students to seek help for themselves and their peers.
- Discourage students from keeping peer accounts of suicidal thoughts, feelings, or planned actions to themselves.
- Acknowledge the individual who has died, being careful not to glamorize the way in which they did.
- Minimize media coverage.

Media Coverage

- News coverage may promote the act of suicide if it
 - Presents a simplistic explanation for the suicide;
 - Engages in repetitive, continuous, or excessive reporting of the suicide;
 - Sensationalizes the story;
 - Includes detailed, step-by-step descriptions of the act;
 - Presents suicide as a means for accomplishing certain ends; and
 - Glorifies suicide or the persons who commit suicide.
- News coverage may be beneficial to the community if it
 - Highlights the community's efforts to address the problem;
 - Serves to disseminate information about local resources and related assistance and support; and
 - Provides information about the risk factors for suicide and how to identify vulnerable individuals.

FUNERALS, MEMORIALS, AND ANNIVERSARIES

Planning for Services

- If possible, neither funerals nor memorial services should be held on the school grounds.
- If the school site is the only option, services should not be held during regular school hours.
- Establish policies that permit students and staff to attend off-campus services held during the school day.
- Administrators should be aware of the family's wishes with regard to whether or not students and staff can attend the service.
- Students should be told exactly what takes place at a funeral or memorial service, and what they should expect to see and hear.
- It is important to let students decide what their level of participation will be.
- Students should be accompanied to services by a parent or trusted adult.
- School support staff should consider attending services, especially when adolescents plan to attend without their parents.

Alternatives to Permanent Memorials

- Temporary memorials that can be removed at a predetermined time (such as after a funeral) and students can be notified about in advance.
- Service activities that allow students to honor the deceased through pro-social acts, such as volunteering, donating, or helping others.
- Campaigns organized around the cause of death (such as to raise funds for cancer patients).
- Cards, letters, and memory books for the family of the deceased. (School staff should review the content to ensure that it is appropriate and sensitive to the family's needs.)

Preparing and Planning for Anniversaries

- Be aware of anniversary dates.
- Pay attention to emotional responses from students and staff around the holidays, and on anniversary or court trial dates.
- Provide additional support on the day of special events, such as graduation or prom, which may trigger grief.
- Prepare a thoughtful and helpful message to disseminate to students and staff on anniversaries.
- Involve students, faculty, and the community in planning commemoration events.
- If you feel that it may be helpful, arrange for additional counselors to be present during commemorations.

The contents of this package were developed under a contract from the United States Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.