

## **Colquitt County Schools Protocol for Addressing a Death in the School Community**

A school's goals in dealing with a death of a student or staff member should be to:

1. Acknowledge the death honestly.
2. Allow students and staff to express their feelings.
3. Offer an outlet for students and staff who desire to help.

*Joy shared is joy increased. Grief shared is grief decreased.*

### **Crisis Response Checklist**

1. Notify the superintendent and other key central office personnel of death in school family.
2. Assemble the Crisis Response Team. Develop a situation specific plan and assign/review roles to each member of the team.
3. Notify the individual's family of the school's plan.
4. Notify staff of the crisis and inform them that all media or community inquiries are to be directed to the principal, his or her designee, or the Central Office.
5. Set a time for staff meeting.
6. At the staff meeting, provide written communication to all staff as to when and how students will be informed of the tragedy, guidelines for class discussions, plans for the day, etc.
7. Set a time to inform all students and give staff a prepared statement to read to students.
8. Set aside Crisis Rooms for students/staff to meet with counselors/social workers.
9. Provide students and staff with opportunities to discuss their feelings and concerns.
10. Inform administrators at other schools that siblings, relatives and friends attend to watch for special needs of grieving students.
11. Enlist the help of staff members to identify students who may be struggling with the grieving process.
12. Keep routine/schedule as normal as possible.
13. If family of deceased has given their permission, send a letter home to parents announcing the death in the school community.
14. Encourage and facilitate memorial activities: moment of silence in the deceased's honor, planting tree or shrub in memory of deceased, yearbook page dedication, scholarship funds, etc.
15. In case of death by suicide, deal with the death honestly. Do not hold a moment of silence or school sponsored memorial in order to avoid glamorizing suicide act. Do allow students to create condolence cards or letters. Do talk openly about the irreversibility of the suicide act.

## **School Response Team Members and Responsibilities:**

### Co-Leaders (Principal, Counselor and/or Social Worker)

- Verify that a death has occurred.
- Notify superintendent and other relevant central office personnel
- Follow system protocol in communicating with media
- Notify/select family liaison
- Schedule meeting to inform staff
- Get coverage for classes as needed
- Write an announcement to be read in classes
- Keep school schedule as normal as possible
- Write and send condolence letter to parents/family
- Establish Crisis Room where students and staff can receive counseling assistance and assist with needs of counselors
- Be visible, supportive, sensitive, reassuring to staff and students
- Attend the funeral
- Provide assistance and referrals for staff members who experience personal trauma after the loss
- Request further assistance from outside agencies if necessary

Family Liaison (Ideally, a person who has had contact with the family on previous occasions. Will represent the entire school's response to the death of their loved one.)

- Contact the family. Inform parents/family of the steps school will take and let them know that the school's assistance is available as needed
- Get family's permission to announce the death at school and to parents.
- Offer to help the family (Suggestions: arranging meals, arranging transportation, running necessary errands, child-care)
- Obtain accurate information from the family regarding circumstances of death/arrangements for services
- Inform the family of school tragedy response plans and procedures
- Help the family gather the deceased's personal items from school
- Attend the funeral
- Keep in contact with family after the funeral
- Follow up with key individuals (e.g., friends, parents) of the deceased to make sure they know how and where they may obtain support.

### Counselors

- Staff the Crisis Rooms
- Encourage students/staff to talk about and express their feelings and let them know these feelings are natural

- Clarify misinformation
- Contact community support resources if needed
- Provide grief information
- Contact parents if children do not respond to support
- Speak to classmates of deceased or deceased siblings or children
- Attend the funeral

Teachers (Primary contact for students. May not be on the “planning/crisis” team but share the responsibility of maintaining a safe and stable environment)

- Read the announcement and talking with students about the loss.
- Modify class lesson plans/time schedule as needed
- Facilitate activities to encourage expression of feelings
- Express personal feelings
- Support appropriate activities that encourage remembering the deceased
- Refer students to Crisis Room if necessary
- Help students create condolence letters

Roamers (Assigned by principal/counselor)

- Be visible in the halls to help maintain order
- Be in cafeteria during meals
- Talk with students/staff
- Escort students to Crisis Room if needed
- Be ready to relieve teachers who may need to go to the Crisis Room or need time alone to express their feelings.
- Assist in any way possible to make the grieving process easier

Suggestions for Classroom Teachers

- Announce the tragedy by reading the prepared statement.
- Allow a minute or two for the news to sink in.
- Express how you are impacted by the tragedy.
- Ask students to share positive memories you have of the deceased.
- Share your own positive memories of the deceased.
- Talk about feelings of grief.
- Encourage students to express their feelings.
- Encourage students to attend visitation or funeral, if this is age appropriate. Otherwise they can make condolence notes or cards.
- Move into regular classroom work with their option to stop anytime they feel a need to discuss the tragedy more or if they are feeling overwhelmed with grief.

SAMPLE STATEMENT FOR TEACHERS TO READ

We are sad to learn that \_\_\_\_\_, in grade \_\_\_\_, died as a result of (type of accident or illness) last night. We do not have any more information at this time.

OR

We are sad to learn that \_\_\_\_\_, in grade \_\_\_\_, died as a result of \_\_\_\_\_ last night. \_\_\_\_\_ (Family Liaison) has talked with the family and this is the information we have at this time.

As more information becomes available, such as funeral arrangements, we will pass it on to you. Counselors will be available for anyone who would like to talk about his or her feelings about this sad news. Would anyone like to talk about any feelings he or she may be experiencing right now?

SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents,

We were very sad to heart that one of our (students, teachers, staff members), \_\_\_\_\_ (name) \_\_\_\_\_, died yesterday as a result of \_\_\_\_\_ (type of accident or illness). \_\_\_\_\_ (Name) \_\_\_\_\_, is the (son, daughter, parent, spouse) of \_\_\_\_\_ (family) \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ (address, with family's permission) \_\_\_\_\_.

Our school's Crisis Response Team has met and discussed a set of planned procedures that have taken or will take place to help our students work through their grief. Counselors and professionals and a caring staff will be available to students.

Arrangements for \_\_\_\_\_ are as follows:

Visitation: (If known)

Funeral Service: (If known).

Please let us know if there are other ways we can help your child during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

(Principal) \_\_\_\_\_

### SAMPLE STATEMENT AFTER A SUICIDE DEATH

We were sad to learn that \_\_\_\_\_ took his (her) life last evening. Because of this, we now know that \_\_\_\_\_ was really hurting inside, and his (her) action was the result of this pain. This action was a tragic mistake. Let us not judge \_\_\_\_\_ to be a bad person, but realize that there are positive ways to handle our problems.

We have all lost someone we care about and we are hurting with you. When people take their own lives, they hurt their families and friends, too. Although we are sure \_\_\_\_\_ never meant to hurt anyone, his (her) family and friends are now hurting. Let us understand that there people who care about us and are willing to listen and help.

As we work through our grief, let's try to understand that:

We all have problems.

Our problems do not last forever. Dark days will pass.

Suicide is never a solution to our problems.

Counselors will be available for anyone who would like to talk about his or her feelings.

OR

Yesterday afternoon at approximately \_\_\_\_ (time) \_\_\_\_, a tragedy occurred involving (name) \_\_\_\_\_. We all know that no one single incident or situation causes a person to commit suicide, and we will never know all the reasons for (name) \_\_\_\_\_ actions. It is important to realize that we must reach out to each other at this time, be friends, listen, care and help each understand and help each other realize that each one of us is important. In the days ahead, take time to tell one another that you care. Counselors will be available for anyone who would like to talk about his or her feelings.

SAMPLE PARENT LETTER AFTER A SUICIDE DEATH

Dear Parents,

We are very sad to announce that \_\_\_\_\_ took his (her) life on \_\_\_\_\_. Suicide is always a very tragic and traumatic event in any community, and we are aware that grief due to suicide can be very different from grief over death from natural causes or accident.

Our Crisis Response Plan has been activated to maintain a safe and calm environment at school. Our emphasis at school will be to assist our students and staff in expressing their grief appropriately. Counselors will be available for assistance. We will all do our best to help our students express their emotions and encourage them to be kind to themselves.

As a parent, I encourage you to talk with your children about this tragedy. Allow them to express their feelings and concerns. Reaffirm your love for them and reassure them that you are willing to listen to their fears and problems.

Please feel free to contact me if we can be of more assistance.

Sincerely,

Principal