

DUNKIRK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATION

CRISIS GUIDELINES

The Unanticipated Crisis/Death of a Child or Staff Member

NOTE: The following will outline the procedures to be followed in the event of a crisis/death within the district.

First Day

1. As soon as a principal learns of a crisis/death, he/she will contact local officials and/or family members to CONFIRM the facts.
2. As soon as the principal CONFIRMS the crisis/death, he/she will immediately inform:
 - a. The Superintendent
 - b. Members of the District Trauma Response Team (appointed by Superintendent)
 - c. Life Transitions Center, Inc., 3850 Harlem Road, Buffalo, NY
 - d. Initiate the Phone Tree in the specific building(s)
3. The principal will continue to OBTAIN/UPDATE the facts of the case.
4. School will not be closed. It is important that the grieving process within the school-family be allowed to occur.
5. Friends, siblings and teachers of the deceased who may be in other schools in the district should be informed, and plans made to assist them.
6. The principal will immediately call a meeting of members of the Trauma Response Team, teachers of the student, fellow administrators and identified professional support personnel to plan the first day.

7. The principal or his/her designee, accompanied by a witness, will check the desk(s) the student sat in and the student locker(s) (hall, gym, etc.) before school. If the death was not an accident the police should be present for the desk/locker search.
 - a. Do not memorialize the desk if it is a suicide.
 - b. If not a suicide, leave the desk for mourning purposes (i.e. artwork, flowers, pictures, etc.).
 - c. Have the Trauma Response Team or the class decide how long the desk should remain empty (recommended for 2 weeks).
8. The principal will call a meeting of all members of the staff prior to the opening of school, or if possible the night before, at the school, to address the staff and plan for the first day.
 - a. At this time, a scripted announcement of the crisis will be created, typed, and distributed. This is to be read by homeroom teachers.
 - b. It will be decided where the Crisis Center(s) will be located. The Crisis Center(s) will include factual updates, mental health professional, refreshments, etc.
9. Students should be informed in a manner appropriate for their developmental level. Who informs who will be decided by the building principal, in consultation with his/her Trauma Response Team, fellow administrators, and identified professional support personnel.
10. Students who are overcome, or who cannot handle the classroom setting and who are felt to be in need of individual or small group assistance by mental health staff, should be escorted to a designated area in the building where support staff will be available. On the first day, DO NOT announce availability of counseling services over the PA system as many times students are just curious about what is going on. Teachers should make the decision on an individual basis about who will leave the classroom for the counseling services. Announcements over the PA system on the second and third day are acceptable.
11. Records should be kept of the high-risk students. Keep daily contact with these people and notify the parents of any students who are considered to be high-risk.
12. Assemblies will not be scheduled; rather, students will be supported in individual and small group settings.

13. A CONFIDENTIAL memo will be distributed to the faculty as soon as reasonable to assist teachers and inform them of key issues. (See attached sample memo.)
14. The principal, the superintendent or their designees will be the only persons authorized to talk with representatives from the media.
 - a. Scripted phone messages are recommended.

Under no circumstances will the media be allowed on school property, or will administrators allow teachers or students be interviewed at the school. The Superintendent or his/her designee will coordinate the control of traffic and access to the school buildings.

15. Group memorial plans and other forms of grieving should be allowed to evolve under the guidance of the building principal, in accordance with the family's wishes. A balance is needed to let the grieving occur but not become a pervasive theme.
 - a. Principal should contact the family to ask what their wishes may be regarding disclosure of funeral arrangements.
 - b. Students should be encouraged to provide appropriate individual memorials; send cards, flowers and/or messages of sympathy consistent with the family's wishes.
16. Student after-school and athletic activities will not be canceled. It is important that the students have the opportunity to participate in scheduled activities.
17. On the school of and following the tragedy many classroom and school rules may be temporarily modified.
18. Staff members from Life Transitions Center, Inc. in Buffalo are available to work with all staff on the topic of "Death and Grief." The principal should offer this immediate inservice to staff if there is an expressed desire for participation.

19. BEFORE THE CLOSE OF THE FIRST DAY:

1. An appropriate PA announcement should be made:
 - a. Thanking everyone; staff, students, etc.
 - b. Reiterate how tough it has been
 - c. Offer continued support
 - d. Offer sympathy to family and friends
 - e. Expected times of services, if family wishes (reminder of attending with a family member)
 - f. Scholarships, donations (make sure you have a policy for this!!)
 - g. Moment of silence
 2. Letter to parent(s)/guardian(s) should be written and sent home:
 - a. See attached draft
20. At the close of the first school day following the death, the principal will have a faculty meeting allowing staff the opportunity to grieve (discuss their own feelings, reactions and issues) and to make recommendations for subsequent days.
1. Lists of high-risk students should be turned in.
 - a. Whose parents should be contacted about their distress
 - b. Who will require individual follow-up
 - c. Whose teachers should be informed about at-risk behavior

Second/Third Day

1. Announcement at beginning of second day:
 - a. Opening statement on the death again
 - b. Thank you for support
 - c. Reiterate plan
 - d. Counseling center(s)
 - e. Memorials

2. Teachers/counselors observing behavior of students.
3. Classes with flexibility.
4. Counseling stations for individuals/groups in place (specific times).
5. Plans for memorials beginning to take shape. In the event of a suicide, no activity will be authorized that “honors” the deceased.
6. The principal should be prepared to respond to the request for large numbers of staff and students who wish to attend the funeral. Staff members should attend. Their presence will be calming. Spacing themselves throughout the funeral will give a sense of stability and security to students in this time of need. The presence of staff shows that the school cares.
7. If appropriate, a special viewing time should be arranged with the family (or funeral home).

SUGGESTIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATOR OR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

1. Take time out for yourself and your own feelings.
2. Division of labor is crucial. Give specific school leaders jobs to do and let them do them.
 - a. Crisis Resource Team
 - b. Media Liaison Person
 - c. Family Liaison Person
 - d. Telephone Response Person
 - e. Crisis Consultants
 - f. Community Liaison Person
 - g. Student Leaders
 - h. Substitute Teachers
3. Diagnose the impact of the crisis. Identify the target groups.
4. Identify and use the resources.

5. Be careful of the media.
6. Work with families involved. Identify a person to liaison between the school and the family.
7. Remember that different people have different needs. Try to have alternatives for people with different needs. Set up the crisis center and counseling rooms. Prepare responses for “at-risk” students.
8. Help your staff first. Don’t forget support staff.
9. Allow people to be real, to grieve. Appropriate role models are crucial.
10. Don’t make demands of staff. Let them do what they think they can handle with support.
11. Acknowledge the different facets and feelings of grief. Give permission to grieve.
12. Let everyone know the facts. Diffuse rumors. Consider sending a letter home to parents.
13. Empower people as much as possible. Allow people to take positive action.

EMERGENCY MEMO TO TEACHERS

TO:

FROM:

DATE:

RE: DEATH OF

The following information will, hopefully, help you through this most difficult day:

1. Don't cancel after-school or athletic activities. It is important to meet all student groups so that each group can handle the dynamics of the grieving process.
2. Both teachers and students need to support each other as much as possible.
3. Don't expect to get your usual amount or quality of work done. Try to teach, based on your feelings as well as those of your students. If it is not possible, a quiet class period is appropriate.
4. Establish your classroom routines as soon as possible, AFTER children have had a chance to express their feelings.
5. It is okay for a teacher to feel uncomfortable about dealing with this situation. Ask for help from the Trauma Response Team if you want it.
6. It is okay for teachers to show their feelings.
7. You may be overwhelmingly upset, especially if you have had contact with the child or staff member. There are professional support staff available to talk with you. If you cannot meet your classroom responsibilities, please inform me immediately and coverage will be provided.
8. You should give mutual support to other staff. The faculty room may be the most comfortable place to share your feelings.
9. Be aware of the FACTS regarding this situation in order to be able to counteract inaccurate rumors.

10. Expect the entire range of emotional reactions from hysterical behavior to joking. ALL reactions are normal. What may *seem* like inappropriate feelings expressed by some children reflect real feelings that we may not immediately understand. There is no appropriate or inappropriate immediate response. Children can be helped to empathize with others and express honest feelings appropriately. Teachers may get the feeling that there are some students who are using this tragedy to avoid school responsibility. These students are in the minority. We all need to be careful not to judge the feelings or motivations of others.

11. If a child expresses the feeling that he should have done something to prevent the death, listen to what he has to say. Let him fully express himself, *and* then let him know he was not responsible.

If there is a possibility of suicide, do not glamorize, romanticize or speculate what might have happened. If children speculate, ask them if they know for sure what happened. Listen, and then point out gently and without criticism what we know and don't know.

12. Think about who children can talk with at home and at school.

13. For those students who are extremely upset, designated areas have been set up in the building where professional support staff are available to assist them. Grieving students should not be in the corridors unsupervised, but rather sent to the designated areas. They will be returned to class when they are ready to handle it. The names of these students will be kept in a confidential log and:

- a. Their parents will be notified immediately.
- b. Individual follow-up sessions will be scheduled with them by members of the professional support staff.

14. Many children may have to talk this through. Be open to students; continue to talk about the death until they "get it all out". This may take a number of days. If it begins to seem excessive, please talk to members of the Trauma Response Team.

15. Do not be surprised if you find yourself dealing with a student who is regrieving. The current death could trigger regrieving the death of a family member, pet or friend.

THE POSTVENTION PROCESS

MEMO ADDENDUM #1

Student Reaction

SHOCK

Students may initially appear remarkably unreactive. In fact, they are in a state of shock and not yet able to accept the reality of the suicide or death.

ANGER AND PROJECTION

Students will look for someone to blame. Initially, this may be directed toward important adults in the victim's life, including school staff. Why did they let it happen?!?

GUILT

Typically, students who knew the victim may move from blaming others to blaming themselves. "If only I had talked to him more."

ANGER AT VICTIM

This is a common reaction by students, even those not closely connected to the victim. "How could he do this to us?"

ANXIETY

Students will begin worrying about themselves.

"If he could kill himself because he was upset, maybe I (or my friends) could too."

RELIEF

Once the normal distortions of feelings are resolved, students can allow themselves to feel the sadness of the loss and begin the healing process.

Staff Response

The staff needs to assume a stance of anticipatory waiting, acknowledging the shock and showing a willingness to talk about the suicide when they're ready. Hill (1984) suggests waiting 24 to 48 hours before taking more direct action.

Some expressions of anger must be allowed. Staff members may share the similar feeling they have had. However, at the same time, reality must be introduced. There are limits on how much one person can be responsible for the actions of another.

Here, particularly, staff can be helpful by sharing their own similar reactions. And again, the reality principle is also introduced. One person cannot assume total responsibility for the act of another.

Staff needs to give permission for such expressions by normalizing them, perhaps tempered by questioning whether the victim fully realized the impact of his act.

Discussion should be guided towards helping students differentiate between themselves and the victim and towards other options for problem-solving.

Staff must guard against encouraging a pseudo-mourning process before students have worked at resolving their conflicts over the suicide.

The following steps are recommended:

Day One: It is assumed that, should an incident occur, it is likely to take place after school hours or on the weekend. Should it happen early in the day on school days, the plan would have to be adapted.

1. As soon as a suicide has been discovered and school authorities notified, a telephone chain will be initiated to inform all teachers of what has occurred so they will not be caught by surprise. Invite the faculty to a meeting prior to classes the following morning.

Day Two:

1. At the meeting, review the facts of the case to dispel rumors. Announce special schedules or events. Be sure that everybody knows what to do. Deal with the staff's feelings to enable them to handle their students.
2. Determine who will talk to the victim's family.
3. Discuss the event in the classroom or assembly. Permit students to ventilate their feelings. Identify any pupil at great risk, who may require immediate attention – this could be somebody who was close to the suicide, someone who had had a fight, or somebody who is depressed and despondent, and may decide to follow the example. You cannot put ideas into other person's mind, but there can be a contagion effect. Avoid any glorification of the suicidal act, but set it in perspective. Strive to return to normal as promptly as possible.
4. If a peer counseling program has been established, allow them to deal with their own feelings and ask them to help identify any other youngsters who might need special attention.
5. Work with children at great risk. Inform *their* parents. It is better to breach confidentiality than to lose a student or friend. It is a good rule to tell any students up front that their confidence will be respected, except in cases where their lives or those of anybody else are at stake. If suicide is a possibility, do not promise confidentiality.
6. At the end of the day, have another faculty meeting to review the events of the day. Determine what additional steps need to be taken.
7. Announce funeral arrangements in accordance with the bereaved family's wishes to allow anybody who so desires to attend. If warranted, take other action, such as setting up a memorial fund, etc.

Day Three: Continue to provide support and guidance to faculty and help for them and students to ensure that everything is getting back to normal.

Throughout this process it is recommended that there be only one person assigned to deal with the media.

While it is recommended that suicide be discussed after an event has occurred within a district, caution is recommended concerning general discussions of the topic. If it is desired to incorporate it into the curriculum, it is suggested that it be included in a broader *topic*, such as mental health education, which would include addictions, child abuse, family violence, as well as suicide. This will allow dealing with suicide in perspective.

In this regard, in recent months the television networks have presented films on suicide, child abuse, and battered wives. While it is desirable that these topics be taken out of the closet to be discussed openly, caution is urged. For instance, in the film, "Something About Amelia", there was a happy ending, problems were solved. In real life, this is not likely to occur. It was probably done to promote audience or sponsor acceptance of the show. To avoid adverse impacts of such TV shows or other films, here are some guidelines.

1. Never assign a film for viewing or present it in class without having previewed it.
2. When discussing the film in class, keep the topic in perspective, on a realistic level.
3. Be alert to identifying anybody in the room for whom the show hit too close to home. For example, a situation may be depicted which causes a youngster to relive a personal, painful experience which was never adequately dealt with. There may be a reaction in a child that is a departure from his usual demeanor. Should you spot somebody, take the pupil aside to talk or take him to somebody else. Do not allow the youngsters to leave if they are in internal turmoil.