

GREENWICH PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Greenwich, Connecticut

Policy E-002 - WHOLE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

Procedure E-002.3 – TRAUMA - DEATH IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The building principal is responsible for development of a plan to deal quickly and effectively with a trauma situation, such as sudden or violent death in the school community. Each year the principal shall designate school/house based crisis team members and organize an emergency communication plan for notification of all appropriate staff. Staff should be informed of and have an opportunity to discuss the plan. Guidelines should be prepared to be distributed to staff in the event of a death.

A crisis team could include: an administrator or administrators, a social worker, psychologist, guidance counselor, teacher and possibly others.

The primary goals of a post trauma plan are to facilitate communication, encourage the healthy expression of feelings, provide outreach and support to those in special need, identify students at risk, and help all students deal with the reality of death in a positive way. The plan should be flexible enough to take into account the differences in each situation.

Notification of Administration and Staff

1. If the Superintendent is notified of a death, he/she will:
 - a. contact or confirm with police as appropriate
 - b. notify building administrator

2. If building/house administrator is notified of a death, he/she will:
 - a. notify Superintendent
 - b. contact or confirm with police as appropriate
 - c. set a time and place for emergency faculty/house meeting
 - d. contact crisis team

3. If notification occurs during the academic day, the building/house administrator may:
 - a. activate crisis team
 - b. notify staff of facts, in writing if possible
 - c. ask teachers to discuss information with students briefly
 - d. ask faculty to attend emergency faculty meeting at end of day

4. If notification occurs during non-school hours, building/house administrator may:
 - a. activate emergency communication plan to give staff basic factual information, including time and place of emergency faculty meeting
 - b. meet with crisis team prior to faculty meeting
5. If notification occurs during a vacation period:
 - a. the building/house administrator will be notified
 - b. other staff members, including the crisis team, will be notified as appropriate

Guidelines for the Crisis Team

1. Prior to the first emergency staff meeting the crisis team will:
 - a. decide when and where to share the information with students (e.g. homeroom, or first period class). All students need to know about and have an opportunity to discuss a death.
 - b. prepare a written statement of the specific facts for staff.
 - c. develop special plans for the classes directly affected.
 - d. develop appropriate support systems within the school, utilizing the experience and knowledge of both building and system staff members.
2. During the day and on subsequent days the crisis team will:
 - a. decide when it is appropriate to contact family to offer condolences and to let family know what is being done at school.
 - b. obtain funeral information, share it when available.
 - c. decide if parents of students in a particular class or grade should be notified.
 - d. decide who else should be notified (i.e. siblings, previous teachers, colleagues, etc).
 - e. decide if PTA should be contacted.
 - f. begin identifying students who may be at risk.
 - g. consider the need for an outside consultant or help from a community agency.
 - h. review the day as it progresses, define next steps.
 - i. assess the long-term effects of trauma on the school. Continue to determine what services or plans are needed (e.g. support groups, memorial service).

Guidelines for Initial Staff Meeting

1. Distribute a written statement of facts and dispel rumors.
2. Inform staff members that all police and media contact concerning the death should be directed to the building administrator.
3. Announce the funeral arrangements, if known.
4. Give staff members an opportunity to react, ask questions and express feelings.
5. Give staff support and encourage them to be supportive of one another.

6. Discuss when and where students will be presented with the information and how particularly affected classes will be handled.
7. Give teachers the option to have another staff person help with the class discussion (e.g. guidance counselor, crisis team member).
8. Distribute and discuss Guidelines for Class Discussion, Warning Signs and High Risk Students.
9. Discuss the support systems that have been developed and the referral process.
10. Inform staff members of the plan for the school day and of arrangements for a follow up faculty meeting.

Guidelines for a Follow-Up Faculty Meeting

1. Review the day and gather feedback from staff members.
2. Give staff members an opportunity to share and express feelings.
3. Set up a staff support group, if appropriate.
4. Gather names of students or classes needing additional support.
5. Discuss next steps to be taken.

Guidelines for Class Discussion

1. Prepare students for the serious nature of the information they are about to receive. State that you have something sad, unhappy, painful or upsetting to tell them.
2. Announce the facts.
3. Allow students to react, discuss or share feelings.
4. Ask students what they have heard prior to the class meeting. Dispel rumors with honest factual discussion. Share your feelings if you are comfortable.
5. If you cannot answer all their questions, find out what they want to know and follow up.
6. Listen to students, be supportive and don't lecture or argue. Respect their responses; take them seriously.
7. Convey a feeling of acceptance for the different reactions expressed. Reactions may range from no reaction at all to degrees of sadness, loss, guilt, anger or disbelief.
8. If students wish to discuss more than you are comfortable with, refer those students to designated staff or request some assistance for your class.
9. Let students know what support systems are available should they wish to talk further.
10. Encourage students to be supportive of each other and to aid each other in seeking help.
11. Refer students who are having strong reactions or who you feel are at risk to support staff. If necessary, ask for help or get another student to act as escort.
12. Discuss ways in which students can express their feelings and concerns (e.g. cards, a class letter, funeral attendance).
13. Help keep communication open. Encourage students to share their feelings with their families.

Warning Signs

Teachers are often in the best position to identify students who may be having difficulty coping with a death. The following symptoms are indicators that a student may need further help. These signs may appear immediately after a death or may be delayed.

- Deep depression, hopelessness
- Talk of suicide or a suicide threat
- Change in personality or behavior
- Increased acting out behavior
- Withdrawn behavior
- Personal neglect
- Psychosomatic complaints or increased illness
- Absenteeism
- Change in school performance
- Inability to concentrate
- Eating or sleeping problems
- Preoccupation with death
- Reactions that appear normal at first but persist and don't improve (e.g. continued sadness or crying)
- Risk taking or reckless behavior
- Substance abuse or increased abuse

High-Risk Students

Potentially high-risk students at the time of a death may be:

- close to the person who has died
- suicidal, having already made an attempt
- lonely or socially isolated
- lacking in social skills
- experiencing heavy stress
- lacking in inner resources to deal with anger or frustration
- unhappy or depressed
- pre-occupied with death or dying
- suffering from another loss

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