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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Communicating about deaths

An elementary student dies of cancer. Two high school seniors are killed in a car crash on the way to school. A middle school teacher commits suicide.

Such tragedies can rock a school, and it's important to communicate quickly with students, staff and parents when they happen. But knowing what to say — and what not to say — is not easy. That's why it's essential to have a protocol in place for what to do when death impacts your school.

The shock and grief that occur when a tragedy happens generate a wide range of reactions. For staff, it can be a particularly hard time because they need to be available for students at a time when they may be grieving themselves.

By having a crisis plan already in place, schools can be ready to react quickly if a tragedy occurs. This plan should spell out in detail what needs to be done when a tragedy happens, listing the steps that need to be taken and identifying the individuals responsible for taking them. It should also include sample letters and announcements that can be modified to address different scenarios.

A key piece of this plan is having a crisis response team ready to respond. The crisis response team typically consists of school counselors and mental health specialists who are trained in dealing with deaths and other tragedies. As soon as they are informed of the death, response team members meet to determine the correct information, as well as the wishes of the deceased's family. They then work with school staff to communicate with staff, students and parents and to support them in dealing with the news.

Fortunately, there are many resources available to guide schools that are dealing with the death of a student or staff member. The Dougy Center website ([www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)) includes tip sheets for school personnel, links to articles and other information about helping students deal with grief.

Two books that address this issue are *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers and When Death Impacts Your School: A Guide for School Administrators*. Both are available in the Dougy Center online bookstore ([www.tdcbookstore.org/store/c4/Books.html](http://www.tdcbookstore.org/store/c4/Books.html)).

The National Association of School Psychologists offers this advice on what to do when your school experiences the death of a student or staff member:

### Inform staff

A briefing meeting with staff should occur to inform them of the circumstances of the death and to provide teachers with guidelines on how to share information about the death with their students. Present information about how students grieve and what behaviors might

(Over)

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be expected. Stress the need for maintaining routines during the day as much as possible, allowing flexibility to talk about the death and its impact when students need such a discussion. Establish referral procedures for students requiring additional support.

**Communicate with parents**

Parents should receive a letter informing them of what has happened, how the school responded, how they can help their children, and where they can receive help.

**Inform students**

Information should be shared on a class-by-class basis. Assemblies and use of a public address system should be discouraged. Encourage discussion, and recognize that the day will not be a normal day. Students and staff will need to discuss and review the life and death of the person, as well as process their own reactions. Have counselors available to provide support.

**Encourage students and staff to reach out to the family**

Students may need help knowing what to say and what to do. School personnel should have a presence at the funeral. Shape a group response. It may be helpful to students and staff to respond as a group. Depending on the needs, circumstances, and culture, responses include contributing flowers or memorializing the deceased in other ways.

It is important to respond in the same manner for every student or staff member who dies.

**Think ahead**

Schools often allow students to play a role in memorializing the person who died. However, it's smart to have a policy regarding memorial services or other commemorations so that you are prepared in advance. The policy should include the answers to these questions:

- Will your school provide the opportunity to acknowledge the death of a student or staff member through some kind of memorialization?
- What kind of memorialization activities will be allowed?
- Under what circumstances will your school consider memorialization activities? The death of a staff member or student? What if the death is from suicide, or a violent death? Whatever policy or precedent the school sets should apply to all deaths.