

When a Student or Staff Member Dies: An Action Plan For Schools

From Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss, edited by Kenneth J. Doka

Schools are advised to have a protocol or action plan should a member of the school community die. This plan should periodically be reviewed and modified. Central to any plan is that a crisis team consisting of administrators, teachers and support staff be formed and trained. A telephone chain is helpful, as all staff, as much as possible, should be informed prior to coming to school. This team will be the key to an effective response. Below are some suggestions for the components of such a plan.

As soon as they are informed of the death, the crisis team should meet.

The initial work of the team will be to determine the correct information, as well as the wishes of the deceased's family. Once information is clarified the team can plan to respond. In this response, the team should identify students, faculty, and staff most at risk. In assessing risk, the team should remember that not all strong attachments are positive. Both enemies and friends may be affected.

Be sure all information is accurate.

Rumors are much less likely to occur when the information shared is accurate, uniform, and complete. Inform classes in a matter-of-fact tone. Information should be shared on a class-by-class basis; assemblies and use of a public address system should be discouraged.

Encourage discussion.

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 help available.

It is helpful to have counselors available for students and staff that seem most affected by the loss. These counselors should reach out to students and staff with strong attachments. But they should also allow students and staff to self-elect into counseling should they feel a need. The death of someone can raise a sense of vulnerability in people with no visible connection to the deceased. The Amelia Center is always available for onsite crisis intervention. They can also be helpful in supporting staff as they discuss the loss with their classes.

Encourage students and staff to reach out to the family.

Students may need help in knowing what to say and what to do. School personnel should definitely 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. What you do to memorialize one, you should equally respond for all losses.

Inform 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. A sample letter is included in this packet.

Handle the deceased's personal effects, such as papers, in a careful manner.

These papers should be offered to family. In some cases, family may not really know what they really want in the early phases of grief. Never send them without warning to families, and do not remove them from automatic communications. For example, in one case, a parent continued to receive absence notes after their daughter died.

Finally, do not ignore the needs of the staff.

Their needs and grief must be recognized even as they reach out to others. The emphasis on staff is critical, as they can easily be overlooked. Encourage use of employee assistance programs, if available, or refer them to The Amelia Center for free, confidential, individual counseling.