

SCHOOL CORPORATION CRISIS RESPONSE AND RECOVERY GUIDE

This guide is provided as support to school administrators when faced with a tragedy impacting staff and students. This document is meant to supplement existing protocols that a school corporation might already have and not replace an existing crisis plan.

The purpose of this guide is to provide a concise, easy reference for school administrators. Local school officials will ultimately determine the best course of action when addressing student tragedy. Our staff is available if you need assistance:

Jeff Wittman	Christy Berger
School Social Work & Foster Youth Specialist	Assistant Director, Social, Emotional, & Behavioral Wellness
jwittman@doe.in.gov	cberger@doe.in.gov
317-234-5704	317-234-1242

Robin LeClaire	Stephen Balko
Director of School Improvement	Director of School Building Security
rleclaire@doe.in.gov	sbalko@doe.in.gov
(317) 232-0524	(317) 232-4914

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS AFTER OCCURRENCE

ADMINISTRATOR RESPONSE

1. First, gather information and verify the facts (e.g., from family members or local authorities).
2. Determine what information should be disclosed and what information has already been released publicly from a reliable source.
3. Gather crisis team or administrative team.
4. Once the information is verified, notify staff. Provide news gently to the teachers who worked with the individual, staff, transportation, and district administrators. Prepare your staff for how the students may react and what resources are available.
5. Prepare to bring in substitute teachers for extra staffing. Ideally your staff will be there for students, but some staff may be overcome with grief and unable to be helpful.
6. If applicable, assign a staff member, law enforcement, or mental health worker to be the family liaison for the affected family.
7. Consider having a crisis team member or counselor “walk the student’s schedule” to help provide support and information to classmates.
8. Meet with front office staff/secretaries to set/review procedures regarding parent and/or media questions. Provide them with any contact information needed (numbers for media contact or counseling centers). Prepare them for the possibility of parents picking up students during the day and granting permission for high school students to leave the building.
9. Identify those who may be directly affected and consider isolating or meeting before an announcement is made:
 - a. Siblings or family in other classrooms, other buildings, or school sites
 - b. Best friends
 - c. Staff who worked with the individual
 - d. Witnesses to the incident
 - e. Student or staff who have faced a similar loss or a recent loss
 - f. Emotions may need to be diffused.
10. Contact the parent/guardian of any students who are extremely emotional and thought to be at-risk before the student leaves the building. Do not allow a student to leave who expresses thoughts of harming self or others, without making contact with parents/legal guardians and/or speaking with school administration to create a safety plan to monitor and support the student.
11. Provide support room, or prepare counselor’s office. Staff with appropriate counselors or mental health professionals. Create a sign-in log for the counseling room, including time in and time out of the room. Please note, there will be

students who report to this room who may not even know the students involved, but are seeking to be part of the “drama.”

12. Determine how and when you will notify students.
 - a. Staff making a face-to-face announcement and safety checks?
 - b. Provide written announcement for teachers or counselors to use when talking with students or classes, or a public announcement. The statement should be modified for age-appropriate sharing. Statement could be followed by moment of silence. (Some teachers may be too upset to read the announcement; be prepared to have other staff possibly communicate the message).

SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT FOR HIGH SCHOOL

“This morning we heard the extremely sad news that (student/staff name) has died. (Student/staff name) was a (sophomore, or teacher, etc.) and played on the sports team, (or taught subject, etc.). At this time, we do not officially know the cause of death and we have no information about funeral arrangements. We are all saddened by this and ask that you keep (first name) and his family in your thoughts today. If any of you feel that you need support please ask for a pass and go to the support room, or go to the room on your break. We will be following our regular school schedule.” (Or follow class release protocol)

SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

“We need to take some time this morning to talk about something very sad. (student/staff), an (8TH grader, or taught subject) at (school) died last night unexpectedly. At this time we do not officially know the cause of his death. Death is difficult to deal with even if you didn’t know (student/staff) and you might have some emotional reactions to this news. It’s important for you to express your feelings about (student’s/staff’s) death, especially sadness. There are counselors available all day today in the support room to talk to you and help you through this. If you need to talk to someone, ask for a pass and go to the support room, or go to the room on your break”

SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*“We need to talk about something very sad this morning. (Student/staff name) died recently. He was a (sixth grader, or teacher, etc.) at (school). Right now we don’t know how he died for certain. Death is hard to deal with even if you didn’t know (student/staff name) and you might have some sad feelings or other feelings after hearing about this. It’s very important for you to tell someone about your feelings. There are people who are ready to listen to you and help you today in room (*room number). If you need to talk to someone, tell me or another teacher, and we will show you the way to the room.”*

13. Be prepared for parents to give permission for high school students to leave the building or coming to pick up younger students. Enforce procedure for checkout that will maintain accountability for the whereabouts of students.

14. Inform administrators at other buildings where siblings, relatives, and very close friends may be affected.
15. Convene staff in morning if possible, and end of the day to share, vent, and to evaluate plans for the 2nd, 3rd, etc. days and to provide access to support which will enable students and staff to move forward.
16. Provide tissues in counseling rooms and front office.
17. Determine if and how to notify school families. Assure parents that support services are available. Utilize mass call system and/or letters home.

SAMPLE LETTER OR CALL CONTENT TO SCHOOL FAMILIES

(State your name and purpose of letter or announcement)

It is with a great deal of sadness that I am informing you of the (death/injury) of one of our students. This tragic event has affected the entire school and I wanted you to be informed so that you will know what happened in order to discuss it with your child.

(Describe the situation.)

Yesterday afternoon, one of our third grade students was let off the bus and while crossing the street to go home, was struck by a car. The bus driver immediately called 911, but the student sustained extensive injuries and died while in route to the hospital.

(Describe what was done.)

We are shocked and saddened by this tragic event. We have made grief counselors available to anyone in our school community. Additionally, counselors have been assigned to the third grade classrooms to assist the teachers and students. These counselors will remain in place for the rest of the week.

(Describe what parents can do.)

We wanted all parents to be aware of the situation so that you can discuss this with your child. There is no way to predict how this tragedy might affect your child, but changes in behavior might be a signal that your child may need assistance to deal with the death of a friend.

- *Talk with your child about his/her feelings about the tragedy; share your feelings too*
- *Talk about what happened; give your child information he/she can understand*
- *Reassure your child that they are safe; you may need to repeat this reassurance often*
- *Listen and comfort your child often*

Please contact the school at (555-555-5555) if you feel that further follow-up with your child would be helpful.

(Close letter)

Thank you for your support as we move forward. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family during this time of loss and grief.

Sincerely,

COUNSELING CONSIDERATIONS

CRISIS COUNSELING

1. Schools provide a familiar environment and can be a best setting for providing services to student and staff after a loss that affects the community.
 - a. Staff options for counseling assistance:
 - i. Elementary, secondary, or community counselors
 - ii. School nurses
 - iii. Are there counselors outside your building who already have a connection with your students?
 - b. Determine best available sites for counseling centers.
 - c. Establish procedures for leaving and returning to the classroom.
 - d. Community options for counseling assistance:
 - i. Community counselors, ministers, and other appropriately vetted volunteers or members of the community.
 - ii. Community counselors are most needed when the adults (your staff) are greatly affected by the loss and when multiple deaths are involved.

FAMILY CONSIDERATION

1. Collect the personal belongings of the student (classroom, lockers) for the family
2. If the student has died, remove the student's name from all class rosters, home mailing lists, email lists, and mass call lists to protect family from ongoing traumatization (weather announcements, school newsletters, etc.)

FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS

1. Permanent Memorials: Suggest corporation policy to state that permanent memorials can be considered one year after the death, or not allowed (particularly for suicide).
2. Spontaneous Memorials: Informal memorials are likely to show up after a death. Ask students and staff to discuss their plans with you. Determine the time period that the memorials will remain and communicate that with the students. Help students plan what will be done with the items afterwards.
3. Funeral Services:
 - a. Be prepared to work with families on how to sign out students for the funeral.
 - b. If teachers are attending, subs may be needed or classes combined.
 - c. Like anyone else, staff attends the funeral to pay their respect, not to manage students. But, our students may seek the same daily supports (a nod, a smile, a hug) that they look for at school.
4. Funeral Services at School Site:
 - a. Costs and availability would be determined through the facility request process.

- b. Is the site feasible? (Security? Funeral director's needs? Counseling needs?)
- c. Use of school would have to be during weekend or after school day.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR STUDENT INTERACTIONS

DON'T

1. Avoid students because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by adults adds pain to an already painful experience)
2. Say you know how they feel
3. Change the subject when staff/students mention the loss
4. Try to find something positive (e.g. moral lesson, closer family ties)
5. Make comments that might suggest care at home, or the hospital, ambulance was inadequate
6. Dwell on details surrounding the student's death

DO

1. Let your genuine concern and caring show
2. Be available to listen
3. Allow them to express their grief
4. Provide special attention when needed
5. Refer to a mental health professional when needed
6. Increase awareness of behavioral changes that could indicate a student's need for greater assistance

MEDIA PROTOCOL

LEAD ADMINISTRATOR RESPONSE

1. Brief your staff *before* you release information to the media. Activate appropriate crisis teams if necessary.
2. In the event of an emergency that draws significant media attention, notify the Central Office that you need the district media protocol enacted.
3. Work closely with public safety officials on the release of information to the media. Refer all public safety questions to the appropriate public safety official. In particular, do not discuss specifics of any ongoing criminal investigations.
4. Conduct periodic joint press conferences with public safety officials. Information should only be released at the media staging area. This tends to reduce attempts by media personnel to resort to unethical tactics to gain information
5. Do not provide any information “off the record.”
6. Be careful not to show any favoritism to any particular press representative. Be particularly careful not to ignore local media representatives while trying to work with national media. Remember, you will have to work with the local media for years after the national media representatives are gone.
7. Be careful of “hot mics.” Television reporters will sometimes leave a camera turned on and record people when they think that they are only engaged in casual conversation with reporters. Consider all electronic equipment active at all times.
8. Before releasing information, consider whether you can legally do so. Be particularly careful about releasing identifying information.
9. Do not authorize interviews with juveniles without specific parental permission.
10. Maintain records of all interviews.
11. Media information sheets, containing basic background information about the school and corporation should be made available for the media. These sheets should contain background information on the school and can reduce the number and duration of interviews.

SAMPLE MEDIA STATEMENT

“My name is Dr. John Miller and I am the Superintendent of (XXXXX) Schools. We learned that a member of our school family, (student/staff name), was reported missing this morning (OR OTHER EVENT). This is a terrible tragedy for (student/staff name)’s family, our school, and our entire community. We have been in contact with (student/staff name)’s family and we should all respect their need for privacy at this time. Our school has implemented our Crisis Response Plan. Corporation staff, social workers, school counselors, administrators and teachers who are members of our team immediately went into action and are providing help for our students and faculty. We are all working together to support the school community at this time. Thank you.”