



*Grief Response
Procedures Manual*

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Definitions

The District Grief Response Team members:

Chief Student Services Officer
Chief Information Officer
Lead Nurse
Coordinator of Social Work
School-based Mental Health Coordinator
Lead School Psychologist
Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education

Grief response is initiated by:

- a sudden, unexpected, or unanticipated death or incident that triggers grief and disrupts the school day and may interfere with teaching, learning, attendance and behavior;
- a situation in which the individual's usual coping mechanisms may not be sufficient to handle a particular situation;
- members of the school community witnessing or learning about an event involving death or physical injury, or threatened death or injury.

The purpose of a grief response is to restore the individuals involved to pre-crisis levels of functioning by:

- assuring that tragic events or occurrences are not ignored;
- assisting students, faculty, parents and other school staff in dealing with emotional responses;
- decreasing the proliferation of rumors through the sharing of facts;
- securing and coordinating the services of community agencies as needed.

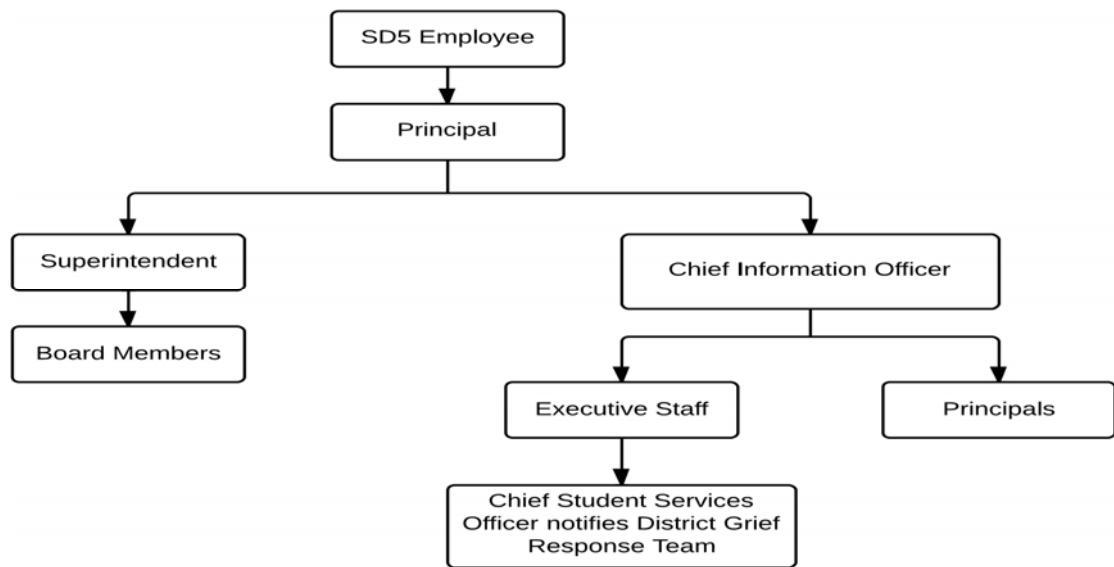
Communication

A communication plan:

- allows the district and school to disseminate key information efficiently and effectively;
- helps provide all school community members (students, families, faculty, staff, etc.) with a unified understanding of a crisis situation;
- decreases rumor and speculation.

Communication plans for a grief response event include:

1. Initial notification flow chart:



2. A phone/e-mail tree to serve as the main communication tool for the School Grief Response Team and faculty/staff;
3. A letter to parents/guardians informing them of the situation and providing details about the school's response; letters should be approved by the Chief Information Officer;
4. Scripts read by teachers and mental health professionals to inform students of the situation so there is consistency in the message and so information can be shared simultaneously;

Communication notes:

- Intercom announcements and large assemblies are discouraged as a means of sharing initial information to faculty/staff and students.
- It is highly encouraged that faculty/staff phone numbers are updated regularly so information can be dispersed quickly.
- Efforts should be made by the school leadership to discourage the use of social media by students and staff.

Guidelines for Student/Staff Sudden Death

Following a death, people can feel a sense of loss for at least two years. Frequently, aftereffects are felt as a pervasive sense of malaise among students and school staff. School staff can be devastated well into the next school year, and there may be a change in attitude toward teaching. Some staff may increase their emotional distance from students. Students tend to be fearful of getting close to one another, fearing the loss of another classmate or friend. The need to cope adaptively is necessary. These guidelines are written to help deal with these concerns and to establish procedures for a sudden death.

Day of a Sudden Death

Upon notification of the sudden death of a student or staff member, the building Principal will first notify the Superintendent followed by the Chief Information Officer. The CIO will contact the Executive Staff and other principals. The Chief Student Services Officer will in turn contact appropriate members of the district Grief Response Team. The Superintendent will contact members of the School Board.

The Principal will initiate a phone/email tree to all faculty and support staff, informing them of the crisis.

The district's Grief response Team will communicate to plan tentative activities for the first couple of days, providing the necessary support to all members of the school community.

As soon as is appropriate, school representatives should visit the family. If possible, the principal and another member of the school community familiar with the family (e.g., teacher, coach, guidance counselor) make the visit. All visits should be carefully orchestrated, with language crafted to express sympathy and offer support.

First Day After a Sudden Death

The school Principal meets with the school crisis team before meeting with faculty to plan the aftermath of the sudden death.

The Principal reviews the available facts of the case with all faculty and support staff to dispel rumors, to discuss the plan of the day, and to allow for faculty and support staff to express feelings. Faculty/staff are encouraged to lend support to one another.

A response center is established in the school building. Additional staff from other buildings may be called to assist. A member of the school team makes phone calls to parents of students who are particularly upset or may be at risk. The response center may be kept open after school hours and into the evening to assist students, parents, and staff.

School Grief Response Team: Roles and Responsibilities to Consider

Position	Responsibilities	✓	Notes
Principal	Verify facts.		
	Call Superintendent and Chief Information officer.		
	Convene the school response team and delegate responsibilities.		
	Serve as spokesperson for the school.		
	Provide overall management of the situation.		
	After approval by the CIO, provide communication to staff, parents, students, and media, including phone/email tree, scripts to teachers, parent/family contact, faculty/staff meetings.		
	Communicate with other district schools as appropriate.		
	Make all other notifications as required.		
	Assess needs of the family.		
	Delegate a staff member to coordinate memorials (school sanctioned activities and permanent memorials) and provide final approval (guidance to follow).		
	Reconvene the school response team for debriefing.		

School Grief Response Team: Roles and Responsibilities to Consider

Position	Responsibilities	✓	Notes
Assistant Principals	Remain accountable to the principal and provide documentation of activities to the principal.		
	Secure rooms for debriefing and counseling.		
	Obtain a list of students, faculty, and staff at risk.		
	Coordinate volunteers.		
	Coordinate contact with parents, including procedures for students to sign-out.		
	Organize coverage for faculty/staff to attend funeral and procedures for student sign-out for funeral.		

Position	Responsibilities	✓	Notes
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Guidance /Mental Health Counselors, Social Workers, School Psychologists	Assign mental health professional to follow the deceased student/faculty schedule for initial day.		
	Provide counseling and intervention.		
	Identify students and adults at high risk.		
	Make contact with parents as needed, including arrangements for students to leave school when appropriate.		
	Ensure appropriate follow-up with students and adults.		
	Contact community agencies for additional support.		
	Provide appropriate referrals to students and adults.		

School Nurse	Assess medical emergencies.		
	Communicate with parents regarding student medical needs.		
	Contact private physicians or hospitals as appropriate.		
	Provide medical information to student, faculty, and staff.		
	Provide follow-up regarding high risk students.		
	Provide referrals to private resources.		

Position	Responsibilities	✓	Notes
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Safety and Security Specialist and SRO	Gather facts concerning any safety issues, threats, or retaliation.		
	Secure school grounds as appropriate.		
	Arrange for any security-related support needed.		
	Organize maintenance crew for any special accommodations that need to be made.		
	Consult with principal regarding facilities status and occupancy issues.		

All Teachers and Staff	Provide accurate information to students in a developmentally appropriate manner.		
	Follow script.		
	Facilitate class discussions.		
	Dispel rumors.		
	Model appropriate responses.		
	Identify and refer students in need of counseling or nursing services.		

Appendix 1: Example script for teachers to use with students

Sample Script:

It is with much sadness that we inform you of the death of (insert name) who passed away due to (insert cause of death) that occurred (insert day/date). Our thoughts are with (his/her) family during this difficult time. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for the entire school. In order to help us cope with this tragic news, social workers, school psychologists, and counselors are available to talk with students and staff members.

Tips for Teachers:

- Keep the information you initially provide brief and simple.
- Share all important facts as to avoid speculation from students.
- Be comfortable with stating what isn't known. For example, teachers and staff members may be most comfortable using prepared phrases such as:
 - “There are a lot of things we don't know right now and we are sharing what we know for sure.”
 - “Speculating and gossiping can hurt the family so we appreciate everyone sticking with what we know.”
 - “I don't know that yet; I'll let you know when we have more information.”
 - “I do have some information about that, but it's not my information to share. “
 - “Please be respectful of using social media. You wouldn't want anyone to first hear this from a tweet or facebook post.
- Use clear language such as “died,” and “was killed” and avoid euphemisms.
- Have counselors and social workers available to assist teachers in the event that the teacher is overwhelmed by the class's response. Ensure that the teacher is aware that he/she is not expected to provide counseling, but that it is helpful for students to receive this type of news from someone familiar.

Appendix 2: Sample Communication: Death of Student or Staff Member

Month, Day, Year

Dear Parents/Guardians and Community Members:

It is with deep sadness that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On (insert date), (insert name) passed away due to (insert cause of death) that occurred on (insert address if know) at (insert time if known). Our thoughts are with (his/her) family during this difficult time. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for the entire school, especially our students.

School District Five has a Grief Response Team made up of professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. These individuals will be in the building over the next several days to assist our school community. Our own counselors, school psychologists, and social workers will work closely with this team and then continue to be available for students who need continuing services.

Information about the date, time, and location of the funeral will be available in the main office once it is received.

We are saddened by this loss and will do everything we can to help you and your student.

Sincerely,

Principal

Appendix 3: Sample Communication: Death of Student to Faculty and Staff

Dear Faculty and Staff,

It is with deep regret that I am writing this letter. All of us are grieving the tragic loss of our student. A special Grief Response Team is in place to assist the students and staff in handling this loss. An increased level of individual and group counseling services has been made available on a continued basis for as long as necessary.

Your students may experience feelings that are strong in nature as a response to this tragedy, including anxiety, denial, anger, remorse, grief, and sorrow. Once the immediate situation is resolved, keeping open lines of communication with your students is helpful as they may require your comfort and support. Listening with empathy, patience, and understanding can be of great benefit to your students. If a student displays dramatic changes in behavior or if symptoms of grief persist, please consult with a guidance counselor.

We are saddened by this loss and will do everything we can to help you and your student.

Sincerely,

Principal

Appendix 4: Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief

Tips for Teachers and Parents

How schools and families handle their response to a sudden death or similar crisis can shape the immediate and long-term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, will need the love and support of their teachers and parents to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children, adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- Emotional shock and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- Regressive (immature behaviors), such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed, or difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- Explosive emotions and acting out behavior that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- Asking the same questions over and over, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

Helping Children Cope

- Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences.
- Grieving is a process, not an event: Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume normal activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions. On the other hand, resuming normal schedules, such as school attendance and family functions can restore a sense of stability and provide much-needed distraction from grief.
- Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event: They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death: Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way: We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need: Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.

- Children will need long-lasting support: The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- Keep in mind that grief work is hard: It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- Understand that grief work is complicated: Deaths can bring forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may also be complicated by guilt, a need for vengeance or justice, or the lack of resolution.
- Be aware of your own need to grieve: Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Appendix 5: Grief Resource Guide