**High School Suicide Response Plan**

**Event:**

School staff member is notified of a student suicide completion outside of school

**Response:**

**Initial Staff Actions**

1. Notify high school principal

**Initial Administrator Actions**

1. Verify the death

2. Notify the superintendent

3. Contact the family to offer support

4. Notify the other building administrators and the high school counselor

5. Initiate the call tree to set up a staff meeting before the school day to notify teachers

6. Contact the high school secretary to identify available substitutes

7. Send home a letter to notify parents of the loss, at risk student behaviors and help resources

8. Request the SRO patrol the school grounds for distressed students and refer them to the recovery room

9. Inform community partners for support (Bitterroot Valley Education Cooperative, Ryan Wetzel, etc.)

10. Document the process

**Initial Counselor Actions**

1. Contact district school counselors and CSCT mental health therapists for additional support

2. Create a list of the high risk students and check in

3. Set up a recovery room to support affected students

4. Make outside counseling referrals to parents if needed by a student

**Initial Teacher Actions**

1. During the first class period, read the death notification statement to the students

2. Identify students displaying difficulty and make a referral to the recovery room

**Secondary Administrator Actions**

1. Make an end of the day student announcement

2. Facilitate an end of day staff meeting

3. Collaborate with parents on a plan to return any of the deceased student’s personal items

4. After the funeral, assist students to return to a regular routine

5. Decide if the school is interested in making a media statement and/or creating a parent meeting

**Secondary Counselor Actions**

1. Organize a recovery team to determine a course of action to monitor and support struggling students

2. Verify posters are located throughout the school building that list crisis phone numbers

**Protocol for Morning Staff Meeting**

1. Inform staff members of the student death

2. Inform staff about the school district’s media policy regarding the death (for example, “No TV cameras or reporters will be allowed in the school or on school grounds. Please direct questions from parents or the community to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”)

3. Provide teacher a copy of the statement they are to read to students during the first class period

4. Answer teacher questions about how to respond to the incident and give the teacher handout

5. Ask teachers about their ability to deliver the student statement and work during the school day (identify any

teachers in need of assistance or a substitute)

6. Instruct teachers to identify struggling students and refer them to the recovery room

7. Inform teachers that there will be an end of the day meeting

8. Inform school staff of the procedure for students leaving school today

**Protocol for Afternoon Staff Meeting**

1. Inquire about the teacher’s ability to handle the loss

2. Inquire about struggling students that teachers have identified and make a list of the students

3. Communicate the district’s policy and plan for students to attend the funeral or engage in memorial projects

**Tips for Speaking about a Student Death**

• Do not glorify the act of suicide. Stress to the students that suicide is an error in judgment and is a "permanent solution to life's temporary problems."

• Do not announce that the death was by suicide when making general public statements. Coroner's medical findings can be legally contested and frequently are in cases of suicide. School personnel should allow the discussion of suicide as the students talk about the death, however, it is not essential that school personnel confirm the death was by suicide.

• As the students are discussing the nature of the death (which they will do), school personnel should take the opportunity to discuss the subject of suicide and how the students might cope with stress, personal frustration, disappointment, and other severe hardships.

• Recognize the tragedy of the event and acknowledge the varied feelings of those grieving.

• Memorials should be directed toward symbols of coping and living (e.g., planting of a tree, donations to a crisis hotline, a blood drive).

**Factors for Identifying High Risk Students**

1. Students that participated in any way with a suicide or accident

2. Students that knew of the suicide attempt or potential attempt and didn't try to stop it

3. Students that feel guilty about things they said or did to the deceased prior to the death

4. Students who did not take a suicide threat seriously or had been too busy to talk to the deceased student who

asked for help

5. Student that are relatives, best friends or students that took a role as a “self-appointed therapists”

6. Students who were mentioned in a suicide note

7. Student that identifies with the victim's situation

8. Students that have a history of significant mental health illness or who have a history of suicidal threats or

attempts

9. Students that demonstrate great changes in behavior after the death (high level of absenteeism, increased

levels of conflict with others, a fixation on death)

**Student Death Announcement Example**

**Sample Announcement for When a Suicide has Occurred, Morning, Day 1**

This morning we heard the extremely sad news that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ took his/her life last night. I know we are all saddened by his/her death and send our condolences to his/her family and friends. A Recovery Room will be located in the school counselor’s office today for students who wish to talk to a counselor. Information about the funeral will be provided when it is available, and students may attend with parental permission.

**Sample Announcement for a Suspicious Death Not Declared Suicide: Morning, Day 1**

This morning we heard the extremely sad news that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ died last night from a gunshot wound. This is the only information we have officially received on the circumstances surrounding the event. I know we are all saddened by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death and send our condolences to his/her family and friends. A Recovery Room will be located in the school counselor’s office today for students who wish to talk to a counselor. Information about the funeral will be provided when it is available; students may attend with parental permission.

**Sample Announcement, End of Day 1**

At the end of the first day, another announcement to the whole school prior to dismissal can serve to join the whole school in their grieving in a simple, non-sensationalized way. In this case, it is appropriate for the building administrator to make an announcement similar to the following over the loud speaker:

Today has been a sad day for all of us. We encourage you to talk about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death with your friends, your family, and whoever else gives you support. We will have special staff here for you tomorrow to help in dealing with our loss. Let us end the day by having the whole school offer a moment of silence for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**Recovery Room**

A Recovery Room will be setting up in the high school counselor’s office to aid students by providing education about grief, conducting counseling activities, assessing student reactions and making referrals for therapy.

Recovery Room Tips:

1. Design it to be a drop-in center for all grieving students that is available all day the first day (news of a sudden death may be disseminated in this setting to students with close relationships to the deceased).
2. Have more than one counselor/facilitator as there may be multiple needs in the group at one time; it's also a good idea to have others available for relief purposes.
3. Co-facilitating is especially critical to maintain continuity, in spite of the "drop-in" process, for consultation in identifying high-risk students and for general support and help.
4. Focus:

A. Memories, positive experiences with person who died

B. Feelings about loss

C. Stages of grieving (grief education)-students may bring up spirituality

D. Funeral and services-appropriate behaviors/concerns about experience

E. Future-what next?

F. Guilt work if needed, some need to focus on causation

G. Family and friend's response (Kids often wonder "What can I do? How can I help?")

H. Identifying others that the students are concerned about (provides them with an

opportunity to help; gives them a purpose in crises; allows them to be part of a

larger supportive community response

1. Avoid focusing on:

A. Narcissistic focus on suicidal thoughts, feelings, experiences if the death was a suicide (consider promoting some dis-identification with the student and the deceased)

B. Constant talk about the actual death (morbid focusing)

C. Blame

1. Bring group to some closure the second day-avoid adding new members (may need to meet others on a one-to-one basis); probably will focus more on funeral and services.
2. May need to reconvene after funeral for an hour to refocus on grief/loss; bring group to some closure again and offer various resources for on-going support.
3. Remember throughout the course of group process, facilitators need to identify students with chronic problems around the issue of suicide/self-destructive behavior (regardless of the cause of the death) and to assess whether these youngsters need to be "pulled" from the group. If the students in question are identified as "chronic manipulative attempters" they must be removed from the group and their on-going counselor/therapist should be contacted.
4. The counseling staff may want to consider the possibility of a "neighborhood group" in the evening to reach youngsters at all age levels (checking in with parents to see if there is a need).
5. Finally, we suggest group work as a possibility for the whole system, K-12. Death impacts the whole educational community, not just one branch.

(this document was modified from the ASCA Crisisbook)

**Sample Letters to Parents**

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of Joe Doe, a sophomore in our school. John died from injuries suffered in a car accident which occurred last evening (do not specify reason if death by suicide or causes which are unknown, etc.).

The funeral will be held at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Funeral Home or Church) at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ a.m./p.m.

Visitation will be held at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Funeral Home) during the hours of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Parents are encouraged to attend the funeral with their child. (Note: Send a letter home to parents even if you do not know the details of the funeral arrangements.)

Students will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. Any reaction is normal in the grief process and can range from withdrawal, to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of Joe.

Special counseling services have been made available to students today and will continue to be available throughout the week and longer, if needed. If you think your child needs additional counseling support, please do not hesitate to contact the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (School Counseling Office) at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (phone number).

Sincerely,

Principal and Staff

**Sample Media Statement**

School personnel were informed that a [\_\_]-year-old student at [\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_] school has died. We are heartbroken over the death of one of our students. Our hearts, thoughts, and prayers go out to [his/her] family and friends, and the entire community.

The school will be hosting a meeting for parents and others in the community at [date/time/location]. Administrators, school counselors and mental health professionals will be present to provide information about common reactions following a suicide and how adults can help youths cope. They will also provide information about suicide and mental illness in adolescents, including risk factors and warning signs of suicide, and will address attendees’ questions and concerns. A meeting announcement has been sent to parents, who can contact school administrators or counselors at [number] or [e-mail address] for more information. Counselors will be available to meet with students and staff starting tomorrow and continuing over the next few weeks as needed.