

**Dealing With Death:
Tips for Building Principals in Managing Emotionality
and
Providing Support to Staff and Students**

Scott Poland
PolandNASP@aol.com

Please consider the following scenarios:

- Four high school students are killed in an automobile accident.
- A middle school student died by suicide.
- A school paraprofessional dies of a heart attack.
- Three elementary girls are shot and killed by their father.
- An elementary teacher died of cancer after a long illness.

This is a small sampling of the tragedies that affected schools in Texas during a period of only a few days recently. All building principals will inevitably be faced with the death of a student or staff member. Since the principal sets the tone for the quantity and quality of assistance that staff and students receive in the aftermath of a tragedy, the following suggestions are offered for maximizing support and processing efforts in effectively dealing with such crises:

1. Immediately verify the facts surrounding the death and convene the campus crisis team. Contact your administrative supervisor in order to obtain central administration support and guidance. (Note: Assemble and maintain at home a crisis file that contains updated planning information and phone numbers.)
2. Do not hesitate to contact the victim's family to get facts and offer assistance.
3. Be truthful and use developmentally appropriate language with students.
4. Do not underestimate the impact of the tragedy. Review the following:
 - How well known was the deceased? There will be more emotionality following the death of popular and beloved students/faculty.
 - What was the cause of death? Deaths by homicide, accident and suicide are sudden and unexpected, and a higher level of emotionality can be expected.
 - Where did the death occur? Deaths occurring on campuses are especially traumatic for both students and staff.
 - Are there prior tragedies that have affected the school community? Issues and emotions from previous losses will likely surface, further complicating the processing efforts.
 - Was there a perpetrator who caused the accident or committed the homicide? If students and staff were acquainted with the perpetrator, many additional issues will surface.

5. If verification of death comes after the school day has ended or during the weekend, the school faculty calling tree should be utilized to notify the staff and to allow them the following:
 - Time to process the information and receive support from their friends and significant others.
 - Additional time to deal with their own personal issues regarding crisis and loss if necessary, thereby being prepared to assist their students when school resumes.
 - To feel included in the processing rather than excluded and even angry when not given prior notification of the tragedy.
 - Advance notification of a faculty meeting scheduled for the purpose of announcing updates, details and specific plans for the day.

6. If school is in session when you verify facts surrounding the tragedy, the following notification methods are recommended:
 - Memos delivered to all classrooms that contain the facts of the tragedy and specific recommendations or a script for teachers explaining what to say to students.
 - Carefully worded and previously rehearsed public announcements to faculty and students.
 - Utilize the minute of silence that is currently being observed in Texas schools each day to encourage students to think about the deceased's family.

7. If the death was a suicide, carefully review postvention guidelines from the American Association of Suicidology at www.suicidology.org or 202-237-2280. Suicide postvention procedures recommend telling staff and students the truth about cause of death without giving explicit details. Make no attempt to explain why he/she died but focus instead on helping students with grief resolution and to learn the warning signs of suicide. Small group or classroom discussions are recommended rather than a large school assembly.

8. Protect staff and students from the media. Set limits for media personnel but provide them with factual information while protecting the privacy of the victim's family. The media has a job to do and maintaining good relations with them could serve to create an opportunity for promoting positive messages to the community.

9. Keep school open during normal hours. Since the school is a major source of comfort and assistance for most students, consider keeping it open on evenings and weekends as needed to provide support for staff and students.

10. Students or staff who were physically and directly exposed to the trauma (i.e., witness to the death or accident) will need more extensive assistance, preferably separate from staff and students who were not physically exposed.
11. Provide classroom interventions, having mental health professionals such as counselors and psychologists leading discussions in classrooms as the first intervention. The majority of students will receive all the help they need in the classroom.
12. Recognize that the tragedy becomes the curriculum subject in logical classes based on the questions outlined in point #4 above.
13. Provide students the opportunity to express emotions through talking, writing, music, artwork, and ceremonies.
14. Individual and group counseling should be offered to students who need additional support beyond what was provided in the classroom interventions.
15. Do not hesitate to contact parents of students about whom you are concerned.
16. Recognizing that you and your staff are personally affected by the tragedy, utilizing objective guidance and support from local as well as state and national resources could be beneficial, depending on the severity of the tragedy. National level assistance is available from:
 - The National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) at the National Association of School Psychologists, 301-657-0270,
 - The U.S. Department of Education's Schools Emergency Response to Violence Projects (S.E.R.V.) at 202-260-1856, and
 - The National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) at 1-800-TRY-NOVA.
17. Faculty and students will be looking for the "gift of hope", or ways to make the world a better place through prevention activities and projects.
18. Plan memorials very carefully, proceed slowly, and involve a committee in the memorial decision making process. There has been much debate about the appropriateness of memorials at school especially if the death was by suicide.
19. Since the effects of a tragedy persist for a long time, make plans to provide follow-up and ongoing support, especially to close friends of the deceased on the anniversary dates of the tragedy. Adolescents who have experienced a

prior loss will be more at risk for depression, substance abuse, and reckless behavior.

20. Do not underestimate your own and your staff's processing and support requirements. Take time to identify your own coping skills as well as sources of comfort and strength in your lives.

Dr. Scott Poland is Director of Psychological Services for Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, Texas. He is a founding member of the National Emergency Assistance Team and has provided training and interventions to school personnel after ten school shootings, the Oklahoma City bombing and 9-11-01 in New York and Washington, D.C. He is the author or co-author of four books and a number of chapters and articles on school/crisis and safety. He can be reached at PolandNASP@aol.com . His most recent publications on school crisis are available from Sopris West at www.sopriswest.com .