

STUDENT PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

SUICIDE, SUDDEN DEATH, AND CATASTROPHIC EVENTS IN THE WESTFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The following draft is based on a report prepared by Robert Hennessey, School Psychologist and Andy Vengrove, Ed.D., School Psychologist.

POLICY

The Westfield Public School system recognizes its moral and ethical responsibility to provide appropriate intervention and referral for potentially suicidal youth who come to the attention of school personnel. The Westfield Public School system recognizes that suicide is a complex issue. The school cannot make a clinical assessment of risk and provide in-depth counseling, but must refer youth to a community agency for such assessment and counseling.

REGULATIONS

Any school employee who has knowledge of a critical school emergency such as a suicide threat or other crisis situations, as in untimely death of a student or staff member or any other catastrophic event or threat which poses potential danger to the physical or emotional well being of the school community, must take the proper steps, as specified in post-vention guidelines, to report this information to the designated school team who will in turn notify the appropriate school officials, the student's family, and appropriate community agencies.

Each school will establish a School Crisis Team (SCT) to handle emergency situations that require a team approach. The SCT will respond to various situations, such as, suicide or sudden death of a student or faculty member, natural disasters, and other emergency situations.

The size and membership of the SCT may vary in accordance with the size of each school and personnel available. It is recommended that the SCT be composed of a minimum of one member for every 100 students. SCT members should possess a variety of skills and knowledge.

The Central Office Support Team (COST) will include the Superintendent, Director of Special Services, Principal of the school or schools effected by crisis and the coordinators of the crisis program. When appropriate, consultants from outside the school system may be included, especially those with influential ties to outside agencies that may assist during crisis.

The responsibilities of this team are to oversee and support the building level teams.

STUDENTS AT RISK

All students at risk for suicide will be assessed by appropriate school personnel. Students at high risk will be closely monitored by a counselor. Parent (s) or guardian(s) will be contacted and an immediate referral to the Westfield Crisis Team and/or a private therapist or community agency will be made. Due to the seriousness of the situation, parent refusal to take their child for an immediate evaluation will result in a report to the Department of Social Services.

Students at moderate risk and low risk will also be closely monitored by school personnel. Their parent(s) or guardian(s) will be contacted about our assessment. School personnel and family members will work together to create a supportive network for the youngster which may include referrals to community agencies and private therapists.

Recommend Practices are on file in each school office.

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Moved to Reference Manual 12-2014

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

The following post-vention guidelines are intended to guide actions regarding the aftermath of a suicide, sudden death or catastrophic event in the schools.

1st Day of Suicide or Sudden Death of Student or Faculty Member

1. The Superintendent needs to verify the death through communicating with the Police Chief, Medical Examiner, hospital authorities and the family. Verification of the death should include:
 - A. Time of death
 - B. Method
 - C. Location
 - D. Extenuating circumstances that may help with later understanding
 - E. Witnesses; especially if students are involved

The Superintendent should designate another person from the School Department to verify information in case the Superintendent is unavailable.

2. Superintendent or designee will make two calls to initiate two separate phone trees:
 - A. Central Office Support Team Network: The Superintendent will contact a Coordinator from the COST to initiate a phone tree to other members. The COST will have the option to conference by telephone or call an immediate meeting at a predetermined location to coordinate plans for the following day or the first day back to school and lend support to each other.
 - B. School Crisis Team communication Network: The Superintendent will contact the Principal or designated Team leader of the individual school where the student or faculty member attended. The School Crisis Team (SCT) will initiate the phone tree to all school personnel, including secretarial, custodial and kitchen staff to briefly inform them of a the tragedy and request their presence at an emergency meeting thirty minutes earlier than their regularly scheduled time.
3. During the first meeting or telephone conference, the COST will begin the postvention process:
 - A. After verification is complete, the immediate task of the COST will be to carefully disseminate accurate information and being to implement he postvention plan. This should be done with special sensitivity to the wishes of the family since their rights of privacy and confidentiality need to be respected. Factual information helps dispel rumors within the school and community.
 - B. The COST will designate one spokesperson, preferably the Superintendent, to receive all inquiries from the press and other media. All individuals involved should be instructed to refer reporters to the designated spokesperson. An alternate spokesperson should be pre-chosen in case the Superintendent is unavailable.

Dealing with the media requires caution, therefore a simple “no comment” may be the best approach until a well formulated response or statement is developed. Avoid focusing on the suicide and concentrate on the sense of loss and they way the School Department is working to help the students and community cope. Reporters should be requested not to sensationalize

the act of suicide since research indicates that this approach to reporting a suicide can set the atmosphere for additional attempts.

Media representatives should not be permitted to interview or photograph students on school grounds. They are to be directed to the Superintendent's office. If photographers or media representatives refuse to comply with requests to leave school property, the police can be notified. If the death happens at school, a brief statement to the press should be prepared which states that an accident has occurred and more information will be forthcoming this can help in diminishing the effects of rumor or hysteria.

C. The COST will prepare written statement regarding the facts of the incident for the School Crisis Team, faculty and students. The statement should be brief, factual and avoid the mention of suicide.

For example:

"We have just learned that John Jones, a 12th grade student, has died. Visiting hours and funeral arrangements have not yet been completed. We will do our best to keep you informed. Those of you who wish to discuss John's death further can obtain passes from your teacher and meet in Room 100 at the end of the is period with counselors who have been made available for this purpose. We are now asking that you observe a moment of silence in memory of John."

D. The Superintendent or designee directly involved with the family should inquire about wake and funeral arrangements.

First Day after a Suicide/Death

1. The School Principal meets with the SCT thirty minutes before meeting with the faculty to plan the aftermath of the suicide/death.
2. The Principal will review the facts of the case with all faculty and support staff to dispel rumors, to discuss the plan of the day and to allow faculty members to express their feelings. Faculty/staff are encouraged to lend support to one another. It's crucial that this meeting take place prior to the opening of school. The SCT will have prepared a written notice to be placed in all faculty and staff members mailboxes stating the facts of the suicide/death and the plans for the day. This will help to keep the information consistent throughout the school and allow faculty to feel more in control.
3. Plans of the day should include the following procedures:
 - A. The school needs to inform the students of the recent tragedy. The statement prepared by the COST may be read by the individual teachers in the classroom/homeroom. The purpose is to have the students find out about the death simultaneously throughout the school. Meetings with students should happen as early as possible to forestall rumor and misinformation and to begin creating a safe, structured environment to aide in the process of sharing the trauma and effective crisis intervention. Most important, students need to be informed of the support system available to them.
 - B. A member of the crisis team, preferable and adjustment counselor, guidance counselor or school psychologist, should describe the feelings which the students may be experiencing and suggest how teachers might handle these. Faculty and supporting staff should also be aware of their own feelings throughout the day and ask for support when needed.
 - C. Faculty and supporting staff should understand that school will not be dismissed. Students who are coping well should be able to follow their regular schedules; students who need

special assistance should be directed to pre-determined locations within the school. Individuals in serious distress should be escorted to the Crisis Center by a faculty member. Record of all passes issued should be kept by both the classroom teacher and the Crisis Center (students should be “logged-in” and “logged-out”).

D. The faculty and supporting staff should be notified of staff meeting at the end of the day (see #9 for more details).

4. A Crisis Center is established in a pre-determined location. Ideally the location should include several large areas that can be sectioned off and easily supervised, preferable with bathrooms nearby. Crisis Team members and additional pupil personnel staff will assist with crisis management. Those students who are most affected by the death should seek special assistance at the Crisis Center. Group and individual counseling will be provided by staff who have adequate training in discussing the issues at hand and providing appropriate support. Crisis intervention is not psychotherapy but the restoration of students to their former emotional/behavioral states.

A member of the crisis team will make phone calls to parents of students who are particularly upset or may be at risk. These contacts should start during the school day and continue until all parents are reached. The crisis team member can explain the students reactions to the death and can make the appropriate suggestions to parents on ways to manage their children. It may be necessary for parents to come to school and take their child home for the day or to receive immediate professional help within the community. Resources for professional help, as well as a booklist regarding issues of death and grief are made available. Any student judged to be at any degree of suicidal risk should be handled through the policy for students at risk (see Appendix).

5. If outside help is needed, local mental health professionals will be contacted by the SCT.

A. When outside consultants are called upon, they can be useful because they are generally not emotionally involved with the case and can provide objective support and direction.

B. If available, the COST can access other counselors and psychologists within the school system.

6. The Coordinators of the Crisis Program and the Principal will keep in contact with the COST throughout the day to share information and mutual support.

7. The COST will contact other Principals or designee to inform them of the suicide/death and ask Principal or designee to be aware of students who may be affected within their schools, i.e. siblings, boyfriends, girlfriends, close family members.

8. The wake and funeral arrangements should be made available to those students who are interested. Attendance at the funeral during school time will require written dismissal permission from parents.

9. The school staff are assembled for one hour (minimum) at the end of the school day. The Principal conducts the meeting with the help of the SCT and does the following:

A. Helps create an environment to allow the expression of feelings and mutual support.

B. Reviews the events of the day.

C. Reviews the characteristics of high-risk students (those who seem especially upset or depressed or show other signs of not coping well and compiles a confidential list of staff observations of distressed students' reactions during the school day.

D. Announce the wake and funeral arrangements and encourage staff to attend in order to provide support to students and their families as well as to deal with their own sense of loss within the school and community.

Second Day of Suicide/Death

1. Continue the operation of the crisis team in the crisis center which has been previously established. The team should continue meeting with individual students and small groups to provide support and further identify high-risk students.
2. A designated spokesperson will announce to the community an open meeting for concerned parents. This can be an evening meeting. They schools may use the media to help announce the meeting.
3. The Principal will communicate to all parents of high-risk students be either:
 - A. writing parents and reminding them to seek a professional evaluation.
 - B. phoning parents to invite them to a special evening meeting.
4. Outside consultants and school staff conduct an evening meeting of concerned parents. At this meeting families of those students who are not coping well are urged to pursue an evaluation at one of the public or private mental health agencies. Current efforts to deal with the crisis are explained. Crisis team members and clinical staff are available to privately answer parents' specific concerns about why some children were identified as high-risk or any other concerns parents may be having. Crisis Team and other clinical staff should meet following parent meeting to discuss meeting. Depending on current situation, the evening meeting may take place on the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th day.
5. The Principal will hold a brief faculty meeting to review the day and answer any concerns.
6. If necessary, the Principal will review the day with a member of the COST.

Third Day of Suicide/Death

1. Crisis team members and clinical staff continue crisis intervention, answer phone calls to anxious parents and meet with concerned staff.
2. "Front line" staff who have been dealing with the crisis meet with a consultant for the expression of feelings and mutual support.
3. Crisis team meets to review how crisis is being handled so far and plans for future actions.

Fourth Day of Suicide/Death

1. Crisis team members and clinical staff continue crisis intervention, answer phone calls to anxious parents and meet with concerned staff.
2. "School/Community Steering Committee" is formed and plans a meeting for all interested community leaders to discuss a community-wide response to the needs of the youth in town.
3. Crisis team meets to review how crisis is being handled so far and plans future actions.

Fifth Day of Suicide/Death

1. Crisis team members and clinical staff continue crisis intervention, answer phone calls to anxious parents and meet with concerned staff.

2. Crisis staff meets at the end of the day to evaluate crisis response and determine if crisis center is still needed.

Responsibilities of the School Crisis Team

The School Crisis Team will be responsible for the following:

1. Implementing the action plan that has been established by the team. The action plan will follow the guidelines set within school policy that has been established for crisis intervention and school emergencies.
2. Reporting to the Central Office Support Team.
 - a. the existence and nature of the crisis
 - b. evaluation of the crisis
 - c. review the events of the day
3. Managing the crisis:
 - a. Principal or administrative designee will be responsible for:
 1. building security
 2. administrative decisions to ensure the regular operation of the school day
 3. meeting with parents of at-risk students who will be released during the school day
 4. other duties as they arise
 - b. School psychologist, Adjustment Counselors, and Guidance Counselors will be responsible for:
 1. identifying and monitoring students at risk
 2. individual and group counseling
 3. liaison to outside mental health agencies and professionals
 4. family contact
 5. other duties as they arise
 - c. School Nurse will be responsible for:
 1. attending to medical emergencies
 2. consultation with medical professionals on an as needed basis
 3. identifying and monitoring students at risk
 - d. Additional team members unique skills will be used according to need.
 - e. The SCT will assess the need for resources outside the school, identify and monitor students at risk, debrief staff after the crisis and provide follow-up activities.
4. Implementing an in-service program planned by the team for staff about student suicide and other crisis related issues. The Central Office Support Team will provide direction and resources for such training.

The Central Office Support Team (COST)

The Central Office Support Team (COST) will include the Superintendent, Director of Special Services, building Principal of the school or schools affected by crisis and the coordinators of the crisis program. When appropriate, consultants from outside the school system may be included, especially those with influential ties to outside agencies that may assist during a crisis. The responsibilities of this team are:

1. Overseeing and supporting the building level teams.
2. Authorizing additional resources to assist building level teams. For example, reassigning counselors and psychologist to crisis areas.
3. Providing for education and training for crisis team members.
4. Evaluating responses to crises.
5. Supporting the establishment and maintenance of a community support team.
6. Providing overall coordination of any non-routine situation.
7. Provide a liaison and representation to the media and community resources.
8. Maintaining a central library of materials on non-routine school emergency for faculty, staff, and students.

Suicide Threat Checklist

Do These Things

1. Remain calm. Stay with the student. Remember, the student is overwhelmed, confused as well as ambivalent.
2. Get vital information if possible (name, address, home phone number, parent's work number). Send another teacher or student to get help.
3. Clear other students from the scene. Direct them to return to class.
4. Assure the student that he or she has done the right thing by talking to you. Try to win the student's trust. Assure the student that emergency help is coming. Tell the student that there are options available.
5. Get the student to talk. Listen! Listen! Listen! Repeat back what you hear the student saying (help the student define the problem). Acknowledge the student's feelings ("you are really angry" "you must feel humiliated").
6. Establish direct eye contact with the student. Speak in a calm, low voice. If the student is about to commit suicide, buy time. Say "Don't jump. Stand there. Talk with me. I'll listen". Show that you are not shocked by discussing suicide.
7. Try to get the student to agree to a verbal "no suicide" contract ("No matter what happens, I will not kill myself").
8. Monitor the student's behavior constantly.
9. Make a mental note at the time of the incident of what the student says.
10. Ask the principal or another administrator to contact the parents with the message that their child is hurt and they will be called back immediately with the name of the hospital where they can join their child. Tell them to keep their telephone line clear.