

CRISIS QUICK ACTION GUIDE

Announcing a Crisis

Crisis Scripts - District officials should write a script for classroom teachers and counselors to read simultaneously to the student body in the case of a crisis or emergency.

- › Crisis script templates can be found at these links: [Crisis Script: Staff Death Notification](#), [Crisis Script Letter to Parents](#), and [Crisis Script: Read to Students](#). If a teacher is unavailable or unable to read a script to their students, another teacher, administrator or counselor can step in and read the script. Additionally, the [Crisis Script: Answering the Phones](#) will be helpful for frontline staff.
- › **Classroom Announcements** - The best environment to announce a crisis (death, harm, other emergency) is a classroom. This provides a safe and controlled setting. A pre-written script should be read at the same time in each class.
- › **Dispelling Rumors** - Providing the facts of a crisis is very important for many reasons. One of the critical reasons is to dispel rumors that will grow out of a crisis. Rumors are a normal occurrence, however, it is important to provide all available facts to minimize these. This is why it is important to use a classroom script to announce a crisis and/or death. Addressing rumors is appropriate when you have facts to share.

Things to Avoid

- › **Assemblies** - Avoid bringing students into an assembly to announce tragic news. The number of students in an assembly makes the setting more difficult to manage and connect with students. Instead, tell individual classes at the same time by reading the same script.
- › **Overhead Announcements** - Announcing a crisis such as a student or staff death, an ill student or staff member, an accident, or other traumatic situation should not be announced overhead unless it is an emergency. An emergency might be announcing an intruder, a fire, a tornado warning, etc.

Caring for Students and Staff

- › **Care Stations** - This is an area where counselors (internal or external) can set-up in order to see students and staff affected by the crisis. This care station should be a private space. For example, a library is a great space for a care station, but it should be closed to the rest of the school when the care station is open. Other places that might be used are a multipurpose room, an empty classroom, teacher's lounge, larger meeting rooms, etc. Care stations should be stocked with water, tissues and snacks. Other items to put in a care station would be crayons, markers, pencils, blank paper, coloring sheets, fidgets, etc. Check out the Care Stations & Psychological First Aid document for more information.

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Classroom Activities Following a Crisis - Avoid topics on death or other sad topics. Consider having a flexible day. Consider opening your classroom to conversation on the crisis and check-in with students on how they are feeling. However, it is important to have a structured activity for some students. Some students' way of coping is to get back on track with their schoolwork.

- ▶ **Student Activity Ideas** - Just like adults, many times students want to do something helpful in a crisis. Here are ideas that may work at your school site:
 - Family cards - Students can write cards to the family impacted by the crisis. These cards should be carefully screened before giving them to the family.
 - Posters - Students can sign a public poster. However, carefully consider the procedures for the poster. This would need to be constantly monitored for content by students. There would also need to be a time and date when it would be removed. When removed, consider giving it to the family **ONLY AFTER** it has been carefully screened for all signatures and notes.
- ▶ **Desks, Lockers and Classrooms** - These locations can be sites of spontaneous memorials and congregation of students and staff. Consider following these best practices for these locations:
 - Desks - Work with the classroom teacher to remove the desk of a student who has died at the elementary level AND to re-arrange the desks of the entire class before students return to school.
 - Locker - Remove the contents of a locker of a student who died when students are not present at school. Watch the space for a spontaneous memorial.
 - Classroom - If a teacher dies, returning to their classroom can be a tough situation. Consider determining how long their things will remain in their classroom (such as one week) and then offer for their family to come and take what they want. After they have taken what they would like, offer the staff to take a memento from the classroom. Then pack up the rest of the teacher's personal belongings. When a new teacher arrives, encourage them to decorate the classroom as they wish. Also, be sure to monitor the classroom and the outside of the classroom for spontaneous memorials.
- ▶ **Tracking Students** - In the event of a crisis, counselors seeing students should keep track of students they talk to about the crisis and their condition. One option is to use the [Crisis Triage Summary Sheet](#). This serves to make sure students who need follow-up can get the assistance they need. It also keeps track of students you want to check on. Any type of document tracking students in a crisis should be kept confidential but should be shared internally with counselors and administrators.
- ▶ **Duty or Classroom Coverage** - One role Crisis Team members or volunteers can play is to cover duty for teachers. This will allow them time to be together and process a loss. Additionally, sometimes teachers might need a break from their classroom on the day of a crisis. Volunteers or members of the crisis team can rotate covering classes for teachers, too.

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- ▶ **External Volunteers** - It is important to partner with your community in case of a crisis. Many times, schools bring in outside counselors, clergy, ministerial alliances or others from the community. It is important that these relationships are made ahead of time and the people you bring into your building have background checks from the school. It is also important that they are all trained on your school/district policies and procedures in a crisis. Providing this training during a non-crisis time is best. It is important to train any helpers at least once a year and make sure your background check is current.
- ▶ **Lunch for Staff** - It is helpful for lunch to be brought in on the day of a crisis response. Consider working with a church, business or PTA to be your designee to call when this happens. Have a formal or informal agreement with this group to provide lunch on short notice.
- ▶ **Psychological First Aid** - Psychological First Aid is an evidence-informed modular approach to help children, adolescents, adults and families in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. See the Care Stations & Psychological First Aid document for more information.
- ▶ **Snacks/Water/Tissue** - Have someone prepared to bring in snacks, bottled water and boxes of tissue in the case of a crisis. This could be things you have ahead of time, or you could designate someone to go to the store as soon as you know a crisis response will be or is happening.
- ▶ **Special Populations** - It is important to consider special populations of students and staff in a crisis. A special population might be the students and staff who attended church with the deceased, who are members of the same club or athletic team of the deceased, friend groups of the deceased, family members of the deceased, those who may have witnessed or been a part of an accident with the deceased, or other groups. These special populations should have a plan created by crisis responders on how they are informed and what the follow-up might be. Consider offering follow-up services at the school or by referral. This might include a Grief Circle, School Processing Session, [psychoeducational group](#), psychosocial group or even individual counseling. Those with similar experiences should be grouped together. In other words, someone who witnessed a crisis should not be in the same group as someone who barely knew the deceased. They should be in a group with other witnesses.
- ▶ **Students with Special Needs** - It is important not to overlook students with special needs. For example, a script being read to the general population might not be developmentally appropriate for students with intellectual disabilities. It is important to work with the teachers of students with special needs and develop a plan. This plan might include when and when not to announce a crisis, how to safely evacuate a student, how to control delivering scheduled medication in a crisis, and other needs. Some students may need an Individualized Emergency Plan. The [U.S. Department of Education's Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans](#) talks more about how to develop these plans for students.
- ▶ **Substitute Teachers** - If you have a sub in your building the day of the crisis, make sure they know what crisis has happened and what the plan is for the day. Be sure to send someone else into the classroom who knows the students to read a script of the crisis announcement (counselor, principal, other teacher). Also, make sure a basic crisis plan is available to subs in their sub folder for the day. This should include any type of procedure for emergencies, such as tornadoes, fires, intruders or any other type of hazard that can be prepared for.

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- ▶ **Therapy Dogs** - Therapy dogs are a great resource in a crisis. However, it is important to take a few things into consideration. Consider reaching out to a therapy dog agency or group before a crisis and establishing a relationship. Consider creating a policy on therapy dogs before a crisis. Make sure to use a reputable therapy dog agency with only trained and certified therapy dogs. You may have others who would like to bring a pet, but pets who are not certified are also not insured. Certified pets are insured, which reduces liability for your district. Certified therapy dogs go through extensive training and have high obedience expectations, and their handlers are trained how to use them in a school setting.

Memorials, Funerals, and Out-of-School Events

- ▶ **Funeral Attendance** - Allow students to attend funerals with an excused absence with parent or caregiver supervision. Schools should not be responsible for taking students to funerals in cars or buses.
- ▶ **Funerals at School** - It is important that your district has a policy in place for holding funerals at the school. Many times, funerals are held at a school, especially in smaller communities. However, it is important to consider that holding a funeral at a school could cause more trauma to your students and staff who will have to return to the school - the site of the funeral - day after day. It can be a trigger for students and staff. It is recommended to make all attempts to find an alternative location.
- ▶ **Memorials** - A memorial should do no harm — memorial or gathering sites should be safe. For example, if a student has died in a car crash, do not allow students to gather and grieve at the accident site if it is beside a busy street or highway. When appropriate, encourage your students to express themselves by providing them with a number of choices in memorial activities. A variety of activities will increase the likelihood that individual students can choose their preferred mode of expression. Check out this [Guidance for Memorials](#) document in the [Crisis Toolkit](#) for more information.
- ▶ **Memorials Best Practices** - Schools can put in place policies that are based on the following best practices: (Here is a [Sample Memorial Policy](#).)
 - Develop a school- or district-wide policy concerning memorials.
 - Suggest having a written “memorial procedures” plan.
 - Designate a memorial committee and committee chairperson to make decisions.
 - Involve all important stakeholders (students, staff, parents, and community members).
 - Be proactive in working with families and students to create appropriate memorials.
 - Follow the maxim of “do no harm.” Memorials should not be a source of retraumatization.
 - Do not make memorial creation or attendance mandatory.
- ▶ **Memorials After a Suicide** - Memorials following a suicide are particularly important to monitor. (Here is more information on [Memorials and Commemorations](#).) The following approaches are recommended:

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- Do not make a permanent memorial following a suicide.
 - Do not glorify, highlight or accentuate the event in any way.
 - Choose memorials that are temporary, nonrenewable, or in the form of a living memorial (e.g., monetary donation to charity or research, purchase of a suicide prevention program for students). These memorials will positively affect surviving students as opposed to glorifying the students that died by suicide, which increases the risk that others will copy the act.
- › **Permanent Memorials** - Permanent memorials require careful planning and discussion before any final decisions are made: Is there potential for retraumatization? Are there design, perception or political implications? Other things to consider are maintenance costs, memorial policies, cultural norms, time commitment, location, management of initial donations, long-term implications and costs. One large high school district established a policy that no space or place on campus can be permanently named after a person. This district-wide policy decreases the likelihood of permanent memorials and promotes renewable or living memorials.
- › **Semi-permanent, Renewable, or Living Memorials** - These memorials may include a tree planting, a memory garden, dedication of a space such as the library or gymnasium, a bench, an annual scholarship, or an annual 5K run. These may require ongoing maintenance. For semi-permanent memorials, the school will want to designate how many years the memorial will remain in place.
- › **Temporary Memorials** - These memorials may include a nonrenewable scholarship, a temporary website or online memorial, a one-time monetary donation to charity, a message on a poster or banner, a memory book, an individual or group letter, a journal, creation of a personal song, poem, or other art project, a candlelight vigil or an impromptu memorial site (collection of balloons, flowers, stuffed animals and photos). Most temporary memorials are short-term and can be given away as a gift or donation, or they will expire or come to an end within a year. In most school-related deaths, it is most appropriate to create temporary memorials. Temporary memorials allow students, staff and families to express their grief in a positive and constructive manner.

Out-of-School Time Crisis Events - It is important that school administration is aware of what crisis events are happening outside of school time. This could be a funeral, a vigil, a church service, a balloon release or something else in relation to the crisis. While it isn't necessary to have school staff attend, it is a good idea for someone who does attend to report back to school staff to help them be aware of anything specific that happened, or students who should be checked on the next day.

Preparation and Recovery

Crisis Go Bags - These bags can be produced ahead of time with items needed in a crisis. There are multiple types, including: [Crisis Go Bag: For the Crisis Team](#), and [Crisis Go Bag: For the Classroom](#). These bags might be expensive to produce, so consider working with the PTA, a church or others to build these bags.

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Crisis Annexes - There are several crisis annexes in an Incident Command System. Be familiar with these annexes and make plans for each annex before a crisis event. These annexes include:

- Evacuation Annex
 - Accounting for All Persons Annex
 - [Reunification Annex](#)
 - Communications and Warning Annex
 - Lockdown Annex
 - Shelter-in-Place Annex
 - Public Health, Medical, and Mental Health Annex
 - Security Annex
 - Continuity of Operations (COOP) Annex
 - Recovery Annex
 - Memorials Annex
 - Threat and Hazard-Specific Annexes
 - Natural Hazards
 - Technological Hazards
 - Biological Hazards
 - Human Caused Threats and Hazards
- ▶ **Crisis Team Training** - The OSDE offers specific Crisis Team training to districts familiar with the PREPaRE model. This training can be tailored to fit the needs of your district. Contact the Office of Student Support for more information. Check out the Crisis Teams document for more information on Crisis Teams.
- ▶ **Debriefing** - Debriefing following a crisis is imperative. Debriefing allows you to assess the crisis response, determine future needs and evaluate who needs to be checked on moving forward. A debriefing should include sharing the floor to what went well, what could be done better, and questions. All crisis responders, especially the Incident Command team, should attend the debriefing. The Incident Commander should lead the debriefing. Decisions should be made for follow-up with students tracked during the initial response, and what supports need to be in place the following days and weeks. Debriefing can happen more than once. Additionally, those involved in a critical incident that might cause trauma could have a separate critical incident debriefing a few days after the event. This is best led by a third-party.
- ▶ **PREPaRE Training** - This training is through the National Association of School

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Psychologists and offered by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The training focuses on the Five Mission Areas of Preparedness:

1. **Prevention:** Avoid, prevent or stop crises
 2. **Protection:** Safeguard against crises.
 3. **Mitigation:** Lessen impact, reduce damage.
 4. **Response:** Reduce traumatic stress, stabilize, assist.
 5. **Recovery:** Return to pre-crisis function, restore.
- Workshop 1, an overview of crisis response, is one day and costs \$45 per person. This training is best for all school officials (administrators, SROs, counselors, teachers, etc.)
 - Workshop 2 is two days and is \$55 per person. This grant focuses on the mental health response to a crisis. It is designed for counselors, licensed mental health practitioners, administrators, and anyone who may respond to students in a crisis, including teachers. A large grant was secured through the Department of Justice that allows the OSDE to provide the training for free to districts until funding runs out. The grant is through September 30, 2023. Training can be scheduled by contacting the OSDE. PREPaRE is an acronym that stands for:
 - Prevent and prepare for crises.
 - Reaffirm physical health & welfare, and perceptions of safety & security.
 - Evaluate psychological trauma risk.
 - Provide crisis Interventions.
 - and.
 - Respond to mental health needs.
 - Examine the effectiveness of crisis preparedness.
- **Crisis Toolkit** – This link takes you to the Oklahoma State Department of Education website that contains multiple resources for crisis, suicide, child abuse, homicidal threats or ideation, memorials, sexual assault and violence, and resources for all of the above. They are free and adaptable to your district's needs.

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References

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Brymer, M., Jacobs, A., Layne, C., Pynoos, R., Ruzek, J., Steinberg, A., Vernberg, E., & Watson, P. (2006). Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide. https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//pfa_field_operations_guide.pdf. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//pfa_field_operations_guide.pdf



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