

Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials

1. Participation of Students: Students may wish to attend the memorial services and/or funeral of the deceased student or teacher. Talk to the family of the deceased and determine their wishes. If many students or staff are likely to attend, inquire if there may be visitation hours/memorial service outside of school hours. If the services are during school hours, establish a policy for student absence that allows students who have a close relationship to the deceased to attend. Have substitute teachers available for teachers who wish to attend the services. Consider arranging for crisis counseling staff to attend after-hours services that are likely to be attended by large numbers of students.

2. Spontaneous Memorials: Informal memorials are likely to “spring up” after the death of a student or teacher. Plans to handle the flowers, cards, etc. should be made in advance. Determine the time period that the memorial will remain (one week, two weeks, a month?), and communicate to students that the memorial will be removed after that time and indicate what will be done with the non-perishable items (e.g., stuffed animals will be sent to the children’s ward of local hospitals, etc.). Providing alternate commemorative opportunities for the students and engaging students early on in the response efforts or an announcement.

3. Timing of Memorial Activities at School: Commemorative activities and memorialization efforts should not be a focus of the crisis response in the immediate aftermath of a death. If done too soon, there may be a perception that the school is trying to “close the chapter” on grieving.

4. Equitable Policies: In general, schools should avoid formal commemorative or memorialization activities or acts (e.g., naming a building or hanging a plaque) to mark the death of a popular student or staff member since failure to respond in the future in a similar manner to the death of a less popular student/staff may raise equity concerns; schools may be reluctant to provide similar responses after certain deaths (e.g., suicide, drug overdose) in order to minimize glamorization of the cause of death (see Special Circumstances below). Instead, less formal but thoughtful commemorative activities developed over time with active student involvement is often much more meaningful (and therapeutic) to students and staff. Such commemoration is more likely to recognize and preserve essential memories of the deceased than are more routine and reactive efforts instituted shortly after notification.

5. Constructive Expression of Grief: Students may wish to write letters/draw pictures to send to the deceased student’s or staff member’s family. Be sure these are reviewed before sending them out. Also, be careful not to interpret the drawings and writings without adequate input from mental health professionals. Avoid activities that solicit public anonymous statements, such as posting places for students to express their

thoughts anonymously about the deceased, as school teachers and staff will not be able to identify students who may express worrisome thoughts (e.g., suicidal ideation or threatening statements).

6. Handling Traumatic Reminders for Students: School desks and lockers may serve as unwelcome reminders of the deceased student(s). Consider procedures for handling these, drawing on the input of the classmates. 7. Personal Effects of the Deceased: Arrange with parents/family members for the return of belongings that is at a time convenient for them, preferably after school hours. Have the personal effects available at the office so that parents/families are not presented with the emotional challenge of having to clean out a locker or desk. Have a member of the crisis team or a school counselor present when parents come to retrieve a child's belongs. 8. Take the family's ad