

REGULATION #5208.3 CRITICAL INCIDENTS – LOSS OF LIFE

1. RESPONDING TO LOSS OF LIFE

The following steps should be taken when dealing with the loss of a life in the school/site community. Detailed information regarding critical incident response may be found in the Critical Incident Resource Manual.

1.1. Gather Factual Information

Confirm the critical incident with appropriate source(s) of reliable information (ie. RCMP, immediate family).

1.2. Contact District Staff

Assistant Superintendent; Manager, Communication Services; District Resource Counsellor

1.3. Activate the Critical Incident Response Team

The Critical Incident Response Team should meet to discuss and develop an appropriate plan of action, taking into consideration the needs of the school and wishes of the family.

1.4. Contact Community Resource Personnel

In the event a critical incident involves:

- a) The RCMP, follow up with the School Liaison Officer.
- b) The Ministry for Children & Family Development, contact the manager.
- c) An attempted or completed suicide, contact Surrey Community Services, Suicide Prevention Education and Counselling Program (SPEAC), at 584-5811 and Adolescent Crisis Response Program (ACRP), at 585-5561.
- d) Student/staff of a particular religious group, consult with the local place of worship as appropriate.

1.5. Considerations for Counselling Support

If appropriate, designate counselling centres for students and staff.

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1.6. Communication with Staff

Arrange for an emergency staff meeting to present the facts as known at the time and review the critical incident response plan. Administration should ensure that itinerant, Continuing Education and afternoon shift staff at the site are also to be notified of the incident and response measures.

1.7. Talking to students about the incident

The manner in which information is relayed to the students can have a major impact on the emotional response of the entire school community. It is not appropriate to use the public address system or an assembly to inform students of a critical incident.

Students should be informed of the critical incident by way of a prepared statement to be read in a classroom setting. It is important to inform students as soon as possible so that rumor does not compound existing challenges. It is also important for staff to communicate that they care about the people affected by the incident and to model appropriate concern.

1.8. Communication with Parents

To assist them in dealing with parent inquiries, staff should be prepared with a script that covers the facts of the critical incident. Depending on the nature of the incident, a letter may be sent home with every student in the class or school. Care needs to be exercised to ensure that only information approved for disclosure is included in the letter. Sample letters are available through the Manager, Communication Services.

1.9. Follow up

Follow up after a critical incident is necessary in order to ensure that all affected individuals have had appropriate access to services and to review how well the response was managed so that improvements can be made when handling future incidents.

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2. LOWERING THE FLAG

It is customary that the school flag be lowered for the death of a student or staff member. The flag is raised again after the funeral/memorial service or on an agreed upon date.

3. THE FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE

The Principal should be in contact with the family regarding the funeral or memorial service and the school should work with the family in an effort to honour their wishes as much as possible. Wishes should be communicated to all staff and students as soon as they are known.

The funeral or memorial service serves a definite purpose in helping to establish the reality of the death, provide closure, and extend support to the family and friends. When appropriate, staff and students should have the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service. In some cases it may be appropriate to make minor adjustments to the school day in order to accommodate those wishing to attend a service. Any proposed adjustments to the school day should be discussed with the Assistant Superintendent.

A Principal or other staff member may be asked to speak at the service. It is often appropriate to do so.

Many students may have had little experience with a funeral or memorial service. If students are likely to attend, school staff should make every effort to ascertain the cultural and religious context in which the service will be held. This information should then be shared with all students. Questions of particular interest may include:

- a) Appropriate dress and decorum for the service.
- b) Viewing of the body either before or during the service.
- c) Interment of the body.
- d) Reception following the service.

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4. SHRINES

The creation of “shrines,” special places of remembrance, and “ribbon campaigns” are now commonplace after a sudden death. Shrines often form at the site of the death, or at the student’s locker or desk.

Often there is a very real need to create a shrine and it will be impossible to stop the creation of one. It is especially important for the Critical Incident Response Team to be proactive and use their wisdom and knowledge to modify either the type or location of a shrine.

Special considerations:

- a) The location of the shrine should be in a place that will not impede the regular operation of the school, as it returns to normalcy.
- b) Once a location for a shrine has been decided, staff should be vigilant to ensure that other “unauthorized” shrines are not created. Should individuals wish to place articles in an unauthorized location they should be re-directed, in a sensitive and caring fashion, to the authorized location and articles moved there as soon as possible.
- c) The material and nature of the shrine should be temporary and no permanent or semi-permanent materials should be used (e.g. have students/staff write their messages of condolence on a large sheet of paper).
- d) A plan for removing the shrine must be in place and communicated to all staff and students **before** the shrine is created. When a special location is set up, staff and students should be informed that this will be the special place until the funeral/memorial service (or some other set time) and then after that time all articles will be given to the family.
- e) If a ribbon campaign is being considered, staff need to incorporate into the plan a specific date that the campaign will end.
- f) It is strongly recommended that schools consult with associate/ neighboring schools prior to making a commitment with regards to shrines or memorial activities.

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5. SCHOOL RECOGNITION OF THE TRAGEDY

A memorial service or dedication at the school in recognition of the tragedy may be considered in some cases. Schools should discuss the appropriateness of such an activity with the Assistant Superintendent.

A memorial service or dedication will not be made an annual event.

In order to prevent additional tragedy, it is vitally important for schools not to glamorize the suicide death of a student. Schools will not conduct a special memorial service or dedication to the memory of an individual who committed suicide.

6. PHYSICAL MEMORIALS

The creation of a memorial is often suggested upon the death of a student or staff member, such as plaques on schools, rooms or playground equipment, creating a memorial garden, or the dedication of a school annual.

It is not recommended that a school create a permanent monument in honour of the deceased without careful consideration and consultation with district senior management. Physical memorials may become problematic, as targets of vandalism and disrepair, or in cases of renovation or closure of the school.

Financial memorials such as bursaries, scholarships and funding of charities seem to offer a more positive alternative to physical memorials. These options offer the opportunity to demonstrate caring for the deceased while at the same time permitting the community to move forward. In addition, they provide schools and families with the flexibility to “retire” these memorials as desired.

Dedicating entire school annuals to a deceased staff member or student may also be problematic. It may be more appropriate to dedicate one page rather than an entire annual.

7. CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS DEBRIEFING

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is an early intervention initiative available to staff and students following the experience of a traumatic event. This service is aimed at reducing the distress experienced by individuals immediately

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following the event, and hopefully preventing the development of more serious difficulties. Schools/sites should consult with the district resource counsellor regarding the appropriateness of using CISD.

8. MEDIA GUIDELINES

Rarely does a critical incident occur within or at a school without the media becoming interested. The degree of interest and variety of media involved usually depends on the nature of the critical incident and, in some cases, its relation to current issues or events.

The principal or site manager should provide direction to media personnel and control access to students when they are on school property. Never should a reporter, camera person or television crew be left on their own while on school property.

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