

Writing a Bereavement Policy

A school which takes time to formalise a response before a critical incident or tragedy occurs, will be much better placed to cope should it ever have to be put into practice. However, every school is different and every situation unique. What is deemed appropriate will vary. The policy should be viewed more as a framework to work around rather than something prescriptive. A sample policy can be viewed in schools section of the website.

Be prepared

- Having a policy to work to will greatly help when in shock or upset, especially with sudden or multiple deaths or traumatic circumstances.
- Identify key people within your L.E.A.
- Try to prepare outlines of documents e.g. letter to parents, in advance.

Identify a team, define roles and responsibilities

- Use any expertise within the school and share the responsibilities.
- Decide who will take overall charge and designate substitutes should they be absent.
- Who will be responsible for communicating with the families directly involved?
- Who will give the news to the rest of the school community?
- If the press are involved, who will liaise with them?
- Organise training for all involved.

Breaking sad news to staff, pupils and families

- Obtaining factual information should be made a priority. Think through how this might be done, remembering that contact with those directly involved may be difficult. State in your policy the importance of not making assumptions or repeating what has been heard through rumour.
- It is essential that all staff are informed straight away, ideally before pupils. Identify ways of doing this sensitively. Don't forget part-time and peripatetic staff.
- Pupils should be told as soon as possible. This is best done in familiar groups by someone they know. A large school assembly is usually not ideal. Staff may well need guidance on words to use and approach to take. Have something pre-prepared.
- A letter should go to families the same day if possible. A pre-prepared script will be very helpful. It is difficult to find the right words when emotional and in shock.
- Consider including guidelines for parents on supporting bereaved children with the letter. (see fact sheet "Supporting Parents and Carers")

The first few days

- In your policy, map out the first few days after an incident. It is usually best to have minimum disruption to the timetable, but some flexibility may be required.
- Consider what the school approach will be if pupils are too upset to attend lessons. If it is a teacher who has died, what will happen to his/her class?

The funeral

- State in the policy that it is essential to sound out the family's wishes. The family may well welcome involvement of members of the school community but equally, may prefer to keep it private.
- Identify which staff and pupils may want to attend and the practicalities of issues such as staff cover and transport. For some schools, it is appropriate to close, for others, it is not. Clear guidance on this in the policy will be helpful.
- Will flowers be sent and/or a collection made? Say if staff and pupils should be involved in the decision.
- Cultural and religious implications need consideration. See fact sheet "Different Cultures and Beliefs"

Support for staff

- Supporting bereaved pupils will be very stressful for staff who may well be already struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Include a list of outside agencies, and people at your L.E.A., who may be able to offer help, both short and long term.
- Plan for some sort of informal mutual support, for example, in the staffroom at the end of the school day, to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions.
- State that copies of "Looking After Yourself" and "Supporting a Bereaved Pupil" fact sheets may be welcome by staff feeling unsure or a bit stressed.

Support for pupils

- State in your policy the importance of identifying pupils who may be particularly vulnerable or likely to experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). For example, anyone who witnessed the death.
- Compile (and keep updated) a list of outside professionals and agencies who can come into the school in the event of a traumatic death to counsel pupils.
- Make sure that help offered from outside is appropriate before accepting. Pupils may find it difficult to receive support or counselling from families of fellow pupils.
- Identify a suitable place in school for pupils who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go to for support.

Remembering

- This is difficult to plan in advance, but careful thought is required. State that ideally the dead person's family should be consulted about plans for any memorials. Schools often find that an assembly that takes the form of a celebration of life is appropriate. (see fact sheet "Special Assemblies")