



## **CRITICAL INCIDENT**

## **POLICY**

2015 / 2016

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## 1. Introduction

This document should be read in conjunction with

- Responding to Critical Incidents, Guidelines for Schools, Department of Education, 2007.
- Responding to Critical Incidents, Resource Material for Schools, Department of Education, 2007.
- NEPS .....

A critical incident may be defined as a single incident or sequence of incidents, which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the day to day running of the school.

Critical incidents may include:

- Death of a member of staff
- Death of a parent
- Student suicide
- School trip accident within the state
- School tour accident outside the state
- Major gang fight
- Assault on a staff member

This list is by no means exhaustive.

If may be necessary to activate the critical incident plan following the death of a recent past student. This is particularly important if the deceased's circle of friends includes current students and/or there are siblings still in the school.

The strategies outlined in this document should be viewed alongside, and in conjunction with, the following practices and policies. Health & Safety Statement Pastoral Care Policy S.P.H.E. Curriculum Discipline Policy

Copies of this document should be available in

- Staff Room
- Secretary's office
- Principal's Office
- Deputy Principal's office
- Guidance Counsellor's office
- Year Head's office

- A copy should be taken on school trips
- A copy of this document should also be available in any staff pack distributed at the start of the academic year and should also be used in any induction process for new teachers.
- This document should be sanctioned by the B.O.M.

The suggestions and insights in this document need to be viewed alongside the particular and unique needs that are presented by every given critical incident. Some insights/suggestion may be applicable to some situations and not others. Indeed, two similar incidents may require different approaches.

## **2. Critical Incident Management Team**

A planning team of key personnel exists. This critical incident team consists of individuals from the school community who know the constituency that comprises the school and each other well enough to make the necessary decisions called for when an incident occurs. Generally the Principal will play a key role and in their absence the Deputy Principal. The staff involved may depend on the particular group of students affected or the particular skills required to deal with the situation that has arisen. Those participating should be interested and motivated and have the necessary skills and should not feel forced or overburdened. Individuals involved will have the option to opt out at any stage in consultation with the Principal. Staff not directly involved should not feel forgotten or ignored. Normally, the minimum a team will consist of is: the Principal, Deputy Principal, Year Head, Chaplain, and Guidance Counsellor. It is important to remember that the responsibility for tasks to be carried out should not sit with one or two individuals. When deemed necessary this team should liaise with other bodies associated with the school including the Board of Management and the Parents' Association. In addition, outside agencies may need to be consulted, including the Department of Education and Science, the National Educational Psychological Service (N.E.P.S.), State Exams Commission, Department of Foreign Affairs if incident is abroad, and any other body with specialist expertise that may be useful and/or necessary.

When choosing members of the critical incident team care needs to be taken. For example, if the incident involves fatalities, has any member of the team suffered a recent personal bereavement? Has any member lost a child? Is any member going through another personal difficulty? If so, should these members be excused from involvement in the critical incident team? Also, when giving individuals task to do, some can cope with being given several task to do one after the other. Others can only deal with being give one task at a time, so for these individuals hold off until the first task is complete before providing subsequent tasks. Consider if those involved in a previous critical incident should be included because of their experience or if those involved in a previous incident should be excused.

## **3. Establishing Facts**

Upon an incident occurring, immediate action should be taken including all or some of the following.

1. Establish contact (name) with necessary organisations, e.g. Gardai, H.S.E. hospital, etc.
2. Establish the nature of incident.
3. Establish the name/s of the bereaved
4. Establish names and whereabouts of those injured
5. Establish extent of injuries
6. Establish names of those who are uninjured.
7. Determine location of victims.
8. Determine if there is any risk of further injury.
9. Determine if those on the trip are in more than one location.
10. Establish if emergency services have already been contacted.
11. Establish the names and whereabouts of witnesses including teachers.
12. Can teachers at the incident remove those unharmed from the scene?
13. Contact other members of the critical incident team.
14. Meet team members and allocate any necessary jobs to be carried out.
15. Initiate transport arrangements if necessary.
16. Make individual contact with staff that may be directly involved or affected.
17. Visit incident site if necessary.
18. Visit hospital if necessary.
19. Arrange to deal with enquiries by phone.
20. Arrange transport if necessary if incident occurred on a school trip.
21. Arrange area or rooms to facilitate reunion of pupils and parents.
22. Special arrangements for those students whose parents are not available.
23. Establish how well details of the incident are known.
24. Contact Parent's association.
25. Contact B.O.M.
26. Ensure telephone is manned.
27. Provide a script to those dealing with telephone queries.
28. When dealing with families check, is there already a deceased parent/s, or a deceased sibling. Are the parents separated? If separated, consider how to deal with both parents separately, if they are unable to be dealt with together.
29. Contact and visit family/ies checking first that they would welcome a visit. Ensure that at least one of the team that visits has a good relationship with the family. If there has been a difficult relationship between the family and the school consider using a third party. This third party could accompany the school representatives or act as an alternative. Every effort should be made to avoid the latter.
30. Other students may be hearing news via social media. Consult with parents affected if they will give permission for the school to send a communication to other parents. This may limit the number of student who may hear the news via social media and allow other parents to tell their child face-to-face.
31. Discuss with the family what you have planned to take place in the school and consult with them what you would like to say for the good of the whole student body and what they want you to say.

32. Remember, if the family have to be met a number of times try and limit the number of times they have to 'tell their story'.
33. Determine how to deal with media if necessary.
34. If there are a number of students involved, is a family room in the school needed?

If incident occurred abroad,

35. Contact Department of Foreign Affairs
36. Contact relevant Embassy or Consulate office.

Provide list containing

37. Names and contact details of adults on trip
38. Try and contact teachers directly to get first-hand information on the ground.
39. Names and contact details of these adults' families.
40. Names of students on trip.
41. Names and contact details of parents of these students.
42. Determine if those on the trip are in more than one location.
43. Details of any pre-existing medical condition of adults on trip and medication required.
44. Details of any pre-existing medical condition of students on trip and medication required.
45. Inform authorities if the school trip involved more than one school.
46. Contact travel agency used

Depending on the scale of the incident, other issues may need to be address by authorities.

- 47 Does the school need a liaison officer from the authorities working with or in the school?
- 48 Is there a Garda present required at the school?
- 49 Is a Garda presence required at family homes?
- 50 Can authorities provide a spokesperson to deal with media?
- 51 Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the deceased to the country?
- 52 Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the injured to the country? This may be a greater need than the provision immediate counselling.
- 53 Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring family members of the uninjured to the country? This may be a greater need than the provision immediate counselling.
- 54 Do authorities need to make arrangements to bring a school staff member to the country?
- 55 Do authorities need to make arrangements to meet those returning from the airport?
- 56 If there is underdeveloped health system in the country where the incident occurred, do authorities need to evacuate home or to the nearest other county?

- 57 Do authorities need to consider bringing medication/ equipment for the injured or medication for those with previous medical conditions?
- 58 Do authorities need to contact Irish N.G.O.s on the ground for assistance?
- 59 Do authorities need to contact an organised Irish Diaspora organisation on the ground to provide assistance?
- 60 Do authorities need to contact an Irish Religious organisation on the ground to provide assistance?
- 61 If there are no Irish organisations on the group, do authorities need to contact U.K. or another country's Embassy/Consulate/N.G.O.s on the ground for assistance?
- 62 While the primary concern needs to focus on the deceased, injured and non-injured and their families, there is a body of students and parents at home who may be upset, particularly younger students or those very close to those affected. With this in mind, consult with authorities what can be, and who should, communicate to other parents and students in the school. Information can have the effect of reducing anxiety. This can also prevent false rumours.

## 4. Family & Suicide

When meeting with the family where a suicide has occurred additional issues arise. The following may be addressed over a number of visits.

1. The family may be willing to allow it be stated by the school that the death was by suicide. **Permission for this should be sought and not assumed.**
2. Before the family is asked for permission to divulge the cause of death, school representatives may anticipate that the family may be reluctant to let people know the cause of death. It therefore might be useful, before they are actually asked and say no, to point out that students are already speculating about suicide amongst themselves and that it can help the school and others if it can be spoken about publicly. Outline the benefits of this and maybe outline the difficulties faced if the cause of death is not acknowledged. This is particularly important if the students are already talking about suicide. It might also be useful to point out to the family that there are a number of vulnerable students in the school you are very worried about and it can help the school and others if permission is given to allow the cause of death to be stated publicly and that it might help prevent others going through such an ordeal. Can the family keep this a secret forever? What will happen at the inquest?
3. When a suicide occurs one of the issues that teenagers can focus on is *why*? This can become obsessive and unhealthy. If the deceased had a history of mental issues and was in the health system, it might be useful to obtain permission from the family to divulge this to others as it would be healthy step in helping them let go of the *why*? Permission should not be sought and

this issue should not be discussed with the family if family issues have contributed to the difficulties the deceased had.

4. The family may have found or been given a suicide note by the emergency services. Give the family an opportunity to discuss the contents with the school. This is particularly important if blame is apportioned to other students and/or teachers. Check with Gardai if they have searched the deceased's phone/tablet etc. and discuss any findings. If the Gardai have found a note and the contents of the note may cause a difficulty, consult with Gardai the best course of action. It might also be necessary to check if e-mails, photographs, or messages have been posted on social networks by the deceased. This may require the help of family or friends.

## **5. Vulnerable Students**

Identify vulnerable students. This may involve consultation with other staff. Vulnerable students may include,

1. Siblings in the same school.
2. Cousins in the same school.
3. Other relatives who attend the school.
4. Those injured.
5. Eye witnesses.
6. Close friends in the deceased's school.
7. Close friends in other schools (contact that school).
8. Those who may have had contact with the deceased immediately prior to the death.
9. Those who may have had a difficult relationship or negative interactions with the deceased.
10. If the student was a senior student and acted as mentor/buddy to younger students, special attention needs to be given to these younger students and if necessary contact their parents.
11. Those who have suffered a previous bereavement, loss, or separation
12. Other vulnerable students may not necessarily have been close friends with the deceased but may be particularly hard hit. These may include those who have had previous emotional issues and these events can cause additional stress. These types of students may not have even known the deceased. This type of student can be the 'quiet ones' who do not display any obvious signs of distress, or those who, because of their previous experiences, quite readily let others know of their issues.
13. Very young students may only be beginning to realise the permanency of death, and their idea of life after death is still vague. They may have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or thinking in the grave. They may have a lot of questions about aspects of the death, e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins. They may think it is normal to



die young or normal to take your own life - this needs to be corrected. Similar issues may arise with students with learning difficulties.

14. Be careful to keep an eye out for contagion of grief. This is where a person becomes upset, not because they knew the deceased or have had a previous issue/s, but become upset simply because others are. This can be a particular concern with younger years.
15. If a death of a teacher has taken place, other vulnerable students may be those who had a particularly close relation with that teacher or those who had a difficult relationship with that teacher.
16. If a particular class/group had been giving a teacher a difficult time, this class/group may need particular attention in terms of group work to deal with such issues as guilt etc

## **6. Staff Meeting**

1. Hold a staff meeting which may include auxiliary Staff and sports coaches.
2. There may be a need for two separate staff meetings to aid supervision.
3. Information should be given to staff before students
4. After delivering the news, give staff time to absorb the news and compose themselves.
5. If any staff members are absent, inform these by phone, not text. Similarly, if the news breaks outside school time, inform staff by using a phone call, not text. Do not leave a voice message giving details of the news, rather, leave a voice mail asking them to return the call as soon as they get the message.
6. Impress on staff the need for consistency in what the students hear from staff.
7. Explain the plan for the day.
8. Discuss vulnerable students and ask for input from staff.
9. Invite/encourage staff to attend students' assemblies.
10. Allow staff to share how they will address classes. If necessary, give staff suggestions as to how they might start their classes. Some staff that normally start their class with a prayer may expand on this to acknowledge the loss. Others who do not start the class with a prayer may choose their own words to mark the loss.
11. Advise staff to use their discretion as to when to restart teaching. Returning to the routine of teaching may actually act as a comfort to students.

However, this should not be done without some form of acknowledgment of the loss – this can cause offence. After the acknowledgement, teachers can, if they wish, ask the students what they would like to do next, e.g. talk about how they feel, talk about the deceased, or talk amongst themselves or return to teaching. Experience shows that when students are given the choice (which itself helps them feel in control) they will opt for the comforting routine of teaching. Caution should be taken here. It may not be a good idea for students to attend 8/9 classes in one day that consist entirely of a discussion around events that have happened.

12. Particular attention should be paid to staff members who may be particularly upset, or had a recent bereavement, or who are simply finding the events difficult. It may be necessary to arrange supervision to support these teachers.
13. Remind staff that if they are upset and anxious, students will become upset and anxious. If staff are calm and considered, the students are more likely to remain calm. Also, if they are comfortable, calmly share their feelings with the class.
14. It might be necessary to hold a staff meeting at the end of the day to review events.

## **7. Breaking News to Students**

- 1 Teenagers need to have whatever information is available so that they can dispel mistruths or speculation; otherwise they may not begin the grieving process.
- 2 Remember that teenagers find it more helpful when adults are honest rather than 'pretending' to be more positive than they actually feel.
- 3 Remember also that as a professional dealing with teenagers, you will have to confront your own reactions your own shock, anger and sense of bewilderment. Get yourself grounded or it will be easy to get caught up in the teenagers panic, pain and confusion.
- 4 Your calmness will influence their reactions. If the adults are anxious and upset they will become so. If the adults are calm and in control it will promote calmness and stability.
- 5 When breaking the news to students whole school assemblies are not recommended and best practice is that the news should be shared in small groups such as year groups.
- 6 If the deceased was on a team or involved with a particular [formal] group within the school, do not treat this group separately when breaking the news.

- 7 It may be necessary to take aside some individuals and tell them in private. It may also be necessary to phone these students' parents to come and collect them from school.
- 8 Be conscious of the fact that teenagers, particularly those in the senior years, have friendships that cross other year groups. Therefore, if the student was in for example 5<sup>th</sup> year, speak to that year group first, then 6<sup>th</sup> years followed by 4<sup>th</sup> year. Then speak to the other year groups.
- 9 Even if the deceased was in 6<sup>th</sup> year, it is still necessary to speak to 1<sup>st</sup> years as they will hear the news anyway and it is best that they hear it in a controlled way from school management. This will ensure that all students have received the same information and accurate information.
- 10 It might also be useful if staff attend these assemblies so they will hear exactly what the students have been told ensuring continuity of message.
- 11 When speaking to different year groups, the language may have to be changed so that it is age appropriate.
- 12 Keep sentences short and avoid overly complicated medical terms.
- 13 Remind students that they need to look out for each other.
- 14 If the cause of death is genuinely not known, let them know this. Use this fact to reinforce that if they hear any rumours about the cause of death, these rumours cannot be true as the medics and family do not even know. This is relevant when there may be a genuine sudden death.
- 15 Let them ask questions and if the answer is not known state this. Be conscious of the fact that asking of questions may simply be reassurance seeking rather than driven by the need for facts. When answering questions do not promise anything you cannot fulfil.
- 16 Give them details of the plan for the day. This provides necessary structure.
- 17 Give details of funeral arrangements or when the details will be known. Get back to them when the dates/times and other arrangements (e.g. guard of honour, dress code) are known.
- 18 It may be necessary to cancel classes for certain year groups for a time during the day or for the rest of the day. This should not be done without having an alternative structured activity in place. This activity should be adult led, structured and if possible have a structure that is familiar to the students, e.g. a prayer service.
- 19 This formal activity can be followed by an informal activity such as food in the school canteen.
- 20 A quiet room should also be provided.
- 21 Arrange extra supervision in particular corridors/school yard/near toilets near the affected year group.
- 22 Staff should be on hand to allow individual students talk in private.
- 23 If, after the assembly, some students are particularly upset, it might be necessary to telephone parents to bring them home.
- 24 Consider if it is appropriate to resume class (for structure based reasons rather than academic reason even if teaching is not resumed).
- 25 If the death was suicide, and if the family have given permission to inform others that it was a suicide, it is recommended that attention be paid to the phrases used.

26 The following phrases

**Should not be used** – commit suicide / suicide victim / a successful suicide attempt

**Instead use phrases like** – A suicide / Taking one's own life / Die by suicide

- 27 Be careful not to glamorise the '*state of peace*' the deceased may have found through death.
- 28 In some cases, the wider student body may know that it was a suicide but are speculating about the method used. This can be very unhealthy if it is a topic of discussion, gossip, a distraction, a source of false rumour and a block to normal grieving. Some argue that details of the method of suicide should not be provided while others state that it is okay to give the basic fact about the method in a short a phrase as possible without giving graphic or excessive details or talking about it at length. However, extreme caution needs to be taken This should not be done to satisfy curiosity, but rather to remove it as the main focus of conversation and to avoid it becoming an issue. Other factors that may determine the method of suicide being stated are the actual nature/method itself and the age of the affected year group/s. If it is to be spoken about perhaps it should only be done in smaller private groups or with the friends of the deceased only.
- 29 When a suicide occurs one of the issues that teenagers can focus on is *why?* This can become obsessive and unhealthy. If the deceased had a history of mental issues and was in the health system, and permission has been obtained from the family, it might be useful to others to hear this portion of the back story to the death. This might help to avoid speculation and help the students move on from the *why?* The back story should not be discussed if family circumstance contributed to the deceased's difficulties. If there is no back story, and the suicide was '*out of the blue*' extra difficulties may be faced by the friends of the deceased. However, remember that best practice is not to include speculation over motives as it is always very complex
- 30 If the family have not given permission for the cause of death to be disclosed, this can be included in what is said to the students by stating that the '*family have requested that the information not be shared*'.
- 31 It might be necessary to acknowledge to the students that there are rumours of suicide but also to state that '*rumours can be hurtful to family and explain the damaging impact of misinformation and rumour*'.
- 32 It might be useful to use the terms '*tragic death*' or '*sudden death*'.
- 33 Throughout all interactions with students be careful not to give the deceased attention in death that they may have been looking for in life. This can be done by shifting the conversation with teenagers from the topic of the deceased to *their reaction* to what has happened. This should result in students taking about themselves rather the deceased.
- 34 Consider obtaining the help of clergy with the delivery of the above or help with constructing a script.

- 35 Consider holding private meetings with, close friends of the deceased, school/class captains/prefect, and positive leaders (who may not have a formal title/job) in the year group. Such a meeting or number of meetings can help the students feel listened to, and that they have some sense of input and control over what is happening. In addition, these meetings can also provide useful feedback to management that may help shape the next few days/weeks.
- 36 It may be necessary to consult with outside agencies. It needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external 'expert' should be primarily used to advise and support school staff.
- 37 Consider if students with special needs may need an altered method of delivery of the news.
- 38 If necessary, provide condolence books (one for each individual, if more than one) on school premises.

## **8. Communicating With the Parent Body**

Despite the fact that a number of parents may already be aware of the death of a student, there is still a need for the school to communicate formally to the whole parent body.

1. Consider if a general brief text needs to be sent out.
2. Remove parents of deceased from text system/e-mail/postal address file.
3. Consider if the details of what will happen in the school needs to be passed on to parents.
4. Consider if the details of what is said to the student body needs to be passed on to the parents.
5. Consider if the funeral details need to be communicated to the parents.
6. Consider if a more detailed letter needs to be sent to the parents, including the above and any additional information not suitable for a text.
7. Consider if the letter sent to the parents of the year group of the deceased needs to be different than the letter sent to other year groups and decide if each year group should receive a different letter addressing the needs of that particular year group?
8. Consider if parents need to be called into the school for a meeting.
9. If a meeting is to be held for, for example, 5<sup>th</sup> years, consider if an invitation should also be given to parents of students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year. This might be necessary if the deceased's friendship circle overlap these years. It may happen that the parents from these other years may not actually turn up on mass – only those whose teenagers were close to the deceased. This might be suggested in the invitation.
10. Consider if the parents night can be addressed by management only or if an outside speaker needs to be call in e.g. from N.E.P.S., Samaritans.

11. If necessary provide literature or hand-outs on death/ loss/ grieving.
12. At such a meeting, management should give an outline of the facts known and outline what the school has done. Outline the plan for further actions. Outline what has been said to the students. Outline supports that are available within the school. Allow for questions to be asked. Provide tea afterwards to allow them to mix.
13. Impress on parents that students may wish to gather together in houses. If this happens parents should not provide alcohol at such an emotional time.
14. Consider meeting the Parents' Association.
15. Parents may need to be reminded of the following. When individuals lose a close friend or loved one, it is normal to share their grief with others who knew the deceased equally well. In the past a teenager may have experienced the loss of an aunt, or grandparent. Because the parents knew that person equally well and are experiencing the same grief, it is normal for teenagers in such situations to share their grief with their parent/s. The situation where a teenager loses a friend can be different. When teenagers suffer the loss of a friend they may turn to their peers more than their parents, sharing thoughts and feelings with them because they are mourning the same loss. Therefore, at a time like this some teens are more likely to want to spend more time with, and talk more to, their peers rather than their parents. In doing this, they are not trying to shut parents out, they are simply surrounding themselves with others who are going through the same experience and who knew deceased as well as they did. This is perfectly normal and teens need to be given the space to do this.

## **9. Funeral**

1. If it is acceptable with the family, the school should involve itself with the funeral arrangements and if necessary speak to the undertakers and/or the clergy or humanist leading the service. Meet students who are very close friends of the deceased to discuss funeral arrangements. This will allow them feel that they are involved in the arrangements.
2. The H.S.E. recommends that teenagers are encouraged to go to the funeral to mark the life and death of the person who has died.<sup>21</sup> The later feelings of regret of not having gone may be difficult to deal with after the event. Encourage parents whose teenagers express an interest to let them go<sup>22</sup> and encourage parents to accompany the teenager. However, teenagers may prefer to sit with their peers at the funeral and this should be allowed with parents watching on. It may be necessary to reserve seating for certain groups of friends from the deceased's school and any other school closely involved. It might be necessary to get teachers to direct groups to their seats and for teacher to sit with

- different groups. If the deceased had close friends in another school, it may be necessary for teachers from that school to attend and help.
3. Discuss with the family the schools and students involvement in the funeral, e.g. a guard of honour, readings, bring up gifts, music, singing, etc.
  4. If there is a wake, the family may choose to have an open coffin. If young people are to attend the wake, an adult should position themselves so that they can alert the students to this fact before getting sight of the body. It might be appropriate to say to students *'prepare yourself, - the coffin is open'*. Again, if the deceased had close friends in another school, it may be necessary for a teacher from that school to attend and help.
  5. It is recommended that parents of the deceased do not address a school assembly outside the funerals. However, the parents may wish to address those assembled at the funeral. The school should explore the possibility of checking what the parents plan to say. If a suicide note was left, it should not be read out at a funeral. This is particularly important if the note apports blame or uses phrases like *'at peace'* or *'ending pain'*. It may be necessary for the school to remind the family that there are some very vulnerable students who will be attending the funeral. The school might respectfully and gently help the family find alternative words to help them get their message across. Also, if the deceased's friends are to speak at the funeral, and they attend the school, it might be appropriate to check what the students plan to say. These points may be worth remembering at any future services e.g. Month's mind or anniversaries.
  6. If a representative from the school is to speak at the service, it might be useful to include, *'I pray/hope that [deceased name] mother and father have the strength to deal with their loss, 'I pray/hope that[ deceases name] sister(/brother/(s) have the strength to deal with their loss', 'I pray/hope that we as a school never have to gather again in such a manner', 'I pray/hope that no other young person takes this course of action', 'I hope/pray that those who feel despair, find someone to talk to and allow others to help so that the sadness here today is not repeated'*. People with different cultural backgrounds might have different customs and ways of dealing with death. Showing respect for this difference can help family members to cope with the death of a loved one.<sup>35</sup> However, regardless of the ethnic or religious background of the family or the type of service surrounding the funeral, some of the above points may still be relevant.

## **10. Memorial to the Deceased**

In the aftermath of a death it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals, clothing or

other items in a place closely associated with the student, such as a locker, classroom seat within the school, or somewhere off school premises, or where the student died. This reflects a basic human desire to remember those we have lost.

However, in the case of suicide, the H.S.E. does not recommend permanent memorials like shrines, such as benches, statues and planting trees. Indeed, they also recommend that trees used in a suicide be cut down. If this was on the school grounds consider re-landscaping, not with another tree, but maybe a hedge that would fill the void. It is often difficult for loved ones to understand why such memorials are not a good idea when people who die in other ways are often memorialised. Indeed, it can be argued that all deaths should be treated in the same way and that suicide deaths should not be treated differently. Unfortunately however, we have to remember that constant reminders, glorification, or glamorisation of a suicide death might have the effect of making it seem attractive to others and that this is not the case with other deaths.

If a spontaneous memorial arises, immediately dismantling it can cause hurt, resentment and anger among students. Indeed, prohibiting any kind of memorial can be taken by students as being hurtful and provoke anger and it might also be incorrectly interpreted as stigmatising suicide. If a spontaneous memorial arises it is recommended that a time limit be set on such memorials - no more than 2 weeks. The site should be monitored regularly, for example, cards and messages should be checked for negative comments or items or comments that romanticise suicide.<sup>41</sup> If possible, the site should be 'squared off' so that flowers and other items added later are added on top of previous items, rather than allowing the site to grow in width and length.

If the memorial is off school premises the school's ability to exert influence is limited. However after a reasonable period has passed and in consultation with the family, it might be a good idea to arrange a small event where the family (if they wish) and close friends of the deceased dismantle the memorial. It is particularly important that those who helped assemble the memorial are involved in the disassembly. Family and friends can also keep mementos from the site. When arranging this, it might be important to remind people, it is best to remember the deceased in life rather than where or how they died.

If there is time, and no memorial has appeared, it might be advantageous to anticipate that one might be spontaneously created on the school premises, e.g. near the deceased locker, at a desk, in the canteen etc. These should be avoided. Instead, if a school suspects this may happen, an alternative might be introduced that is under the school's control, such as a condolence book that can be signed in a private secluded part of the school. It is recommended memorials should not be in a communal area such as canteen or entrance.

Students may wish to create and distribute t-shirts or bracelets or other images of the deceased or items that carry the deceased's name, which may, in the schools view, contribute to suicide contagion. This needs to be handled sensitively. It might



be good idea to be honest with these students and explain the schools rationale to them by outlining the concern about other vulnerable students. Indeed, in some situations it might be useful to have this meeting very early on to avoid future disappointment or anger. This discussion can be strengthened if it can be stated that the *'family do not wish to have such a memorial'*. In addition, there is sometimes a trend among teenagers to have a very permanent reminder of the deceased by getting a tattoo. Parents should be alerted to this and encouraged to persuade their teenager to wait at least a year before getting a tattoo. The majority might not wish to do so after such a time period has passed.

Creative alternatives can be suggested to students such as organising an event with a beginning, middle, and end, rather than a permanent fixture. If an event is organised it is recommended that it not be named after or to honour the deceased, but instead, called for example, 'a mental health awareness initiative'. It might be preferable to organise such an event later in the school year. If the students insist of doing something more tangible, alternative suggestions can be made that leave no permanent reminder such as releasing Helium balloons (near the sea if practicable) or place flowers in a moving river. Suggestions can also be made around a dedication in next year's year book or allowing the students create a scrapbook that they can bring home. In the case of a suicide, it is recommended that flags should not be flown at half-mast.

If the family request a memorial on school grounds you might have to explain, without naming other students, the difficulty this will pose regarding vulnerable students in your care. It might be necessary to say you have taken advice from the professionals in this area and that you are really worried about the possibility of suicide contagion and that you do not want to have this on your conscience. The school might have to consider precipitating this conversation in advance with the family before they bring up the subject. This might avoid them asking in the first place and putting the school in the difficult situation of saying no. Despite the fact that permanent memorials following a suicide are generally to be discouraged the family may be determined to have a permanent memorial. If this is the case, it should be off school grounds. It needs to be remembered that if the school agrees to a permanent memorial such as a tree, bench, plaque or scholarship the school should be prepared to do so for future deaths past deaths and indeed recent past students who pass away. If the school decides to erect a memorial, it should be small, discrete and placed in an out of the way position in the school that is not used for day to day activities.

Finally, the H.S.E. advise schools to include a policy statement on memorials in their critical incident plan. It will help against being driven by intense emotions in a time of crisis.

## **11. Seeking Outside Help**

Outside help can be sought from agencies such as:

- N.E.P.S
- The Samaritans
- Console
- Barnardos
- H.S.E.

It may be necessary to seek help if:

- There are multiple deaths
- The death takes place in the school
- The deceased is a very young student. Such a death can have extra difficulties.
- If the death is a suicide and totally out of the blue.
- If the death is a suicide and blame is apportioned to other students and/or teachers

While it may be necessary to consult with outside agencies, it needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external 'expert' should be primarily used to advise and support school staff.

## **12. Social Media**

Following the death of a friend, social media may help teenagers to share their grief. Indeed the family, including parents, may take comfort from what is said by the deceased's friends on social media.

However, it might be useful to remind the students that the family may be reading what is on social media, and therefore to be careful and sensitive about what they might write. It might be useful to remind immediate family members that they can ask Facebook to remove a loved one's account. This will completely remove the account from Facebook so that no one can view it. Facebook will not restore the account or provide information about its contents unless required by law. (If the request is made by a non-family member they will not process the request, but they will memorialise the account.) If the family takes this course of action, ask them to let you know so that the students can be forewarned.

The school should remain vigilant to inappropriate comments or images that may be posted on social media and be prepared to act if necessary. This might be a topic for

discussion at a meeting with close friends, class captains, and positive leaders in the year group affected.

### **13. During Holiday Time**

If a death occurs during the State Exams, immediately contact the State Exams Commission and N.E.P.S. Discuss alternative arrangements and what supports they can provide.

If a death occurs during holiday time extra issues arise that may not occur if the school was open. The school should be opened. An invite should be sent out to the affected year group/s to invite them into school. A structured, familial and adult led activity should be provided. This provides comfort and familiarity and some degree of certainty for grieving teenagers. Such an event might be a prayer service. This might be followed by an informal gathering in the school where food can be provided.

The school should be open in the days to follow for students to access. Remember also to inform staff by telephone not text. If a voice message is to be left for staff who cannot be contacted, it should be *'ring me back when you get this message'*

If the death occurs in the early part of a holiday period, e.g. June, it may be necessary to repeat some of the formal events that took place immediately after the death when the school reopens in September. This is necessary to cater for students who may not have been around when the death occurred and to mark and acknowledge what has happened when the school returns. If this is not done, offence can be taken by grieving teenagers who may think that the school has forgotten, don't care, or don't realise how upset they were.

### **14. Other Schools**

Most teenagers have friendship circles that cross school boundaries. This is particularly true for older teenagers. One other task that might be worth pursuing is to determine the name of the other school/s where the deceased friends attend. It might be necessary to alert the Principal/s of events. If the friends in the other school/s are particularly close, it might be appropriate to invite them into your school for any event that may be taking place. It might be necessary for teacher/s from the other school/s to attend the funeral and sit with their students. This can provide familiarity and comfort. Contacting another school is particularly important if the deceased attended more than one secondary school.

### **15. Returning To Normal**

At some point there will be a time when the right thing to do is to resume normal classes full time without interruption.

1. Routine is very important at a time of tragedy. It provides a sense of security, especially for younger students. It helps students to see that, despite these awful events, the world remains largely unchanged and that life goes on. They will learn this over the next few hours, days, weeks. They learn this through seeing you cope with this event and seeing that the routine of life is continuing. It is important to maintain the normal routine as much as possible.
2. In some cases the resumption of normal classes may be enough for students to start moving on. However, other structured activities may be needed to restore a stronger feeling of normality returning. For example, a soccer blitz, a dance that they can organise and dress up for. These activities may be necessary for younger years.
3. One very important issue that needs to be addressed is the 'empty seat'. In some classrooms it may be possible to rearrange the seating so that the empty seat is not noticeable. If the seating arrangement up to this point was casual, and the rearranging is not noticeable, it may not be necessary to mention it to students. However, if rearranging the seating is very noticeable, it might be necessary to forewarn the students that the changes have been made. It might be helpful to invite students to discuss what to do about the empty chair. However, if after this discussion the students decide that the empty seat should be left as it is, it would be very difficult to go against their wishes. Therefore, sometimes it might be best not to consult with students in advance, but instead forewarn them in a sensitive way *why* it had to be done.
4. If the death occurred in a room in the school, consider a total refurbishment of that room so it becomes unrecognisable from before. If it occurred on the school grounds consider re-landscaping.
5. The deceased student's locker is also an issue that needs to be addressed. If it is not fixed to a wall can it be easily removed? If it is attached to another student's locker, both should be removed and the other student allocated a new locker. If the locker cannot be removed, at the very least the deceased's name should be removed. If the locker cannot be removed is it possible to reallocate all the lockers in a new random sequence so that the deceased locker is indistinguishable from the rest? Students should not be asked to assist with the removal/ rearrangement of lockers. An empty locker space can be particularly distressing symbol for close friends so it is appropriate to fore warn them in a sensitive way *why* this has happened. If at all possible, a locker should not be removed leaving an empty space.

6. The contents of the locker should also be removed and returned to the deceased's family and the locker should not be emptied when students are present.
7. the timing of addressing the locker issue can vary but if it is likely to become a focal point/make a shift memorial: it should be removed as soon as possible.
8. make sure the deceased's name is removed from all class rolls, and parents removed from text system, e-mailing list and e-postal lists
9. be extra vigilant with vulnerable students for a number of months
10. be extra vigilant with absentees, particularly if these involve vulnerable students
11. some students may experience abnormal reactions. The following is a list of some symptoms that may present themselves. Those that have previous experiences of bereavement may be particularly affected. Those who have their own emotional issues or special needs may need particular attention.

Anxiety	Numbness
Isolation	Bedwetting
Nightmares	Thumb sucking
Over dependency	Withdrawn
Tantrums	Mood Swings
Loss of Concentration	Forgetfulness
Insecurity	Use of Drugs/Alcohol
Refusal to discuss trauma	Uncontrollable crying
Change in orientation re future	Physical symptoms
Impulsive behaviour	Failing memory
Guilt feelings prolonged	Change in eating habits
Self defeating beliefs	Suicidal thoughts
Keeping a diary / scrap book	Strained relationships
Suppressed anger	Feeling of vulnerability

## 16. The Return of Siblings

Sometimes grieving siblings can find it very difficult to return to school. They can be consumed by anxiety about how they will be treated. They may fear facing their friends, being crowded out, others being 'in their face', or they may fear breaking down in public and being singled out.

1. Visit the home and talk through the anxieties about returning
2. Give the sibling the option of a gradual/staggered return.
3. Ask the sibling how they would like to be treated.
4. Let them know that they can leave class if they feel overwhelmed, and tell them there is an alternative room they can go to.
5. Speak to the sibling's year group friends.
6. Discuss with them the need not to crowd the sibling out or not to be in their face.
7. Speak to them about not approaching the sibling on mass as a group.
8. Help the friends with suggestions about what they might say to the sibling.
9. The strongest worry the grieving sibling may have is the fear of breaking down in public when approached by others. The possibility of this happening can be heightened by what is said to the sibling or how they are greeted. For example, if the sibling is asked '*How are you?*' they may get very upset. This is a question that puts the sibling under pressure to respond emotionally and more than likely respond in the negative way. Of course they are not Okay! Therefore alternatives both students and teachers can use are '*welcome back*' or '*It's good to see you*'. These are statements and not questions and do not put the sibling under pressure to respond.
10. After a brief acknowledge with the sibling, encourage students to enter into normal conversation e.g. '*guess what happened in Maths class?*', '*did you see that match last night*'
11. With regard to teachers, one suggestion might be for the teacher to wait outside the classroom before class starts so that they can meet the sibling before they enter the classroom. Again they might steer away from questions that require the sibling to give an emotional response or engaging in a long conversation that might make them feel under pressure to respond. This can be particularly difficult if the sibling has to endure such interactions from 8 or 9 teachers in one day. Teachers might simply say '*it's good to see you*' – while placing a comforting hand on their arm/shoulder.
12. Teachers should not prompt or facilitate a long emotional conversation in a public area.
13. If it provides comfort, tell the sibling some or all of the above has been done.
14. Remember also that to ignore or not acknowledge the returning sibling can be very damaging.
15. The above points are also worth remembering when teenagers return to school following the death of a parent.

## 17. Events In The Future

Future events can cause re-emergence of issues for grieving teenagers. These events may include:

- Month's Mind
- Birthdays and Christmas
- Prize Giving and Graduation
- Extra Curricular such as a play or sporting event

It may be useful to re-read this document and plan ahead when such events are approaching and consult with family, close friends, class representatives and positive leaders.

## 18. Evaluation

When time allows, the steps taken after the incident need to be assessed. The following questions may need to be asked. When reviewing this document, consult with all parties involved who may have an interest.

- Can the school lessen the possibility of reoccurrence?
- Do steps need to be deleted?
- Do steps need to be added?
- What worked?
- What did not work?
- What has been learned?
- Were there any circumstances that were unforeseen?
- Do the following policies need amendments?

Health & Safety

SPHE Curriculum

Pastoral Care Policy

Discipline Policy

In addition, the Critical Incident Team should meet once a year to review the plan even if there has not been a critical incident.

## 19. Self-Reflection

Dealing with a critical incident can be one of the most challenging and distressing events any professional working with children has to deal with. When faced with difficult tasks, human nature tends to look for ways of avoiding having to do these tasks. Sometimes we justify not doing these tasks by saying '*there is no need*', or '*it is not relevant in this case*'. Ask yourself are you dismissing the need for tasks to be done *because of the fear* of carrying them out? Are you doing this to avoid the emotional difficulty faced by engaging in these tasks? If this is the case, remember that a task should be done –despite it being difficult - simply because it is the right thing to do.

When faced with a critical incident, the normal human reaction is to put ourselves under pressure to make sure we do all that is needed, and do it well. This can sometimes manifest itself in panic and anxiety and rushing around at high speed. It might be useful to, instead of going up a gear - which is what we naturally tend to do - to go down a gear. Go slower, be more thoughtful, more purposeful, and, if needs be, go slower again. This might allow your actions be driven by practical needs rather than your heightened emotional state. Remember, you can't get everything right and do everything yourself, share the responsibilities or seek outside assistance. Remember, you can't undo what has happened nor can you fix what has happened. You can only control or influence some – not all – of the consequence of what has happened. Everything you do will be for the best of intentions and will be done to have a positive outcome and remember, you cannot control how others will react to what is done.

Be mindful of follow up contact between the person dealing with a family and the family itself. Such contact should not develop into a dependent relationship where the person providing the assistance becomes a necessary part of the family's life. This is particularly important if it is a lone parent family.

Finally, after events have settled down, it may be necessary to have a gathering of those in the school directly involved with the incident and/or a gathering of the whole staff. This should not be a debriefing session to assess what worked and did not work. Instead, the aim of the gathering should be to allow those attending to 'declutter' their minds and provide a 'therapeutic outlet' for their emotions. This can be as simple as an informal social event such a meal out, or a more structured event facilitated by an outside expert. If the incident occurred during the school holidays, consider holding such a gathering as soon as possible, rather than wait for the next



term to start. However, if the majority cannot attend due to holidays, it may be best to wait until the school term recommences so that all can attend. It may also be necessary for the school to facilitate counselling (using the Department of Education service) for teachers, if needed.

**Ratified by the Board of Management**

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**Chairperson Board of Management**

**Date: Sept 2015**

**Review Date - May 2017**