

KinderMourn

1320 Harding Place
Charlotte, NC 28204
704.376.2580
www.kindermourn.org

WHEN DEATH IMPACTS A SCHOOL: TIPS FOR INFORMING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY OF A DEATH

School administration can find itself on the front lines regarding dispersing news of a death (whether it is that of a student or staff member) and this is undeniably a delicate position. Because of the emotional reaction death engenders in most of us, schools may feel it would be better not to discuss a death, or that it is not the school's place to discuss it. Unfortunately, without timely and accurate information, the rumor mill takes over and students often receive widely varied accounts of what happened from peers and at home. Families look to their school administrators in these times to provide accurate information and to provide leadership on how to navigate the loss. The way in which news of a death is handled is crucial to a school community's ability to grapple with the shock, and its ability to support its bereaved students and staff. The following are guidelines to consider.

Note: Every loss is different and has a different impact within a school community. Schools may choose to share news of a death school-wide, or they may find that it is more appropriate to share the news with select students/classrooms/parents. The information provided below is suggested for circumstances in which news of a death is shared school-wide. These tenets can be adapted for smaller distribution circumstances.

Informing Staff:

- Inform staff as soon as possible after a death occurs, and make sure that all staff members are contacted (including support staff) so that no one feels left out. Widely dispersing the news also ultimately better supports the students because it means that emotional reactions expressed in a variety of settings will be better understood and hopefully, responded to in the most thoughtful way.
- If a death occurs overnight, on a weekend or during vacation time allows, it is best to inform staff by email *before* they report to work. This gives staff some time to absorb this news before being face to face with their students. Include within this correspondence acknowledgment that receiving this news by email is very difficult, but share that the intention was to make sure that everyone was notified. Also in this correspondence provide information regarding a time and place *prior to the next school day* for the staff to gather to process this loss as a group such as the hour before the school day begins, or at a staff meeting called for the night before.

- If school administrators learn about a death during the school day, it is ideal for the staff to learn of the death outside of the presence of their students. Doing this provides staff members some privacy and space to absorb this news rather than being blindsided by it in the presence of students.
- From an administrative level, be sure to model appropriate grief responses to your staff and emphasize the importance of addressing the death in a public and straightforward way. Be especially attentive to staff who have had previous close experiences with death and be sensitive to what this news may trigger for them. It may be valuable to offer such staff extra support or even time off from their classroom or workspace due to any such personal history.

Informing Parents:

- Regardless of when the death occurs (during the school day, overnight, on a weekend or holiday), communicate this news to parents as soon as possible. Options for doing this include both email as well as telephone robo-call messages. Only share the cause of death information in the manner that it has been described by the family. Privacy is very important to bereaved families and it is crucial to respect a family's preference to keep details of the cause of death minimal. This is especially important in instances of suicide or violence.
- Let parents know exactly what information will be shared with their children.
- It can be very helpful to provide printed literature regarding how to support grieving children/teens to serve as a reference for parents. Schools may find it valuable to have this information available in printed form to be sent home with their students, email it to parents and/or post it on its school website.

Informing Students:

- While it is important to provide accurate information as soon as possible, it is important to be thoughtful regarding the timing of when to share this news with students. For instance, if the death happens towards the end of the school day, it may be better to proceed with alerting the parents only at this time so that they have the option of telling their child themselves, and then the following day sharing the news across the student body.
- As stated above, it is important for information about the death to be shared with accuracy, calm and thoughtfulness. Without accurate and calmly delivered information, students will rely on rumors and their own logic to figure out answers for themselves. This can not only lead to misinformation, but unnecessary anxiety and confusion.

- It is advisable to inform students of the death in their classroom space and from a teacher rather than over the public address system, although in some school settings (especially high schools) this can be difficult to do. The reason for this is that students often feel more secure expressing themselves in the familiar and intimate environment of their classrooms.
- It is very important that teachers be provided with a written statement to read aloud that gives details about the death so that the information is shared with all students uniformly.
- Provide teachers with information regarding grief responses. In an ideal setting, the teacher would be comfortable leading a discussion with their students about the death and possible grief reactions but this is often more the exception than the norm. Plan for this by having counselors and support staff stationed at a designated place within the school for students to go for support. It is ideal to have this on-site support in place for at least two days following the death.

Important note on the informing students: It is important to be aware that not all teachers may be comfortable delivering this news to their students. It is crucial that teachers not feel forced to share this news. It is important that teachers be given the alternative of another colleague delivering this news if they are uncomfortable, for whatever reason, doing so.

For more information or guidance on supporting your school community, please call KinderMourn during office hours: 704.376.2580.

Information originated from "School Survival Kit" created by "Supporting Kidds: The Center for Grieving Children and their Families" (www.supportingkidds.org) Adapted by KinderMourn.