RESPONDING TO DEATH AND LOSS IN SCHOOLS

While we all hope it will never happen in our community, the death of a student, parent, teacher, administrator or others is inevitable. One of the best ways to step into these situations with as much calm, empathy, and preparedness as possible is to adopt best practices in advance. Below are key considerations in how you plan a response to death and loss in your school.

PLANNING AHEAD

With every loss and crisis there will be a variety of reactions that are often unpredictable. It is important to map out a clearly defined process of response that aligns with your values and is considerate of everyone involved. This will reduce stress and you will be able to pay more attention to the people rather than the process since it will be laid out clearly ahead of time. Consider these tasks in your planning:

- Review organizational values.
- Form a Crisis Leadership Team.
- Develop a communication plan.
- Identify internal & external resources.
- Consider memorialization options.

REVIEWING ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

Taking time to review your values and educate your staff on how those values should be exhibited routinely and in times of crisis is important. Values can help you to make the tough decisions. Equally important will be to identify where there are gaps or questions about your values when they come into contact with grief and loss. We suggest looking at our “Good Grief Compass” for important values related to supporting grief and loss. Questions to consider include:

- What are your organizational values? Does everyone know how to exhibit those at all times?
- How do they inform or come into conflict with providing a supportive response?
- What (if anything) is missing?
- Adopt values specific to grief and loss if needed (i.e., “The Good Grief Compass”).

FORMING A CRISIS LEADERSHIP TEAM

When forming a Crisis Leadership Team we suggest recruiting a group with diverse roles and perspectives that can advocate for the variety of needs in your school. The team does not need to be large (5-10 people). The primary role of this team will be to assist leadership in the development and implementation of a crisis response plan. You can make decisions about what feels like an appropriate term of service on the team. Tasks of the Crisis Leadership Team can include:

- Write a policy for response to death in your organization or school.
- Develop a communication strategy for sharing news of the death and how the school is responding.
- Identify grief resources and staff training for before and after.
- Develop long-term support plans (i.e., how you will continue to follow up with at-risk students).
- Consider potential memorialization opportunities to facilitate communal mourning.
- Assign roles and responsibilities for implementation of the plan.
DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATION PLAN

Creating a supportive and empathic environment after a death will depend significantly on the quality of communication that occurs both at the leadership and faculty/staff levels. Ongoing questions and conversations are going to take place, and effective communication will include equipping everyone to be confident in their interactions. Important questions to ask include:

1. How will your school share the news of the death to all members of the community?
2. How should staff respond with students, parents, and others (i.e., what is the best way for them to be a supportive, caring presence)?

IDENTIFYING INTERNAL & EXTERNAL RESOURCES

What resources do you have at your disposal to ensure that no student falls between the cracks and does not get the support they need? How will you identify at-risk students? Who will track them and ensure they are getting the help they need? Do you have the infrastructure in place to accomplish these things? If not, who do you need to have in place to help? Also importantly, is your faculty and staff comfortable enough to facilitate a supportive dialogue after death and loss has occurred? If not, what training plans do you have? Resources to consider:

✓ Training with faculty & staff to provide tools and resources for supportive response
✓ External resources for students who need additional support: counselors & therapists, grief groups, others

MEMORIALIZING A LOSS

Memorialization is integral to the grief process. There are no “right” or “wrong” ideas when it comes to memorialization. Memorialization opportunities for students should always be made with their input so they feel ownership, and it is best to ask those individuals most directly impacted by the death. Ideas for memorialization:

✓ Create a “wall of remembrance.”
✓ Create a “memory journal” and set it up on a table where people can write memories.
✓ Student’s locker: If a student dies, allowing peers to leave notes on that student’s locker for a designated period of time (perhaps the rest of that school year).
✓ Allow close friends to share speeches, play music, and other ways to memorialize their peer at school-held memorial.

When you land on an idea, it will be important to set up safety parameters so that everyone knows how to engage respectfully. Guidelines you may want to include are respecting one another, honoring diversity, non-judgment, and have a plan in place to remove anything that is disrespectful or hurtful.

WHEN A DEATH OCCURS...

When a death or loss does occur in your school, keep in mind this checklist of tasks:

✓ Confirm the death and gather all facts you can before anything else.
✓ Update the Crisis Leadership Team to get their support.
✓ Hold a staff meeting (if possible and necessary) to ensure everyone is on the same page.
✓ Share the news with staff, students, parents, and others impacted.
✓ Make plans for any changes in schedule or special activities.
✓ Reach out for external support (if needed).
✓ Facilitate memorialization opportunities.