



School Response to Suicide loss of a Student

Greg A Marley, LCSW
Maine Suicide Prevention Program
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Key considerations for school administrators and clinicians in approaching the first critical days after a traumatic loss.

The suicide death of a student within a school community does not happen often, and many schools will see decades pass before a school suicide occurs. Yet each year Maine suffers the loss of almost 30 people under the age of 25 (Maine Vital Statistics 2014-16). When a suicide occurs no one feels prepared to address the powerful and complex emotions and needs of a school community. The risk of contagion (copycat suicidal behavior) is the most prevalent among youth and rapid and decisive action to support the needs of students and staff in the immediate aftermath is vital in reducing that risk. The recommendations below are by no means comprehensive, but serve as a check-list of steps to take in the first days after a loss. Consult more complete resources for further information.

- **Confirm the death** and what is known of the cause. Be aware that in the initial aftermath the cause is often not “officially” confirmed, and it is important to speak with the family about what they are comfortable having announced.
- **Reach out to MSPP/ NAMI Maine** staff for guidance, resources and support. Suicide is, thankfully, a rare event and few schools are prepared to manage the complex needs of your community in the immediate aftermath. **1-800-464-5767**.
- **Assess the likely impact of this suicide** on the school community. Work to determine the impact based on the age of the youth, degree he/she was integrated into the school community and the degree that students are likely to learn of the loss as a suicide. When unsure, err on the side of more postvention support needed rather than less.
- Even when the cause of death has not officially been stated, or the family is not able to allow an open acknowledgement of suicide, it is vital that the school support the grief narrative the students are reacting to when they come to school. Given the speed of social media, students are likely to arrive at school with a story and associated reactions. Recognize that, even if you do not have permission to acknowledge the loss as a suicide, if your students are carrying the story that it was a suicide loss, it is **IMPERATIVE** that you support their grief around that perception. That can be done without ever making any official statement regarding the cause of death.
- **Convene the school or district crisis** team as early as possible to plan and support the school response. This team is well-suited to plan any postvention response.

- **Alert school staff** to the death with the intention that they learn of the tragic loss before they arrive at school, if possible.
- **Develop a list of affected youth** who are likely to be most impacted by the loss and those most vulnerable from other losses or needs. Anyone who may have known or suspected the victim was at risk and any close friends, team mates... Target outreach and extra support for this group as you support the whole school. Consider outreach to the parents of the close friends of the student who died to let them know to be especially supportive and vigilant. Maintain heightened vigilance over time and follow-up with any students where heightened concern exists.
- **Arrange for additional clinical support** for the first few days to meet with kids as needed and to be available to support staff. Your regional mental health crisis team is often able to send staff. Nearby school/districts are another good source for clinical support.
- **Convene a staff meeting** first thing to share the message, alert them to the plan for the day and offer support. Plan for school clinicians to support some staff in announcing the loss.
- Plan to have a few extra substitutes available for a few days to support affected staff.
- **Offer a clearly worded statement** for students and one for parents that acknowledges the basic information you can share. For each group, underscore the availability of helping resources and how to access them.
 - Student message to be read in small “home room” size groupings. A clinician or member of the school crisis team may be used to support staff in delivering the message.
 - Parent message should go out ASAP through email or other regularly used channels.
- **Be prepared for media attention.** A youth suicide may easily become the focus of media attention, especially if it occurred in a public setting or with a youth otherwise well-known. Be prepared to manage media attention and urge any reported to adhere to recommendations on reporting on suicide. A set of recommendations can be found [here](#).
- **Beware of contagion risk.** Our experience has shown that the sudden tragic loss of a middle school student triggers an especially strong wave of contagion reaction. The strong reaction comes from students as well as parents. This is, in part, a developmental age reality for the youth, and for the parents, fear based on the sudden reality that suicide can happen for one so young.
- **Allow for, and support, grief needs of students** while maintaining care that messaging does not glorify suicide. Be aware of and monitor social media posts that reflect the grief of individual students and any sense of blaming or self-blame among peers.
 - Many schools have held informal candlelight vigils with staff support as a way to support grieving.
 - Consider how you can support students to attend a memorial service (with parent support).
- **Plan for support for most-affected staff as well.** Offer a short debrief meeting for all staff at the end of the first day and consider a more formal debrief after a couple of days (also at the end of the day). Suicide Prevention staff have offered these debriefs in many

schools where local resources are not available. Most effective if held within the first week after a loss. Triage the most impacted staff for additional support and follow-up

- **Consider offering an evening session for parents and the community on postvention awareness.** This session should be sponsored and organized by the school and usually held on school grounds. It offers a time to educate about the grief following a suicide and what parents can do to support their kids (and selves). It also is a time to briefly educate about signs of suicide and to underscore avenues for help. Parents are often very open to this message after a tragic event that reminds them that suicide can occur in their community. This program is delivered by NAMI Maine suicide prevention staff.