

# AVON MAITLAND DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

## ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE

### NO. 182

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#### **SUBJECT: TRAGIC EVENTS RESPONSE**

Legal References: *Education Act: Section 265 (1) (j) Duties of Principal: Care of Pupils*

Related References: *Administrative Procedure 160 Access to School Premises; AP 170 School Emergency Procedures; AP 175 Accidents, Incidents and Occupational Illnesses; AP 176 Bomb Threats; AP 178 Inclement/Severe Weather; AP 314 Medically at Risk Students; AP 357 Violence-Free Schools; AP 364 Search and Seizure Guidelines; AP 540 Hazardous Materials Disposal; AP 589 Transportation*

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#### **1. Guidelines for Responding to Tragic Events**

The director of education has developed this administrative procedure to provide guidelines for school personnel when responding to situations of need and stress within the school community related to crisis and tragic events.

#### **2. School Procedures**

- 2.1 The Tragic Events Response Support Team (TERST) Resource Guide outlines procedures that should be followed and resources that may be utilized when a tragic event occurs (Appendix A).
- 2.2 Principals shall develop a school-based Tragic Event Response Support Team (TERST). Members may include school staff members, social workers, nurses, police officers and clergy. Membership will be reviewed annually. Each September, the superintendent responsible for tragic event response will distribute a form (sample in the Resource Guide) asking schools to report on their TERST.
- 2.3 A district Tragic Event Response Support Team will also be available to assist and support the in-school team. In the case of a tragic event, principals should consult with the superintendent with responsibility for tragic event response to determine the need to activate the district Tragic Event Response Support Team (TERST).
- 2.4 When a tragic event occurs, the superintendent with responsibility for tragic event response, or designate, shall notify the director's office, all senior staff and all trustees.



**TRAGIC EVENTS  
RESPONSE SUPPORT  
TEAM  
(TERST)**

**Resource Guide**



## 1.0 Tragic Event Quick Reference Checklists

### Quick Reference Checklist for a Tragic Event

- Confirm the death/detail of crisis (refer to AP182/TERST Manual)
- Notify TERST Superintendent, who will contact Communications Manager, District TERST, Senior Staff, Trustees
- Speak with family, offer condolences, confirm their wishes
- Convene school TERST at one spot
- Notify staff via meeting (if possible) - consider ALL staff (ex., COPE, fieldtrips, custodians, bus driver, cafeteria, etc.)
- Consider who else needs to be notified (i.e., other schools with siblings/relatives)

**Refer to AP182/TERST Manual for detailed checklists**

## **Quick Reference Checklist For the Death of a Student or Staff Member**

Upon receipt of crisis information school TERST team meets/conferences.

- Confirm the death/detail of crisis
- Notify TERST Superintendent, who will contact Communications Manager and District TERST
- Speak with family, offer condolences, confirm their wishes (see 4.0)
- Convene school TERST at one spot
- Notify staff via meeting (if possible) - consider ALL staff (ex., COPE, fieldtrips, custodians, bus driver, cafeteria, etc.)
- Lower the flag to half-mast until after the funeral
- Consider who else needs to be notified (i.e., other schools with siblings/relatives)
- Notify student body via announcement or prepared statement for teachers to read to their class, identify safe area for students to go, monitor students (washrooms, parking lots, etc.)
- Notify parent community - direction from TERST Superintendent/Communications Manager
- Direct media that may arrive/call school to AMDSB communication manager
- Begin considerations for follow-up (debriefing for staff, monitor other students/staff/those close to situation)
- Update Maplewood ( if student death, so no absent phone calls are made), update printed materials i.e., OSR

### Other Considerations

- Be cognizant of staff or students that may require special/immediate considerations
- Letter/card/flowers to family
- Staff members to funeral
- Personal space - ex., locker/desk/cubby/physed locker/name plate/etc.
- Memorial area, other areas in school
- Monitor those directly or indirectly affected - be aware of grief triggers, impact cluster effect
- Outside agencies - when and what organizations should be/need to be involved

## **Quick Reference Checklist For the Death of a Parent/Sibling of Student/Immediate Relative of Staff Member**

Upon receipt of crisis information school TERST team meets/conferences.

- Confirm the death/detail of crisis
- Notify TERST Superintendent, who will contact Communications Manager and District TERST (if necessary)
- Speak with family, offer condolences, confirm their wishes (see 4.0)
- Convene school TERST at one spot
- Notify staff via meeting (if possible) - consider ALL staff (ex., COPE, fieldtrips, custodians, bus driver, cafeteria, etc.)
- Refer to Section 4.0 regarding social media
- Consider who else needs to be notified (i.e., other schools with siblings/relatives)
- Direct media that may arrive/call school to AMDSB communication manager
- Begin considerations for follow-up (debriefing for staff, monitor other students/staff/those close to situation)
- Update Maplewood (if student death, so no absent phone calls are made), update printed materials i.e., OSR

### Other Considerations

- Be cognizant of staff or students that may require special/immediate considerations
- Letter/card/flowers to family
- Staff members to funeral
- Monitor those directly or indirectly affected - be aware of grief triggers, impact cluster effect
- Outside agencies - when and what organizations should be/need to be involved

## **Quick Reference Checklist For the Death of a Student by Suicide**

Upon receipt of crisis information school TERST team meets/conferences.

- Confirm the death/detail of crisis
- Notify school Superintendent and TERST Superintendent, who will contact the District TERST Team (including Mental Health Lead), Communications Manager, Senior Staff and Trustees
- Speak with family, offer condolences, confirm their wishes (if possible). Consent is needed from the parent(s)/guardian(s) to disclose the death as a suicide.
- Convene school TERST
- Notify staff via meeting (if possible) - consider ALL staff (for example, bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria, COPE, etc.)
- Consider who else needs to be notified (i.e., other schools with siblings/relatives); back-up from community agencies
- Notify student body via prepared statement for teachers to read to their class, support from TERST, identify safe area for students to go, monitor students (washrooms, etc.)
- Monitor social media (refer to 4.0)
- Support for students
- Notify parent community
- Direct media that may arrive at school/call school to AMDSB Communications Manager
- Begin considerations for follow-up (debriefing for staff, monitor other students/staff/those close to situation)

### Other Considerations

- Be cognizant of staff or students that may require special/immediate considerations
- Monitor those directly or indirectly affected - be aware of grief triggers, impact cluster effect
- Card/flowers to family
- Flag at half-mast until after funeral
- Community agencies - when and what organizations should be/need to be involved
- Personal space - ex., locker/desk/cubby/physed locker/name plate/etc.
- Memorial area in school
- Update Maplewood (if student death, so absent phone calls are not made), update printed materials
- Staff members to funeral



## DISTRICT TRAGIC EVENT RESONSE SUPPORT TEAM

Name	Phone Number	Position
Jodie Baker	800-592-5437 x208 519-492-2112 (cell)	Superintendent (TERST)
Kate Treischl (Co-Lead)	519-949-2111 (cell) 519-271-9740 (school)	Guidance, SNSS
Ruthann Waldick (Co-Lead)	519-619-7412 (cell) 519-284-1731 (school)	Guidance, DCVI
Peggy Blair	800-592-5437 x109	Superintendent
Anne Robinson	800-592-5437 x119	Mental Health Lead
Mark Cassone	519-271-4500	Guidance SCSS
Janice Shore	519-524-7353	Vice Principal, GDCI
Deb Goggin	519-291-1880	Guidance LDSS
Scott Mercer	519-531-1415	Teaching and Learning Coordinator
Stacy Somerville	800-592-5437 x252	Student Success Coordinator
TBA	800-592-5437 x231	Manager of Communications
Tim Bilcke	800-592-5437 x128	Communications





# SCHOOL TRAGIC EVENT RESPONSE SUPPORT TEAM

Name	Phone Number	Position
<p>Possible Tragic Event Response Support Team Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal</li> <li>Vice-Principal</li> <li>Teacher(s)</li> <li>School-Based Social Worker</li> <li>School-Based Public Health Nurse</li> <li>Community Service Officer</li> <li>Community Members</li> <li>Clergy</li> </ul>		

*Note: Both the School-Based AND District Tragic Event Response Support Teams shall be updated yearly. The School-Based TERST shall be submitted (this form) to the Superintendent (TERST) in October.*

## 2.0 RATIONALE

A tragic event is any situation faced by individuals which causes them to experience unusually strong emotional reactions and which has the potential to interfere with their ability to function at the time of the incident or later. When tragic events occur which affect the student and staff of a school, the task of coping with such tragedies is shared by the school and related professionals.

Children and youth vary in ability and experience in understanding tragic and critical events and may rely upon adults to assist them. Young children are subject to fears and inaccurate understandings about death; these thoughts and feelings are related to development.

School professionals need insight into their own feelings about death, the process of grieving and the age-appropriate reactions of students to death and dying. This requires knowledge, skills and sensitivity to the feelings and behaviour of others. Other professionals may be more experienced in responding to emergencies and highly stressful events; as such, they too have a role in the action plan.

Without intervention, survivors may feel isolated. The emotional readjustment of survivors is directly related to how well they are able to move through the grieving process. **Grief is a journey, not a destination.**

Implicit in the guideline is the assumption that each person grieves in an individual way, and latitude and support must be provided. Such support, as is necessary, should be provided while maintaining as minimal disruption of the educational process as possible.

Implicit in the guidelines is respect for the wishes of the immediate family in the response and application of the guidelines. However, such wishes will not preclude the need of the school to deal as effectively as possible with student/staff grief.

### **3.0 TRAGIC EVENT RESPONSE SUPPORT TEAM PROCEDURE**

#### **A. FIRST STEP - INITIAL DECISIONS**

The Principal should convene the school TERST team. The Principal should notify the Superintendent in charge of Tragic Event Response whenever there is a death of a student or staff member or other crisis of a traumatic nature.

The school TERST should meet during the school day immediately upon receipt of the crisis information at the school. If the crisis occurs outside of school hours, the phone chain and/or email will be used as the most practical method of notifying each staff member in a timely manner.

The TERST, in consultation with the Superintendent in charge of Tragic Event Response, may decide to request the assistance of the district Tragic Event Response Support Team.

#### **B. SECOND STEP - CONTACT FAMILY (Should be done before SCHOOL TERST meets if possible)**

Principal (or most appropriate person) calls family

- a) To verify information and facts surrounding death;
- b) To see how the family defines or understands death i.e., accident, illness, suicide;
- c) To see what their wishes are, if any, in regards to sharing information (particularly through social media), funeral arrangements, etc.; and,
- d) To briefly outline what the school will likely do (general process schools will follow).

##### Some Guidelines

Phone Call to Parent/Spouse who has suffered the loss.

Parental distress is great and parents may be understandably reluctant to discuss the death of their child with a person unknown to them. Therefore, it is important that, if possible, the designated contact person be someone with whom they are familiar (e.g., principal, classroom teacher).

When you contact the family, first express your sympathy and that of your staff. In this initial conversation, you may or may not be able to confirm the details concerning the death. You may wish to offer to call again at a later time to see if the school community could be of assistance. It is more important to clearly establish the wishes of the family concerning the school's involvement. If you have procedures you intend to follow, indicate these to the parents (e.g., a commemoration). Invite their involvement if appropriate. Leave a number where you can be reached. Follow up with a sympathy letter on behalf of the school.

#### **C. THIRD STEP - NOTIFY STAFF (Principal or designate)**

1. Identify staff who may be the most vulnerable to the death and provide support if necessary.
2. If possible, hold a staff meeting as soon as possible in the day to explain events and procedures. Use phone chain and/or email to notify staff of meeting before school. Be sure to include all staff off site.
3. Staff meeting before and debrief after school.

**D. FOURTH STEP - NOTIFY STUDENTS** (Principal or designate)

1. Prepare a paragraph to give to staff members to read to their classes to briefly explain the facts and what will happen next, or communicate with student body via PA system. In-school TERST/Admin to decide the best method for their school.
2. Offer TERST for support to all students. Special consideration should be given to classes of the deceased student/staff member.
3. An adjustment in the school schedule may be necessary.
4. Identify a location in the school for students to gather who need support (e.g., Student Services).
5. Consistently monitor hall, parking lots, etc.
6. When possible avoid full school assemblies at this time.

**E. FIFTH STEP - NOTIFICATION TO PARENT COMMUNITY** (Principal or designate)

If deemed appropriate, the following steps may be taken:

1. A letter outlining information concerning the death, funeral arrangements and availability of support services may be sent home with the students. (see sample letters in 6.0)
2. A call to the parents of students most affected by the tragedy.
3. Message through social media if deemed appropriate by Superintendent. (see 4.0)

**F. SIXTH STEP - DEALING WITH THE MEDIA ON ISSUES AND CRISIS INTERVENTION**

Refer to Section 4.0 - Communication

**G. SEVENTH STEP - FIRST DAY FOLLOW-UP**

The Principal or designate meets with the TERST at end of the day to review the current situation and determine the next plan of action.

1. Review information:
  - a) Was everyone notified and how was it received?
  - b) Updating appropriate people
    - Parent letter to be written and distributed to students (optional)
    - Update memo to staff, which can be read to students the next day (optional)
    - Staff meeting after school to review progress (optional)
  - c) Updating Superintendent for TERST and Regional Superintendent
  - d) Review media contacts, if any.
2. Review the role of support services.
3. Review “ongoing” processes and prepare for subsequent stages.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- A. Grieving is necessary for both students and staff and both **should be allowed to express their grief.**

For surviving siblings, their lives may have overlapped the deceased's by as much as 80% to 100%. Siblings may have served many functions for each other. The one who is an only surviving child tends to have greater anxieties, because there may have been reliance on the sibling to lead the way into new situations. It is important to recognize the needs of the sibling(s) as being different from those of peers or friends.

To varying degrees, the death of a peer precipitates an identity crisis: if it can happen to them, it can happen to me. For adults, the death of a child can be equally alarming: if this can happen, then anything can happen.

When a parent dies, the school may represent the single most stabilizing element in the child's life during the reconstruction period.

1. Grief may be expressed in a variety of ways (sadness, anger, laughter, tears, withdrawal).
2. Both close friends and adversaries are most vulnerable and should be counselled in separate groups. Adversaries may be at risk because of guilt and irrational thinking ("I caused it").
3. Teachers need to be sensitive to their students' needs to grieve.

- B. Help may be given in the following ways:

1. Group sessions
  - Generalized group for those who need it and/or request it
  - Specific groups
    - Close friends
    - Adversaries
    - School staff
2. Classroom group discussion may be led by a teacher or, if requested, by a support team member. (NOTE: TERST members should not be used as classroom teacher relief.)
3. Individual/group counselling may be provided in the school by:
  - Guidance Counsellors
  - Psychologists/ School-Based Public Health Nurse or Mental Health Nurse/School-Based Child Youth Worker
  - Outside Therapist
  - Clergy

- C. Student's Belongings

1. Returned to family in a manner consistent with family wishes.
2. School items such as a desk can be discussed with a class as to what to do (i.e., remove it, leave it empty, etc.).

## COMMEMORATING

School community responses to a death through commemoration may be varied and individual, but should be respectful of the wishes of the immediate family.

### A. Funeral

1. Some students may attend school on the day of the funeral. The school can:
  - Provide support
  - Keep individuals from being isolated
  - Clarify misinformation
2. If a staff member dies, every effort should be made to accommodate staff and students who wish to attend the funeral. However, arrangements must be made to ensure adequate supervisors for students who attend school on the day of a funeral.
3. Exceptional Circumstances: Response regarding the closure of the school in the event of a death of a staff member needs to be at the discretion of the Director of Education.

### B. School Commemoration

Students/staff need to be actively involved in commemoration.

- Wishes of the family must be considered
- Best friends and/or family - should be involved
- Can occur a few weeks after death, but should not be prolonged (unless required)
- School would give final approval
- Principal should be actively involved in discussions, particularly prior to staff engaging in communication with family, and should preview and approve all presentations/video

### C. Memorial Address Guidelines

This address is intended to focus on the value of the life lived and to provide accurate factual information. Before composing this address, it is sometimes helpful to meet briefly with a few staff and students to hear their thoughts about the person. Reviewing the OSR and speaking to a previous school's teachers might be helpful as well.

The components in a Memorial Address are:

1. An explanation that this is a special address regarding the death of a member of your school community. The address normally takes three minutes with a minute's silence observed at the end.
2. Clarification of facts: name, age, grade level, date and manner of death. If the manner of death is being investigated (e.g., murder, suicide) consult with the police regarding what can be said officially.
3. Background of the student: names of schools recently attended, extracurricular activities, hobbies, favourite subjects, part-time jobs, etc.
4. Personal remarks: relay some of the positive remarks of staff/students. The deceased will always be remembered for ... If there is no personal information, speak in general terms about the loss of a young life and value of the brief time spent together. Invite the student body to participate in memorial activities (e.g., creation of a visual display, an assembly, etc.).  
Concluding remarks: recognize the emotions arising from the situation, the need to support one another, the "normalcy" of grief responses (i.e., tears), the importance of recognizing the value of the person's life. End by requesting that all stand for a minute's silence in the deceased's memory.

5. If the deceased is a member of staff, the preceding points should be amended to recognize an adult as opposed to a student.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

- A. Students and staff need to know it is acceptable to go on with **business at hand even though still grieving. Laughter and humour are considered appropriate coping strategies.**
- B. Grieving may be a long-term process.
  1. Students having a particularly hard time can be referred for counselling.
  2. Others may struggle at times but are functioning and will only require some special understanding from time to time.
- C. TERST meets to evaluate the situation and the effectiveness of the actions taken.
- D. Mark the OSR deceased and change the computer records in Maplewood.

## 4.0 COMMUNICATION

### A. Dealing with the Media on Issues and Crisis Situations

All requests from the media should be forwarded to the AMDSB Communications Manger.

### B. Social Media

1. Admin use of Social Media to Communicate  
School administration will speak with the Communications Manager/TERST Superintendent or Mental Health Lead about the effective use of social media to communicate any related message regarding the crisis.

Messages being sent using social media need to contain brief factual information. Names and personal information should not be shared, or will only be shared with the permission of the family.

2. Student Use of Social Media  
Be aware that students will use social media. They may have incorrect information from this resource. This may then require staff/admin to intervene.
3. Provide clear and consistent messages such as: `We are saddened by the death of one of our students. Our thoughts are with his/her family, friends, and the entire community. Our Board and school Tragic Event Response Team will provide counselling and support for students and staff.`
4. If there is a decision to use social media, it is recommended that there be a message on the school website such as `We are grieving the loss of ...` provided permission has been given by the family to do so.



## 5.0 SUICIDE

### Special Considerations

There are special considerations in formulating the appropriate actions following a student death by suicide:

#### Concern About Contagion, “Cluster Effect”

Contagion is the process whereby those who have exposure to someone with suicidal behaviour or someone who died by suicide are more likely to attempt or consider suicide themselves (copycat/imitation).

For contagion, there is a fine line between dramatizing a death and doing something that allows an expression of loss, a channeling of feelings. It is best to err on the side of caution and not glorify death in any way. Avoid isolated discussions of suicide. Discussions should pertain to death, not the manner of death; the focus should be on adaptation to loss. The actions taken after a death by suicide have a large impact on the level of risk for vulnerable students and others in the community.

**Good postvention is good prevention.**

#### Impact – Identification of Those at Risk

A death impacts most closely with peers: for the teen, it's a fellow teen; for an adult, it's another adult. Role models of prestige, competence and/or authority can have a significant impact. The plan must emphasize the identification of those at risk.

#### Long(er) Term Follow-up

Grief resolution will be longer. There is a stronger prospect of complicated grief reactions. Educational postvention is essential. The grieving process may be more complicated and prolonged, with sustained impact on attentiveness and availability for learning/working.

Be sensitive to the needs and wishes of the family
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#### Responding to a Student Death by Suicide

Following are the steps of a postvention plan that a school should put into action when a student dies by suicide. Although the circumstances may vary in different school communities, and the time frames may vary depending on when the death occurs and when the details are confirmed, each step should be addressed by the school:

### Immediate Response:

Step 1: Verify that the suicide occurred. (The family or the police may confirm the death has occurred). Be aware of any information that may be damaging or hurtful to the parents/guardians or other children in the family.

Step 2: Notify the key people in the school system:  
Contact your regional Superintendent and the Superintendent with responsibility for tragic event response (TERST Superintendent), who will inform the Director, senior staff, and trustees.

The TERST Superintendent will contact the District Tragic Event Response Support Team (TERST) Lead, who in turn, will activate the District Team. The TERST Superintendent will also contact the AMDSB Communications Manager to deal with the media.

Activate your School Tragic Event Response Support Team. (This team may include various school-based/connected community staff, for example, Huron-Perth Centre, SW Local Health Integration Network, Public Health, Choices for Change, School Police Constable).

Step 3: Begin to pull together as much information as possible about the student.

Step 4: Contact the family to offer the school's deepest sympathy. In a caring manner, confirm the nature of the death and level of information the family wishes to be shared with the school community. Consent is needed from the parent(s)/guardian(s) to disclose the death as a suicide. The family may not want the death disclosed as a suicide and this makes postvention more difficult. Consult with the family about the general wishes the school will follow, and their wishes regarding sharing information such as funeral arrangements, particularly through social media on the school web site.

### Subsequent Response (with 24 hours of the news of the death)

Step 5: Notify staff (via phone list, memo). It is good to touch base especially with any staff (for example, teacher, Coach, Educational Assistant, etc) who taught or worked closely with the student or his/her siblings, prior to meeting as a staff group.

Step 6: Convene the School TERST team along with regional Superintendent and/or TERST Superintendent, and the District TERST team (including the Mental Health Lead), as soon as possible, to share information, create a plan, and offer support.

Step 7: Prepare a general statement for the student body (see Appendix for sample script). Do not mention details of the suicide. A straight forward announcement of the death and a simple statement of sympathy and condolences to the family are appropriate. A statement that more information will be forthcoming, when it is verified, can be reassuring to students. Students appreciate being told about funeral or memorial service arrangements, if known.

Step 8: Hold an emergency staff meeting for ALL staff (for example, bus driver, custodian, cafeteria, COPE, etc.) as soon as possible in order to share information, outline the plan and gather input, and offer support. Enlist the help of the school TERST and District TERST team in providing general support to the staff. (see Appendix F for sample script for staff meeting).

Step 9: Consider who else needs to be notified (i.e., other schools with siblings, relatives).

- Step 10: Arrange to have additional staff and administrative support at the school to handle routine operational matters and assist in supporting staff and students.
- Step 11: Ensure that the Office Administrator adjusts the attendance register so that “absence” phone calls are not sent home to the parent(s) of the deceased.
- Step 12: Share the information with students. Delay feeds rumours which only compound the situation. Delays also engender anger from students who feel that information is being withheld. Share the information with students in a personal way, in classrooms, not through large assemblies or via announcements. Use the script to ensure students receive the same information at the same time. Teachers should restrict their answers to students’ questions to basic information and avoid speculation. Members of the school TERST or District TERST can be available to support the teachers in their classrooms.
- Step 13: Identify students at risk. Make a list. Who is at risk? – those close to the student; those who have recently lost a loved one, or those who have experienced loss.
- Step 14: Monitor social media to see what students and the community are discussing (see Appendix L for Social Media guidelines).
- Step 15: Arrange for students to gather in a safe spot. TERST Team members and counsellors should be available to spend time with students who wish to talk. Be alert for students who are close to the victim who do not join the group; also, those students who have recently lost a friend or family member. Ask: “Are there any others who should be with us now?” Students should only be allowed to leave the school with parental permission. A sign out and picked up by who sheet will be kept in the office. If a student is exhibiting suicide feelings or thoughts in response to his/her peer’s death, follow steps of Suicide Intervention (see page x).
- Step 16: Give students direction as to what is appropriate as a memorial. Recognize the need for closure. For example, set up a Memory Table or Memory Book for students to write messages. Place the table close to the office or Guidance office in order to monitor students.
- Step 17: Connect with community agencies that may have been involved (for example, Huron-Perth Centre, SW Local Health Integration Network, Public Health, Choices for Change, School Police Constable) to inform them of the death, and/or consult with them regarding the Postvention plan. Also arrange for backup help from the community agencies.
- Step 18: Ask the custodian to lower the school flag (after appropriate notification).
- Step 19: Draft a letter to send to the school community (see Appendix H sample letter home). Send the letter home with students and also post on the school website.
- Step 20: Direct media that may arrive at the school/call the school to the AMDSB Communications Manager. Be aware of AMDSB’s media policy and media guidelines for suicide. (see page Appendix K for Media section).
- Step 21: Hold a debriefing meeting at the end of the day. Offer support to the school TERST and to all staff. Remind them of the EAP phone number for more assistance.
- Step 22: Respect the wishes of the family regarding attendance at, or participation in the funeral/memorial. If service is held during school hours, students need signed parental permission.

Step 23: Draft a letter to the school community if the death occurred near an upcoming school break as a reminder that youth need “wellness monitoring” by families, to look for various signs and symptoms, and resources in the community (see Appendix J).

Step 24: Monitor the well-being of the staff.

After a death by suicide, students, families, or staff often wish to “do something”. However, many typically suggested activities (for example, large scale memorial activities, untested therapeutic activities) are not best practice and can result in contagion or increased suicide risk among vulnerable students. Such activities should be planned in consultation with the Mental Health Lead and/or other members of the District TERST team.

School administrators should consult with the “School Mental Health ASSIST Guidelines for Programs and Presentations, Videos, Social Media Campaigns, and Materials Related to Mental Health School”, and as well, use the “School Mental Health ASSIST Decision Support Tool” for any suicidal awareness activities.

### Responding to an Adult Death by Suicide

When the suicide involves a staff member or other adult in the school environment, many of the same factors come into play. For example, there would be notification to all staff and key members of the educational community.

The greatest impact may be with colleagues. However, there may be varying impact with students. These adult colleagues need the same opportunities to discuss and share. Administration needs to facilitate these opportunities to discuss and share, to respond effectively.

Lack of acknowledgement or outright discouragement will only serve to fragment a staff and student body at the very time when they most need to pull together.

The Employee Assistance Program, too, has a definite role in this regard. In the Avon Maitland District School Board, EAP is provided

## Suicide: Signs of Risk

Contributing conditions may include family, individual and cultural factors. The stability (emotional, financial and social) of the family, as well as the individual's physical, social and emotional status may be contributing to the current crisis.

Together, in varying combinations, these signs represent a very high risk.

### Feelings

- sad despondent
- hopeless
- helpless
- worthless
- lonely
- extremes of mood change, marked hostility, apathy
- guilty

### Thoughts

- constricted perceptions/thoughts; narrowing of focus ("only", "always")
- "I wish I were dead."
- "All of my problems will end soon."
- "I won't be needing these things anymore."
- "I'm a loser."
- "Everyone will be better off without me."
- "I can't do anything right."
- "No one can do anything to help me now."
- "I just can't take it anymore."

### Actions

- previous attempts or gestures
- discussion and/or gathering of suicidal methods
- discussion and/or making of suicidal plans
- inactive
- giving away of personal possessions, putting affairs in order
- loss of interest in hobbies
- withdrawal from (family, friends, school work)
- extremes of behaviour change
- impulsive
- reckless behaviour: driving, sexuality
- abuse of alcohol, drugs
- self-mutilation: scratching, marking body, other self-destructive acts

### Physical

- lack of interest in appearance
- change/loss in sex interest
- disturbed sleep
- change/loss of appetite, weight
- physical health complaints

## Context

- recent loss through death
- recent loss through suicide
- “threatened) loss of significant others
- self identity of performance failure

## Possible Signs of Suicidal Youth in Classroom

- abrupt change in attendance
- dwindling academic performance
- sudden failure to complete assignments
- lack of interest in activities and surroundings
- changed relationships with friends and classmates
- increased irritability, moodiness or aggressive
- withdrawal and open displays of sadness
- death or suicide theme in reading selection or written work

## Possible Signs Out of the Classroom

- overhearing remarks indicative of significant unhappiness or despair
- knowledge that prized possessions are being given away
- loss of interests in extracurricular activities
- direct suicide threats or attempts
- marked emotional ability
- recent conflict or losses in close relationships
- increased and heavy use of alcohol or drugs
- recent depression or suicide behaviour in family

## 6.0 Sample Letters, Announcements and Memos

Sample letter to alert parents of the **death of a student**. This letter should be sent home on school letterhead to all parents/guardians on the day the death is announced to students.

### *SCHOOL LETTERHEAD*

Dear Parents/Guardians:

We sadly announce that (*student's name*), a grade \_\_\_ student, passed away (*last night, over the weekend*). (*Student's name*) has been a student at (*school*) since grade \_\_\_.

Funeral arrangements have not yet been made and you will be informed as soon as this information is available.

(*or*)

Friends will be received at \_\_\_\_\_ Funeral Home, (*address*) today at \_\_\_\_\_. Funeral Services will be held in (*name of church or funeral home*), on (*date and time*). Friends who wish may make memorial donations to (*name charity*).

Please note:

1. We have arranged for staff/counsellors to be at the school to assist students and staff.
2. In order to allow staff representatives to attend the funeral, there will be necessary adjustments for program/timetabling for several classes on \_\_\_\_ morning.
3. Student may attend the funeral with an adult family member.
4. The school flag will fly at half-mast as a tribute until the funeral is over.
5. Your students may wish to discuss the loss of a fellow student with you. It would be appreciated if parents take time to do so. If you want to discuss how to do that or ask for resources, don't hesitate to contact the school.

We appreciate your understanding and support, and thank you for the many kindnesses already expressed on behalf of the family.

Sincerely,

Principal

Sample letter to alert parents of the **death of a staff member**. This letter should be sent home on school letterhead to all parents/guardians on the day the death is announced to students.

*SCHOOL LETTERHEAD*

Dear Parents/Guardians:

We sadly announce that *(teacher's name)* passed away *(last night, over the weekend)*. (Staff member *name*) has taught with the Avon Maitland District School Board for many years and has been a teacher at *(school)* for the last \_\_\_\_ years.

Funeral arrangements have not yet been made and you will be informed as soon as this information is available.

We have arranged for counselling staff to be at the school to assist students and staff. Because of this loss of one of our staff members, there will be necessary adjustments to program/timetabling for several classes over the next few days. Your child may wish to discuss the loss of a teacher with you. It would be appreciated if parents/guardians take time to listen to their children as they explore this or related events.

*(Name of supply teacher)*, a supply teacher who has worked at our school on several occasions, has been appointed continuing Occasional Teacher for the remainder of this school year.

The school flag will fly at half-mast as a tribute until the funeral is over.

We appreciate your understanding and support, and thank you for the many kindnesses already expressed on behalf of the family.

Sincerely,

Principal



## Memo to staff on the **death of a staff member**

The news we received (*specify time*) was sudden, tragic and shocking. Thanks for all the support that has been extended so far. It is really appreciated. The next couple of days, particularly today, will be difficult. However, with each other's support we will get through this stressful situation.

We will get a variety of responses from students. Some will be grief stricken and others will appear calm. Some, because of embarrassment or lack of training, may even act inappropriately. Each will deal with it in his/her own way just as we teachers will. We need to be sensitive to all members of the school community.

Here is a tentative plan for today:

- Opening exercises will be brief. O Canada and a moment of silence will be followed by a brief statement by me (*the principal*).
- Teachers will inform students about what has happened. The details as we know them are as follows:
  - 
  - 
  -

Students will need a chance to express themselves. A whole class discussion is a most appropriate way to begin. For some, this will be sufficient; others may need a longer period of time to talk, perhaps in small groups. Still others will need quiet time to reflect about the situation. It is important not to "get on with the day" too soon. You will have to use your judgement and your sense of what is appropriate to gauge what is needed in your class.

Students are welcome in the (identified place by the school) where there will be members of our own staff and members of the Tragic Events Response Team to help out. They are also available to take over in classrooms should you need a break for whatever reason. It is important that neither staff nor students grieve alone today.

(*Supply teacher*) has agreed to come in and look after (*the deceased's*) timetable.

This whole time need not be taken up with this situation or with talk. Some students may prefer to write, draw, read or work on assignments. A good organization to follow is an explanation, followed by discussion, followed by quiet reading/writing and routine programs.

We will let you know what other arrangements are as the information becomes available. With regard to memorials and other remembrances, let's please coordinate plans and/or suggestions through the office so that we avoid duplication and so that we can have consensus on what is best.

Please refer all requests from the media to the office. This is done not only to relieve you of the necessity of such communications, but it also ensures that the same consistent messages are given each time.

Principal

## Sample Script for Staff Meeting Regarding Student Death By Suicide (used only if the parent(s) consent to death being identified as a suicide)

(provided by SMH ASSIST)

We've brought you together for a brief meeting today to share some sad news. As you may have heard, one of our grade (x) students, (name), died suddenly on (day). We know you join us in extending our deepest sympathy to the (name's) family. I have contacted them to express condolences on behalf of the school.

I want to you to be able to support students today, so I will be sharing some information with you in confidence. It appears that (student) died by suicide. I am sure you understand the sensitivity around the cause of death.

An announcement about (name's) death will be made class by class and a letter will be sent home with students today. Some of our students already know about the incident and we expect them to be talking about it at school as they have been doing online. It is important for all of us to avoid speculation about the circumstances and to help curb rumours as much as possible. It is especially important not to discuss this incident near students. I know I can count on your professionalism.

If students in your class are upset and need someone to talk to, members of the District TERST are here today. If you see distraught students in the hall, please personally escort them to the (designated area) to speak to a counsellor.

I know this is a tragic situation that is deeply upsetting to all of us. Members of the District's TERST are also available for any of you who wish to speak with someone. It is important that we take care of ourselves and to be aware of the impact that a tragic situation like this can have on us. Members of the team will stay as long as they are needed to support us and our students.

News media may be out in front of the school today. If you see a reporter on school property, please direct them to the Principal and/or Superintendent.

Our flag is at half-mast to honour (name's) memory. A memorial table will be set up in the foyer where students can write messages of remembrance and condolence.

This is all the information we have at this point. I know that you will all support and encourage each other today.

Thank you.

## Sample Announcement following Death by Suicide

1. "We sadly announce that (*name*) died (*date*)."
2. Brief statement about the student (e.g., student in grade 10 with particular interest in sports/activities/clubs).
3. "This is a difficult time for (*name's*) family and friends. We extend our sincere sympathy and condolences to the family."
4. Statement regarding how distressed individuals can get immediate assistance (e.g., classroom teachers will facilitate discussion, "counsellors"/members of the TERST are available in the resource room).
  - \* Students should not be left unsupervised; if older students wish to leave the school, ensure that they are picked up by responsible adult(s) and sign out at the office.
5. Indicate specific funeral arrangements (funeral home, street and date/hours of visitation) if known; otherwise, indicate how and when this information will be shared.
6. "It is important that we support one another during this difficult time."

# Sample Letter to Parents Following Death by Suicide

## SCHOOL LETTERHEAD

Dear Parents/Guardians

1. "We sadly announce that (*name*) died (*date*)."
2. Brief statement about the student (e.g., student in grade 10 with particular interest in sports/activities/clubs).
3. "This is a difficult time for (*name's*) family and friends. We extend our sincere sympathy and condolences to the family."
4. "The school has provided a number of opportunities for students/staff to deal with their reactions. (if appropriate) Arrangements have been made for counsellor(s) to be available at the school to assist students and staff."

Your child may wish to discuss this loss with you. Please give them this opportunity. It is very important that you closely monitor your child and his/her whereabouts.

The school has information regarding risk factors and behaviours. Please contact (principal/guidance) for this information."

5. Indicate funeral arrangements. Students may attend the funeral service only with parental permission (for students under age 18).
6. Indicate any impact on scheduled events.
7. "We appreciate your understanding and support."

Sincerely,

Principal

## Memo regarding Post-Traumatic Stress

A traumatic event involves an actual or threatened death or serious injury to self or others. It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have very strong emotional reactions. The following reactions to an abnormal event are normal:

- feelings become intense and sometimes unpredictable
- thoughts and behaviour patterns are affected e.g., flashbacks, difficulty concentrating
- recurring emotional reactions are common e.g., anniversaries or anticipated events may act as triggers
- interpersonal relationships often become strained
- physical symptoms e.g., headaches, nausea, disrupted sleeping and eating patterns

There is no standard pattern or time frame (onset of distress and/or duration). However, a number of factors affect the recovery process:

- degree of intensity and loss
- personal general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations
- other stressful events preceding the traumatic experience

### Responding to Students' Needs

To help alleviate the emotional consequences of trauma, consider the following:

- spend more time with students and let them be more dependent
- encourage talking about thoughts and feelings
- maintain regular schedules

### When to Refer

Students with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should be referred to a mental health professional. Teachers are important informants to parents about how their children are adjusting.

Students who demonstrate continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance.