**Minnehaha Academy**

**Crisis Management Plan – Draft Statements**

**Appendix Resources**

Announcing Loss to the School …………………………………………………………

Memorial Service/Recognition Activities …...…………………...……………………...

Postvention-Suicide………………..…………………………………………………….

Teacher-Directed Activities After a Loss ...…..…………………..……………………..

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**ANNOUNCING LOSS TO THE SCHOOL**

It is important to accurately disclose facts in an atmosphere that permits voluntary expression of grief in a supervised environment. A return to usual routines is less chaotic when survivors are permitted to participate in recognition activities of the tragic loss/sudden death.

*Provide facts in a language that avoids clichés or euphemisms. “Died” is better than “passes away,” “hanged” is better than “ended it all.” Knowing the exact cause of death is often as much as many students need to know. The precise nature of the methods used by those who have committed suicide, however, should not be disclosed, since it increases the likelihood of copy cat suicide and parents may not want it disclosed.*

Information about the funeral and procedures for attendance at the funeral is appropriate and should be shared based solely upon the wishes of the family.

Discourage romanticizing or glorifying, or forced mourning of the deceased, and any judgmental or over simplifying explanations of the cause of the tragedy. (Suicide victims should not be eulogized in public assemblies or forums, although it is permissible to publicly acknowledge a loss from suicide.)

Some students will be more affected than others. Some may demonstrate profound or immature reactions, i.e., rudeness, ghoulish humor, or total denial. Highly charged and uncontrolled emotional reactions that are publicly displayed will increase the level of hysteria among some students. Because of this, it is preferable to avoid large congregate mourning groups or assemblies. Adherence to normal routines as much as possible will tend to dampen undue contagion with students who, if allowed to be in halls or unsupervised areas, may resort to blame and fighting in reaction to the tragedy.

Employees associated with the deceased will experience a range of reactions; some may be profoundly affected by guilt or feelings of helplessness. Tears are a natural outlet that need not be suppressed.

Loss Announcement Activities:

1. If time permits, communicate to faculty before returning to school or place a succinct notice of the tragedy in faculty/staff mailboxes.

2. Notify crisis support team members, review facts, plan information dissemination to student body and wider school community.

**POSTVENTION: SUICIDE**

When facilitating a classroom discussion following the suicide of a student, please follow these guidelines:

1. Encourage the expression of feelings.
2. Try not to allow the discussion to glamorize or romanticize the act.
3. Remember it does not take strength of will to commit suicide—just the opposite.
4. Do not allow someone to become larger in death than he or she was in life.
5. Please reinforce that this person’s death is a tragedy.
6. Let students know it is natural to experience a sense of guilt of shared responsibility: (“I had just talked with him or her…” Why did I not notice?” “If only…”)
7. No one person is responsible.
8. Suicide does not solve problems—it creates them.
9. Those loved ones left behind experience great pain; however suicide hurts the victim far more—it is a poor choice for “getting even.”
10. Allow participation in the memorial service.
11. Promote peer contacts among the victim’s friends.
12. Model appropriate expression of loss; your behavior sets the tone and creates permission for all others.

**TEACHER-DIRECTED ACTIVITIES**

While some people get through definite stages of grief, others do not. With some individuals the stages may vary, or there may be difficulty with only some stages of grieving. People grieve at their own pace and in their own particular way. Attempting to place everyone in the same mold will only create undue frustration.

For the first days after a tragedy, students may be expected to display varying levels of shock, disbelief, and denial. In group situations and in classroom, most students will actively seek information, share reactions and express feelings. After 2 or 3 days, a barrier seems to go up, as if there is a need to distance themselves from the event. This distancing in and of itself is not pathological, nor does this mean that grieving needs for individuals have been resolved. This process signifies that group responses to the tragedy have reached a “saturation point.” Further accommodations to the tragedy or loss should be guided by individual needs and concerns.

1. Identify and refer students who want to share questions or concerns with support/guidance staff.
2. Provide an opportunity for students to voluntarily discuss the loss, stages of grief, or what they have learned from other loss experiences.
3. Acknowledge emotions/feelings through involvement in constructive activities in the classroom. Use assignments that will enhance this process.
4. Postpone and reschedule tests/projects as needed; return to routines as appropriate.
5. Discuss school procedures for attending the funeral so students will understand expected behaviors. Verify plans with principal and chaplain.
6. See assistance from administrator, chaplain, counselor and/or nurse when/if student reactions become too intense to feel comfortable handling.
7. Participate in memorial services/special activities with students and other employees as appropriate.
8. Share feelings and concerns with others as appropriate, seek additional support when feeling stressed or isolated.

**WORK WITH THE MEDIA**

Society is heavily influenced by media. Schools are increasingly involved, directly or indirectly, in events covered by the news media. A major tragedy or sensational news story can create profound stress for employees and students depending upon cooperation between the media and the school administration. Participants who have experienced such events often report that the pressures of media involvement made coping with the loss of tragedy more difficult.

Because we also live in an open and democratic society that values the contributions of a free press, it is difficult to justify why the media should not have access to information concerning a major school- related tragedy or loss. In such circumstances it is crucial that administrators and staff think, plan and act at peak efficiency. These tasks inevitably become more difficult in the pressure cooker atmosphere of media interview.

The following general philosophy and operating strategies should assist administrative staff to respond to media inquiries in a positive and pro-active manner. This information will hopefully impart ideas that otherwise may be overlooked because of crisis demands or lack of prior experience in fielding media inquiries.

1. General Philosophy

School administrators have as their primary responsibility the duty to educate youngsters in an atmosphere that is safe and conducive to learning. While the news media seeks entry into the school in order to investigate a news event, the school administrator’s first obligation is to protect the privacy rights of students and staff while preserving the learning atmosphere of the school.

Positive and cooperative relations with the media are encouraged. Media requests should be handled with courtesy and promptness by the president or designated media spokes person whenever possible. Media questions should be answered objectively and accurately. The spokesperson should avoid whitewashing a situation or giving unwarranted assurances during interviews. The spokesperson should not, however, be pressured into answering questions for which he/she is not responsible, nor should he/she answer questions which may violate the privacy rights of students, parents or staff.

1. Privacy Guidelines

Parent permission must always be obtained when/if a student interview is conducted. Requests for student interviews should preferably be declined and should occur off school property unless the news story is part of a planned school-wide event. Requests for teacher interviews should be approved of by the president or BL, involve prior teacher consent and never are scheduled to interrupt the instructional day unless the story is part of the planned event.

Private information concerning students, parents and employees may not be disclosed to representatives of the news media. This includes:

* Names of friend, relatives or other survivors
* Class schedule
* Grade point average, test scores, information from school files
* Details or speculation about method of death… note that in some cases, cause of death may not be immediately determined (i.e. accidental death vs. suicide)
* Sensitive or personal information about a student, family or employee

**ALL COMMUNICATIONS SHOULD BE APPROVED BY THE PRESIDENT AND COMMUNICATION DIRECTOR**

**SAMPLE LETTERS**

The following includes suggested phrasing for use in letters to the school community following a crisis:

Dear Parent,

Today one of our second grade students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, in Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s classroom, tragically died in a fire that destroyed her home.

We have had school personnel in each classroom to discuss this with the students. I am available to offer support and answer questions as the need arises. Your child may have questions and concerns to discuss with you as well.

Sincerely,

Principal

Employee Memorandum

Last night \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, in Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s classroom, was hit by a car while she was out trick-or-treating. She is at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Hospital in critical condition.

We will tell the children about the accident and then discuss basic safety. Mr./Ms \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, our school counselor, will be available to assist any individual student and/or classroom who are having difficulty understanding or dealing with the situation.

I have written a letter to parents which will go to all parents today.

Dear Parent,

On Monday evening, a child from your child’s classroom was hit by a car while she was out trick-or-treating. She is hospitalized in critical condition.

This morning Mr. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, our school counselor, and I met with the class to talk to them about the accident. We tried to answer questions and concerns that the children raised. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will be available to meet with children as needed during the next several days.

I want you to know of the accident so you will be better able to respond to any questions or concerns your child may raise at home. Please call me at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ if you have any questions or would like assistance in helping your child understand what happened.

Sincerely,

Principal

Dear Parent,

Today we are saddened to learn of the death of one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, due to leukemia*. (*do not say any reason without permission of student’s parent)

In the time \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ attended, she endeared herself to all of us. We have talked to the students in her classes about her death. We also have counselors on call who are available to speak with any children who might need their services.

It is our suggestion that you discuss the matter with your child and respond to any questions he or she might have. If you wish to have the counselor speak individually with your child, or wish to speak with someone yourself, please contact \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ so that we can make those arrangements.

Sincerely,

Principal

P.S. If you wish to join the staff in contributing to a fund for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you may contact us at the school. As appropriate….

Dear Parent,

I expect that most of you have heard the sad news that one of our seniors, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, died last weekend from carbon monoxide poisoning. *(share only if appropriate to share and approved by parent)* Her death has been a great shock to all her classmates, teachers, and friends.

We are now engaged in the important process of dealing with the inevitable grief and inadequacy that so many of us feel. Our school counselors met with the senior class on Monday afternoon, the day we learned of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death. They have helped the students understand the nature of their feelings and what they might expect to feel in the future, how to cope with those feelings and to help others cope with them. The counselors stayed after the group meeting with a few students who wanted to discuss their feelings further.

We have also planned ways of involving faculty and students other than senior students in understanding this tragedy. The counselors have arranged for a number of professional psychologists and ministers to be available to speak with groups and individuals in the next couple of weeks. Brief discussions are being held in grade-level class meetings and lengthened homeroom/advisor group meetings around topics of grief, options for times when feeling trapped in difficult situations, and how to be a friend to yourself and to others. On Wednesday the faculty met to discuss its feelings and share support for each other

In addition, with the help of our middle and lower school counselors, there is a process for middle and lower school students to participate in discussions about this event. Topics include the importance of communicating their feelings, how to help each other, and how to deal with their own concerns and those of others. With the younger students, we have decided to involve them in a more informal way and respond to questions as they arise.

A further concern at school has centered on a number of students who were very close to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. We are working with them and their parents to address their grief and feelings.

I regret having to bring you this new. I know that you all share with me our profound sympathy for the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ family.

Sincerely,

Principal

Dear Parents,

This past weekend \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, our school maintenance engineer, passed away after falling while working on his home one week ago.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ was a special friend to many of our students. They saw him working around the building, fixing things in their classrooms, and each day in the lunchroom. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ took the time to visit with students, and they greeted him by name when they saw him. He will be greatly missed by all of us.

The students have been told about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death. We are working with the school counselor to help students understand and assist them with questions or concerns they might have.

I wanted you to know of our loss so if your child talks to you about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ you will be better able to respond to any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Principal