

Policies & Protocols-The Difference is in the Details!

Most School Boards have adopted some sort of a broad based statement of policy with regard to protecting the well being of students. Samples of such statements are listed below.

The Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program (MYSPP) has prepared and promoted the use of “Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Guidelines.” These guidelines are designed specifically to provide support and direction to schools to help them prepare for and manage a suicide related crisis. The guidelines are meant to be flexible and used as necessary depending upon the situation at hand. They do not constitute policy level decisions.

Examples of typical policy statements follow, one with no mention of suicide and two that specifically addresses suicide:

Sample POLICY STATEMENT #1(this is a broad “umbrella” statement that does not mention suicide):

It is the policy of the _____(school) to provide a full array of services for students, through the utilization of both internal and external support resources, in order to promote their social and emotional growth and well being. In those cases where individual students are at-risk or in-crisis, all staff shall cooperate in providing the supports needed to address the student's problem(s) and to normalize, insofar as possible, the student's learning situation. In those cases where a death occurs within the school community, staff shall collaborate, under the direction of the building administrator, in addressing those problems and issues raised by that death among the students, staff and parents.

Sample POLICY STATEMENT #2 (this one refers specifically to suicide):

The State of _____recognizes the need for comprehensive suicide intervention guidelines to aid school and school based health center staff and personnel in carrying out appropriate procedures with suspected suicidal students, students who have attempted suicide, and for students who have died by suicide. _____(School) has adapted protocols as outlined in the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program’s “Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Guidelines” designed to ensure the safety of students, to facilitate positive changes in students’ lives, and to assist schools in crisis management.

Sample POLICY STATEMENT #3 (this one refers to managing a death at school):

A. The _____ School Board recognizes its responsibility to respond to a sudden death in the school community. The district shall provide for the support, control and structure necessary to stabilize the crisis and return to a healthy learning environment.

B. The Board therefore directs the superintendent to develop and implement procedures which address:

1. maintaining the structure and order of school routine;
2. facilitating the expression of grief in a controlled and organized manner;
3. minimizing the risk of contagion in cases of suicide;
4. facilitating the needs of the bereaved family and others in the school community affected by the loss, and,
5. establishing guidelines for interaction with the media to be adhered to by all representatives of the school district.

C. With the intent of not putting others at risk, and responding to all deaths in a uniform matter, the board directs the following:

1. avoid flying the flag at half-staff; (Only the Governor can request that to happen.)
2. implement memorialization activities which focus on prevention and education;
3. avoid memorialization activities which glamorize the death and may potentially promote contagion; and,
4. the district crisis management team, superintendent and appropriate building administrators shall review all memorialization activities within 21 days of the request.

Policies must “fit” the culture and emotion of individual school. They serve to formally state that the school considers suicide prevention a priority. Guidelines spell out the details of possible actions to take in a variety of situations involving suicidal behavior. Both policies and guidelines are only effective if they are disseminated and recognized as important by administrators, staff, community professionals and parents. Without support, the prevention efforts will lack institutionalization.

The three sample policy statements above differ and yet all would benefit by having well thought out guidelines/protocols in place before faced with a crisis situation. The MYSPP “Youth Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Guidelines” will help in the event of suicidal behavior, a death by suicide, or any sudden traumatic death.

School Administrators, Directors of Special Services and Crisis Team Leaders from across the country have learned from research into the aftermath of suicide that anniversaries of suicide deaths, or special events that mark that suicide may reactivate the grief experience for some of those who were initially affected by the loss.

Often there is enormous pressure on school administrators from family members and friends of the deceased to provide some special memorialization activities. Protocols/guidelines set the stage for fair and equitable treatment for all. It is important to consider that a suicide death is a very real possibility when planning the protocols for how to manage the aftermath of ANY sudden traumatic death. The contagion factor or copycat effect is unique to suicide, so it is important to plan ahead for the type of memorialization activities that support grieving students, avoid the contagion factor AND avoid further stigmatizing those who die by suicide. Guidelines help schools to steer clear of situations in which extra special attention is provided to those who die in a car crash or other tragic circumstance and then in an attempt to manage the contagion factor, do very little if the death is a suicide. There is middle ground. Protocols/guidelines set that stage.