



**Ballinteer Community School**

Critical Incident Policy

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## **Introduction**

A Critical Incident may be defined as a single incident or sequence of incidents, which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school and disrupts the day to day running of the school.

### **Critical incidents may include:**

|                            |                            |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Death of a student         | Death of a member of staff |
| Fire in the school         | Death of a parent          |
| Takeover of a classroom    | Student suicide            |
| Staff suicide              | School trip accident       |
| Traumatic accidental death | School tour accident       |
| Shoot out                  | Major gang fight           |
| Assault on a student       | Assault on a staff member  |
| Hostage situation          | Siege at school            |
| Building collapse          | Serious flood/vandalism    |

This list is by no means exhaustive.

It may be necessary to activate the Critical Incident Plan following the death of a recent past student if his/her siblings/friends are still in the school.

The strategies outlined in this document should be viewed alongside and in conjunction with the following:

- Health and Safety Statement
- SPHE Curriculum
- Pastoral Care work
- Code of Behaviour

The approaches outlined here need to be viewed alongside the particular and unique needs that are presented by every given critical incident to find the most appropriate way of dealing with the incident in question.

### **Creation of a coping supportive and caring ethos in the school**

We have put systems in place to help to build resilience in both staff and students, thus preparing them to cope with a range of life events. These include measures to address both the physical and psychological safety of the school community.

## **Physical safety**

- Evacuation plan formulated
- Two scheduled fire drills
- Fire exits and extinguishers are regularly checked
- Supervision before and after school
- Side gates are locked during school hours
- Monitored reception during school hours – check in system & badges for school visitors
- Code of Behaviour in place

## **Psychological safety**

The Senior and Middle leadership teams and staff of *Ballinteer Community School* aim to use available programmes and resources to address the personal and social development of students, to enhance a sense of safety and security in the school and to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion.

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is integrated into the work of the school. It is addressed in the curriculum by addressing issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; resilience; conflict management; problem solving; help-seeking; bullying; decision making and prevention of alcohol and drug misuse. Promotion of mental health is an integral part of this provision.
- Staff have access to training for their role in SPHE.
- Staff are familiar with the Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures and details of how to proceed with suspicions or disclosures.
- Books and resources on difficulties affecting the primary/post primary school students are available.
- Information is provided on mental health in general and such specific areas as signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Staff are informed in the area of suicide awareness via HOPE week and some members of the Student Support Team are trained in interventions for suicidal students.
- The school has developed links with a range of external agencies – NEPS, Crosscare, An Garda Síochána, Barnardos.
- Inputs to students by external providers are carefully considered in the light of criteria about student safety, the appropriateness of the content, and the expertise of the providers. See DES Circulars 0022/2010 (Primary) or 0023/2010 (Post-Primary)
- The school has a clear policy on bullying and deals with bullying in accordance with this policy.
- There is a care system in place in the school using the "Continuum of Support" approach which is outlined in the NEPS documents published on 2007 for primary schools and 2010 for post

primary schools. See also Student Support Teams in Post Primary Schools (2014). These documents are available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

- Students who are identified as being at risk are referred to the designated staff member (e.g. guidance counsellor or support teacher), concerns are explored and the appropriate level of assistance and support is provided. Parents are informed, and where appropriate, a referral is made to an appropriate agency.
- Staff are informed about how to access support for themselves via Spectrum Life through the Senior Leadership team.

### **Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)**

A CIMT has been established in line with best practice. The members of the team were selected on a voluntary basis and will retain their roles for at least one school year. The members of the team will meet annually to review and update the policy and plan. Each member of the team has a dedicated critical incident folder. This contains a copy of the policy and plan and materials particular to their role, to be used in the event of an incident.

### **Critical Incident Team**

Principal – Amy Doherty  
Deputy Principal – Chris Doyle\*  
Guidance Counsellor – Aoife Mannion  
Chaplain – Rachel Garland  
HSCLO – Orlaith Regan  
Student Support Team – Jane Rooney and Yvonne Beardsley

The Year Head and Tutor of a group of students may also be included as part of the team, where appropriate. The Board of Management and possibly the Parents Association will be involved in dealing with the incident.

\*Leads in the absence of the Team Leader.

| <b>Team Leader</b> | <b>Area of Responsibility</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Amy Doherty        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alerts the team members to the crisis and convenes a meeting.</li> <li>Coordinates the tasks of the team.</li> <li>Liaises with the BOM, NEPS, SEC.</li> <li>Liaises with the bereaved family.</li> <li>Liaises with the Gardaí.</li> <li>Ensures that information about deaths or other developments is checked out for accuracy before being shared.</li> <li>Leads briefing meetings for staff on the facts as known, gives staff members an opportunity to express their feelings and ask questions, outlines the routine for the day.</li> <li>Advises staff on the procedures for the identification of vulnerable students.</li> <li>Provides materials for staff (from their critical incident folder).</li> <li>Keeps staff updated as the day progresses.</li> <li>Is alert to vulnerable members of staff and makes contact with them individually.</li> <li>Advises staff of the availability of the EAS and gives them the contact number.</li> <li>Media Liaison - will liaise where necessary with the SEC, relevant teacher unions, Media etc.</li> </ul> |

| <b>Student Liaison/s</b>                       | <b>Area of Responsibility</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aoife Mannion<br>Rachel Garland<br>Chris Doyle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Co-ordinate information from tutors and year heads about students they are concerned about.</li> <li>Alerts other staff to vulnerable students (appropriately).</li> <li>Provides materials for students (from their critical incident folder).</li> <li>Maintains student contact records.</li> <li>Looks after setting up and supervision of 'quiet' room where agreed.</li> </ul> |

| <b>Parent Liaison</b>                        | <b>Area of Responsibility</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Year Head (where appropriate)<br>Jane Rooney | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visits the bereaved family with the team leader/ Chaplain.</li> <li>Arranges parent meetings, if held, may facilitate such meetings and manage 'questions and answers'.</li> <li>Sets up room for meeting with parents.</li> <li>Maintains a record of parents seen.</li> <li>Meets with individual parents.</li> <li>Provides appropriate materials for parents (from their critical incident folder).</li> </ul> |

| Administrator Role                    | Area of Responsibility                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yvonne Beardsley<br>Clerical Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes minutes of all CI meetings &amp; collates and updates High Priority list of students.</li> <li>• Takes telephone calls that need to be responded to.</li> <li>• Prepares and sends out emails, letters and texts in liaison with Team Lead.</li> <li>• Photocopies materials needed.</li> <li>• Keeps accurate records of team decisions.</li> </ul> <p>** All members of the team to keep adequate records of phone calls made and received, letters sent and received, meetings held, persons met, interventions used, material used etc.</p> |

### Confidentiality and good name considerations

Management and staff of *Ballinteer Community School* have a responsibility to protect the privacy and good name of people involved in any incident and will be sensitive to the consequences of public statements. Members of school staff will bear this in mind, and seek to ensure that students do so also, **e.g. the term ‘suicide’ will not be used unless there is solid information that death was due to suicide, and that the family involved consents to its use.** The phrases ‘tragic death’ or ‘sudden death’ may be used instead. Similarly, the word ‘murder’ should not be used until it is legally established that a murder was committed. The term ‘violent death’ may be used instead.

### Critical Incident Rooms

In the event of a critical incident, the following rooms are designated for the indicated purposes.

| Room Name                  | Designated Purpose                                                     |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Library                    | Quiet Space                                                            |
| Prayer Room                | Meetings with students (identified close friends/ vulnerable students) |
| Guidance Counsellor Office | Meetings with students/parents (individual sessions)                   |
| Chaplain Office            | Meetings with students/parents (individual sessions)                   |
| Board Room                 | CIMT meeting space/meetings with NEPS                                  |
| HSCLO                      | Meetings with students/parents (individual sessions)                   |

## NEPS Guideline Actions by Day

### Short Term Actions: Day 1

| Task                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gather accurate information                                                                              |
| Who, what, when, where?                                                                                  |
| Convene a CIMT meeting – specify time and place clearly                                                  |
| Contact external agencies                                                                                |
| Arrange supervision for students                                                                         |
| Hold staff meeting                                                                                       |
| Agree schedule for the day                                                                               |
| Inform students – (close friends and students with learning difficulties may need to be told separately) |
| Compile a list of vulnerable students                                                                    |
| Prepare and agree media statement and deal with media                                                    |
| Inform parents                                                                                           |
| Hold end of day staff briefing                                                                           |

### Medium Term Actions: Day 2

| Task                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Convene a CIMT meeting to review the events of day 1       |
| Meet external agencies                                     |
| Meet whole staff                                           |
| Arrange support for students, staff, parents               |
| Visit the injured                                          |
| Liaise with bereaved family regarding funeral arrangements |
| Agree on attendance and participation at funeral service   |
| Make decisions about school closure                        |

### Follow-Up: Beyond 72 Hours

| Task                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------|
| Monitor students for signs of continuing distress  |
| Liaise with agencies regarding referrals           |
| Plan for return of bereaved student(s)             |
| Plan for giving of 'memory box' to bereaved family |
| Decide on memorials and anniversaries              |
| Review response to incident and amend plan         |

### **Outside Agencies:**

The following agencies may be involved in supporting the school:

Department of Education and Skills

National Psychological Services

State Examinations Commission

Cross Care

### **CIMT Steps For Establishing the Facts**

Upon an incident occurring, immediate action should be taken including all or some of the following:

- Contact all members of the Critical Incident Team – a meeting may need to be held.
- Establish contact with the necessary organisations eg Gardaí, HSE, hospital etc
- Establish the nature of the incident
- Establish the name(s) of the bereaved
- Establish the names and whereabouts of those injured
- Establish the extent of the injuries
- Determine the location of the victims
- Determine if there is any risk of further injury
- Establish if Emergencies Services have already been contacted
- Establish the names and whereabouts of witnesses including teachers
- Meet team members and allocate any necessary jobs that can be handed out
- If the incident occurred abroad, contact the relevant Embassy or Consulate office
- Initiate transport arrangements if necessary
- Make individual contact with staff that may be directly involved or affected
- Visit incident site if necessary
- Visit the hospital if necessary
- Arrange to deal with inquiries by phone
- Arrange transport if necessary if the incident occurred on a school trip

- Arrange rooms to facilitate the reunion of parents and students
- Special arrangements for the students whose parents are not available
- Establish how well details of the incident are known
- Contact the Parents Association
- Contact the BOM
- Ensure the school phone is manned
- Provide a script to those dealing with phone calls
- Contact and visit to family/families having checked that they would welcome a visit
- If the family has to be met a number of times limit the number of times they have to tell the story
- If there is an issue of Health and Safety around the critical incident, the Health and Safety Statement should be consulted.

### **CIMT Steps: Vulnerable Students**

Identify vulnerable students. This will involve consultation with the Student Support Team and may involve consultation with other Staff. Vulnerable students may include:

- Siblings in the same school.
- Cousins in the same school.
- Other relatives who attend the school.
- Eye witnesses.
- Close friends.
- Close friends in other schools (contact those schools).
- Those who may have had contact with the student immediately before death.
- Those who may have had a difficult relationship or negative interactions with the deceased.
- Those who have suffered previous bereavement, loss or separation.

- Students who may not have ever had much to do with the student but have emotion issues themselves.
- Very young student who may be only realising how permanent death is eg 1<sup>st</sup> Years. Be watchful for younger students who might think it is normal to die young or to take one's own life.
- **Watch for the contagion of grief – those who get upset simply because others get upset**

### **CIMT Steps: Staff Meeting**

- If the incident happens out of school hours and if at all possible the CI team should phone all Staff prior to their arrival at the school (a branch approach may be used).
- Hold a Staff Meeting which may include auxiliary staff and coaches. CIMT members should supervise corridors .
- There may be a need for two separate Staff Meetings to aid supervision.
- Information should be given to staff before students.
- After delivering the news give staff time to digest the news and compose themselves.
- If staff are absent inform them by phone. Similarly if the news breaks outside of school time, call staff – do not text. Do not leave a voice message – ask them to call you back.
- Impress on staff the need for consistency in what they tell students – prepare a statement (Team Lead will provide this).
- Explain the plan for the day.
- Discuss vulnerable students and ask for staff input.
- Give Staff guidance on how to move on from the announcement – ask students what they think they would like to do. Remind staff that returning to routine is essential and may comfort students.
- Be mindful of staff who have had a recent bereavement or who may get particularly upset. Supervision may be needed to help these teachers.
- Remind staff that if they become upset or anxious then the students will become upset and anxious. If the staff are calm the students will be calm.
- It might be necessary to hold a staff meeting at the end of the day to review events of the day.

## **Breaking the News to Students**

- Teenagers need to have whatever information is available so that they can dispel mistruths or speculation; otherwise they may not begin the grieving process.
- Remember that teenagers find it more helpful when adults are honest rather than ‘pretending’ to be more positive than they actually feel.
- Remember also that as a professional dealing with teenagers, you will have to confront your own reactions, your own shock, anger and sense of bewilderment. Get yourself grounded or it will be easy to get caught up in the teenagers panic, pain and confusion.
- Your calmness will influence their reactions. If the adults are anxious and upset they will become so. If the adults are calm and in control it will promote calmness and stability.
- When breaking the news to students **whole school assemblies are not recommended and best practice is that the news should be shared in small groups such as year groups.**
- If the deceased was on a team or involved with a particular (formal) group within the school, do not treat this group separately when breaking the news.
- It may be necessary to take aside some individuals and tell them in private. It may also be necessary to phone these students’ parents to come and collect them from school.
- Be conscious of the fact that teenagers, particularly those in the senior years, have friendships that cross other year groups. Therefore, if the student was in for example 5<sup>th</sup> year, speak to that year group first, then 6<sup>th</sup> Years followed by 4<sup>th</sup> Year. Then speak to the other year groups.
- If the deceased was in 6<sup>th</sup> year, it is still necessary to speak to 1<sup>st</sup> years as they will hear the news anyway and it is best that they hear it in a controlled way from school management. This will ensure that all students have received the same information and accurate information.
- It might also be useful if staff attend these assemblies so they will hear exactly what the students have been told ensuring continuity of message.
- When speaking to different year groups, the language may have to be changed so that it is age appropriate.
- Keep sentences short and avoid overly complicated medical terms.
- Remind students that they need to look out for each other.
- If the cause of death is genuinely not known, let them know this. Use this fact to reinforce that if they hear any rumours about the cause of death, these rumours cannot be true as the medics and family do not even know. This is relevant when there may be a genuine sudden death.

- Let them ask questions and if the answer is not known state this. Be conscious of the fact asking of questions may simply be reassurance seeking rather than driven by the need for facts. When answering questions, do not promise anything you cannot fulfil.
- Give them details of the plan for the day. This provides necessary structure.
- Give details of funeral arrangements or when the details will be known.
- It may be necessary to cancel classes for certain year groups for a time during the day or for the rest of the day. This should not be done without having an alternative structured activity in place. This activity should be adult led, structured and if possible have a structure that is familiar to the students, e.g. a prayer service. This formal activity can be followed by an informal activity such as food in the school canteen.
- A quiet room should also be provided.
- Arrange extra supervision in particular corridors/school yard/near toilets near the affected year group.
- Staff should be on hand to allow individual students talk in private.
- If, after being informed, some students are particularly upset, it might be necessary to telephone parents to bring them home.
- Consider if it is appropriate to resume class (for structure based reasons rather than academic reason even if teaching is not resumed).
- The word “Suicide” should not be used. Instead we should say “has died suddenly”.
- Be careful not to glamorise the ‘state of peace’ the deceased may have found through death.
- In some cases, the wider student body may know that it was a suicide but are speculating about the method used. This can be unhealthy if it is a topic of discussion, gossip, a distraction, a source of false rumour and a block to normal grieving. Some argue that details of the method of suicide should not be provided while others state that it is okay to give the basic fact about the method in as short a phrase as possible without giving graphic or excessive details or talking about it at length. However, extreme caution needs to be taken. This should not be done to satisfy curiosity, but rather to remove it as the main focus of conversation and to avoid it becoming an issue. Other factors that may determine the method of suicide being stated are the actual nature/method itself and the age of the affected year group/s. If it is to be spoken about perhaps it should only be done in smaller private groups or with the friends of the deceased only.
- When a suicide occurs, one of the issues that teenagers can focus on is *why*? This can become obsessive and unhealthy. If the deceased had a history of mental issues and was in the health system, and permission has been obtained from the family, it might be useful to hear this portion of the back story to the death. This might help to avoid speculation and help the students move on from the why? The back story should not be discussed if family circumstance contributed to

the deceased's difficulties. If there is no back story, and the suicide was 'out of the blue' extra difficulties may be faced by the friends of the deceased. However, remember that best practice is not to include speculation over motives as it is always very complex.

### **CIMT Steps: Communicating with the Parent Body**

- Despite the fact that a number of parents may already be aware of the death of a student, there is still a need for the school to communicate formally to the whole parent body.
- Consider if a general brief text needs to be sent out.
- Remove parents of deceased from text system/e-mail/postal address file.
- Consider if the details of what will happen in the school needs to be passed on to parents.
- Consider if the funeral details need to be communicated to the parents.
- Advise Parents/Guardians of the importance of attending the various ceremonies to support their young people through them.
- Consider if a more detailed letter needs to be sent to the parents, including the above and any additional information not suitable for a text.
- Consider if the letter sent to the parents of the year group of the deceased needs to be different than the letter sent to other year groups and decide if each year group should receive a different letter addressing the needs of that particular year group.
- Consider if parents need to be called into the school for a meeting.
- If a meeting is to be held for example 5<sup>th</sup> years, consider if an invitation should also be given to parents of students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year. This might be necessary if the deceased's friendship circle overlap these years. It may happen that the parents from these other years may not actually turn up on mass – only those whose teenagers were close to the deceased. This might be suggested in the invitation. This will be at the school's discretion.
- Consider if the parents night can be addressed by management only or if an outside speaker needs to be called in e.g. from N.E.P.S., Samaritans.
- If necessary, provide literature or hand-outs on death/loss/grieving.
- If the family have not given permission for the cause of death to be disclosed, this can be included in what is said to the students by stating that the *'family have requested that the information not be shared'*.
- It might be necessary to acknowledge to the students that there are rumours of suicide but also to state that *'rumours can be hurtful to family and explain the damaging impact of misinformation and rumour'*.

- It might be useful to use the terms '*sudden death*' '*died suddenly, unexpectedly*'.
- Throughout all interactions with students, be careful not to give the deceased attention in death that they may have been looking for in life. This can be done by shifting the conversation with teenagers from the topic of the deceased to *their* reaction to what has happened. This should result in students talking about themselves rather the deceased.
- Consider obtaining the help of clergy with the delivery of the above or help with constructing a script.
- Consider holding private meetings with close friends of the deceased, school/class captains/prefect, and positive leaders (who may not have a formal title/job) in the year group. Such a meeting or number of meetings can help the students feel listened to, and that they have some sense of input and control over what is happening. In addition, these meetings can also provide useful feedback to management that may help shape the next few days/weeks.
- It may be necessary to consult with outside agencies. It needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external 'expert' should be primarily used to advise and support school staff.
- Consider if students with special needs may need an altered method of delivery of the news.

## **Funeral**

- If it is acceptable to the family, the school should involve itself (Chaplain and Management links) with the funeral arrangements and if necessary speak to the undertakers and/or the clergy or humanist leading the service. Meet students who are very close friends of the deceased to discuss funeral arrangements. This will allow them to feel that they are involved in the arrangements.
- The HSE recommends that teenagers are encouraged to go to the funeral to mark the life and death of the person who has died. The later feelings of regret of not having gone may be difficult to deal with after the event. Encourage parents whose teenagers express an interest to let them go and encourage parents to accompany the teenager. However, teenagers may prefer to sit with their peers at the funeral and this should be allowed with parents watching on. It may be necessary to reserve seating for certain groups of friends from the deceased's school and any other school closely involved. It might be necessary to get teachers to direct groups to their seats and for teachers to sit with different groups. If the deceased had close friends in another school, it may be necessary for teachers from that school to attend and help.
- Discuss with the family the schools and students involvement in the funeral, e.g. a guard of honour, readings, bring up gifts, music, singing, etc.
- If there is a wake, the family may choose to have an open coffin. If young people are to attend the wake, an adult should position themselves so that they can alert the students to this fact

before getting sight of the body. It might be appropriate to say to students *‘prepare yourself, the coffin is open’*. Again, if the deceased had close friends in another school, it may be necessary for a teacher from that school to attend and help.

- It is recommended that parents’ of the deceased do not address a school assembly outside the funerals. However, the parents may wish to address those assembled at the funeral. The school should explore the possibility of checking what the parents plan to say. If a suicide note was left, it should not be read out at a funeral. This is particularly important if the note apportioned blame or uses phrases like *‘at peace’* or *‘ending pain’*. It may be necessary for the school to remind the family that there are some very vulnerable students who will be attending the funeral. The school might respectfully and gently help the family find alternative words to help them get their message across. Also, if the deceased’s friends are to speak at the funeral, and they attend the school, it might be appropriate to check what the students plan to say. These points may be worth remembering at any future services e.g. Month’s mind or anniversaries.

If a representative from the school is to speak at the service, it might be useful to include,

*‘I pray/hope that (deceased’s name) mother and father have the strength to deal with their loss,’*

*‘I pray/hope that (deceased’s name) sister(s)/brother(s) have the strength to deal with their loss,’*

*‘I pray/hope that we as a school never have to gather again in such a manner’,*

*‘I pray/hope that no other young person takes this course of action’,*

*‘I pray/hope that those who feel despair, find someone to talk to and allow others to help so that the sadness here today is not repeated’.*

- People with different cultural backgrounds might have different customs and ways of dealing with death. Showing respect for this difference can help family members to cope with the death of a loved one. However, regardless of the ethnic or religious background of the family or the type of service surrounding the funeral, some of the above points may still be relevant.

### **Memorial to the Deceased**

- In the aftermath of a death, it is not unusual for students to create a spontaneous memorial by leaving flowers, cards, poems, pictures, stuffed animals, clothing or other items in a place closely associated with the student, such as a locker, classroom seat within the school, or somewhere off school premises, or where the student died. This reflects a basic human desire to remember those we have lost. However, in the case of suicide, the HSE does not recommend permanent memorials like shrines, such as benches, statues and planting trees. Indeed, they also recommend that trees used in a suicide be cut down. If this was on the school grounds, consider re-landscaping, not with another tree but maybe a hedge that would fill the void. It is often difficult for loved ones to understand why such memorials are not a good idea when people who die in other ways are often memorialised. Indeed, it can be argued that all deaths should be treated in the same way and that suicide deaths should not be treated differently. Unfortunately, however, we have to remember that constant reminders, glorification, or glamorisation of a suicide death might have the effect of making it seem attractive to others and that this is not the case with other deaths.
- If a spontaneous memorial arises, immediately dismantling it can cause hurt, resentment and anger among students. Indeed, prohibiting any kind of memorial can be taken by students as

being hurtful and provoke anger and it might also be incorrectly interpreted as stigmatising suicide. If a spontaneous memorial arises it is recommended that a time limit be set on such memorials – no more than 2 weeks. In all circumstances, the school will work with families on a case by case basis to respect their wishes where possible.

### **Seeking Outside Help**

Outside help can be sought from agencies such as

- N.E.P.S
- The Samaritans
- Console
- Barnardos
- Headstrong
- H.S.E.

It may be necessary to seek help if;

- There are multiple deaths
  - The death takes place in the school
  - The deceased is a very young student. Such a death can have extra difficulties.
  - If the death is a suicide and totally out of the blue
  - If the death is a suicide and blame is apportioned to other students and/or teachers.
- While it may be necessary to consult with outside agencies, it needs to be remembered that students need to be with people they know and trust. If at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external ‘expert’ should be primarily used to advise and support the school staff.

### **Social Media**

Following the death of a friend, social media may help teenagers to share their grief. Indeed the family, including parents, may take comfort from what is said by the deceased’s friends on social media. However, it might be useful to remind the students that the family may be reading what is on social media, and therefore to be careful and sensitive about what they might write.

### **Media**

- o Press will not be granted access to the premises
- o Ms Amy Doherty will be our media spokesperson. Mr Shaun Mac Geidigh will assist her.
- o They will draft a media statement – it will not be delivered live
- o It will be brief, carefully considered and accurate
- o Amy / Shaun shall advise staff that only they will deal with the media.

- o When appropriate a notice may be posted on a modified version of the website stating that a letter will issue outlining the school's schedule for the coming days.
- o Parents will be advised not to allow their children to be interviewed as they do not have the maturity and judgement needed to handle it. It can sometimes lead to regret at a later stage or may increase distress for various parties.

### **During Holidays**

- If a death occurs during the State Exams, immediately contact the State Exams Commission and N.E.P.S. Discuss alternative arrangements and what supports they can provide.
- If a death occurs during holiday time, extra issues arise that may not occur if the school was open. The school should be opened. An invite should be sent out to the affected year group/s to invite them into school. A structured, familial and adult led activity should be provided. This provides comfort and familiarity and some degree of certainty for grieving teenagers. Such an event might be a prayer service. This might be followed by an informal gathering in the school where food can be provided.
- In the absence of any of the Critical Incident Team, the relevant Year Head should be included in the process.
- The school should be open in the days to follow for students to access. **Remember also to inform staff by telephone not text.** If a voice message is to be left for staff who cannot be contacted, it should be *'ring me back when you get this message'*.
- If the death occurs in the early part of a holiday period, e.g. June, it may be necessary to repeat some of the formal events that took place immediately after the death when the school reopens in September. This is necessary to cater for students who may not have been around when the death occurred and to mark and acknowledge what has happened when the school returns. If this is not done, offence can be taken by grieving teenagers who may think that the school has forgotten, don't care, or don't realise how upset they were.

### **Other Schools**

Most teenagers have friendship circles that cross school boundaries. This is particularly true for older teenagers. One other task that might be worth pursuing is to determine the name of the other school/s where the deceased's friends attend. It might be necessary to alert the Principal/s of events. If the friends who are in the other school/s are particularly close, it might be appropriate to invite them into your school for any event that may be taking place. It might be necessary for teacher/s from the other school/s to attend the funeral and sit with their students. This can provide familiarity and comfort. Contacting another school is particularly important if the deceased attended more than one secondary school. The Guidance Counsellor will both offer support and receive support by linking in their cluster area.

## **Returning to Normal**

At some point, there will be a time when the right thing to do is to resume normal classes full time without interruption.

1. Routine is very important at a time of tragedy. It provides a sense of security, especially for younger students. It helps students to see that, despite these awful events, the world remains largely unchanged and that life goes on. They will learn this over the next few hours, days, weeks. They learn this through seeing you cope with this event and seeing that the routine of life continuing. It is important to maintain the normal routine as much as possible.
2. In some cases the resumption of normal classes may be enough for students to start moving on. However, other structured activities may be needed to restore a stronger feeling of normality returning. For example, a soccer blitz, a dance that they can organise and dress up for. These activities may be necessary for younger years.
3. One very important issue that needs to be addressed is the 'empty seat'. In some classrooms, it may be possible to rearrange the seating so that the empty seat is not noticeable. If the seating arrangement up to this point was casual, and the rearranging is not noticeable, it may not be necessary to mention it to students. However if rearranging the seating is very noticeable, it might be necessary to forewarn the students that the changes have been made. Some argue that it might be helpful to invite students to discuss what to do about the empty chair. However, if after this discussion the students decide that the empty seat should be left as it is, it would be very difficult to go against their wishes. Therefore, sometimes it might be best not to consult with students in advance, but instead forewarn them in a sensitive way why it had to be done.
4. If the death occurred in a room in the school, consider a total refurbishment of that room so it becomes unrecognisable from before. If it occurred on the school grounds, consider re-landscaping.
5. The deceased student's locker is also an issue that needs to be addressed. If it is not fixed to a wall, can it be easily removed? If it is attached to another student's locker, both should be removed and the other student allocated a new locker. If the locker cannot be removed, at the very least the deceased name should be removed. If the locker cannot be removed, is it possible to reallocate all the lockers in a new random sequence so that the deceased locker is indistinguishable from the rest? Students should not be asked to assist with the removal/rearrangement of lockers. An empty locker space can be a particularly distressing symbol for close friends so it is appropriate to inform them in a sensitive way why this has happened. If at all possible, a locker should not be removed leaving an empty space.

6. The contents of the locker should also be removed and returned to the deceased's family and the locker should not be emptied when students are present.
7. The timing of addressing the locker issue can vary but if it is likely to become a focal point or make-shift memorial, it should be removed as soon as possible.
8. Make sure the deceased's name is removed from all class rolls, and parents name removed from text system, e-mailing list and postal lists.
9. Be extra vigilant with vulnerable students for a number of months.
10. Be extra vigilant for absentees, particularly if these involve vulnerable students.
11. Some students may experience abnormal reactions. The following is a list of some symptoms that may present themselves. Those that have previous experiences of bereavement may be particularly affected. Those who have their own emotional issues or special needs may also need particular attention.

Anxiety  
Isolation  
Nightmares  
Over-dependency  
Tantrums  
Loss of concentration  
Insecurity  
Refusal to discuss trauma  
Change in orientation towards future  
Impulsive behaviour  
Guilt feelings prolonged  
Self-defeating beliefs  
Keeping of a diary or scrap book  
Suppressed anger  
Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with incident  
Yearning numbness  
Bedwetting  
Thumb sucking  
Social withdrawal  
Mood swings  
Forgetfulness  
Misuse of drugs or alcohol  
Uncontrollable crying  
Physical symptoms  
Failing memory  
Change in eating habits  
Suicidal thoughts

Strained relationships  
Feeling of vulnerability  
Disengagement from enjoyable activities

Parents may also need to be informed of the symptoms to observe. Encourage parents to watch out for these feelings and inform the school. Some students may need referral to a professional counsellor. This should be done in consultation with the parents. Experiences and feelings associated with the incident may recur – especially if the incident itself recurs or on an anniversary of the incident.

### **The Return of Siblings**

Sometimes grieving siblings can find it very difficult to return to school. They can be consumed by anxiety about how they will be treated. They may fear facing their friends, being crowded out, others being ‘in their face’, or they may fear breaking down in public and being singled out.

1. Visit the home and talk through the anxieties about returning.
2. Teachers should not prompt or facilitate a long emotional conversation in a public area.
3. Give the sibling the option of a gradual/staggered return.
4. Ask the sibling how they would like to be treated.
5. Let them know that they can leave class if they feel overwhelmed, and tell them there is an alternative room they can go to.
6. Speak to the sibling’s year group friends.
7. Discuss with them the need not to crowd the sibling out or not to be in their face.
8. Speak to them about not approaching the sibling on mass as a group.
9. Help the friends with suggestions about what they might say to the sibling.
10. The strongest worry the grieving sibling may have is the fear of breaking down in public when approached by others. The possibility of this happening can be heightened by what is said to the sibling or how they are greeted. For example, if the sibling is asked ‘How are you?’ they may get very upset. This is a question that puts the sibling under pressure to respond emotionally and more than likely respond in the negative, of course they are not Okay! Therefore, alternatives both students and teachers can use are ‘Welcome back’ or ‘It’s good to see you’. These are statements and not questions and of not put the sibling under pressure to respond.

11. After a brief acknowledgement with the sibling, encourage students to enter into normal conversation e.g. ‘Guess what happened in Maths class?’ ‘Did you see the match last night?’
12. With regard to teachers, one suggestion might be for the teacher to wait outside the classroom before class starts so that they can meet the sibling before they enter the classroom. Again, they might steer away from questions that require the sibling to give an emotional response or engaging in long conversation that might make them feel under pressure to respond. This can be particularly difficult if the sibling has to endure such interactions from 8 or 9 teachers in one day. A teacher might simply say ‘It’s good to see you’ – while placing a comforting hand on their arm/shoulder.
13. If it provides comfort, tell the sibling some or all of the above has been done.
14. Remember also that to ignore or not acknowledge the returning sibling can be very damaging.
15. The above points are also worth remembering when teenagers return to school following the death of a parent.

### **Students:**

In preparation for the return to school of siblings/friends of the deceased person, students who will be in contact with them, will be given the opportunity to discuss how to deal with the initial meeting.

### **Events in the Future**

Future events can cause re-emergence of issues for grieving teenagers. These events may include;

- Month’s mind
- Birthdays and Christmas
- Prize giving and Graduation
- Extra-curricular events such as a play or a sporting event

It might be useful to re-read this document and plan ahead when such events are approaching and consult with the family.

## **Evaluation**

When time allows, the steps taken after the incident need to be assessed. The following questions may need to be asked. When reviewing this document, consult with all parties involved who may have an interest.

- Can the school lessen the possibility of reoccurrence?
- Do steps need to be deleted?
- Do steps need to be added?
- What worked?
- What did not work?
- What has been learned?
- Were there any circumstances that were unforeseen?
- Do the following policies need amendments?
- Health & Safety Statement
- SPHE Curriculum
- Pastoral Care Policy
- Discipline Policy

## Emergency Contact List

| Agency                                                         | Contact Numbers                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| An Garda Siochana – Dundrum                                    | 01 666 5600                     |
| Nutgrove (Rathfarnham) Fire Station<br>(No 8 Station with DFB) | 01 673 4000                     |
| Health Service Executive (Churchtown)                          | 01 491 6400                     |
| Ballinteer Health Centre                                       | 01 296 4649                     |
| Parish Office                                                  | 01 499 4203                     |
| Fr. Liam Belton                                                | 01 494 4448                     |
| Order of Malta Blackrock (Megan Johnston)                      | 085 285612                      |
| Civil Defence, Dublin County Council.                          | 01 2224000                      |
| Dún Laoighaire-Rathdown County Council                         | 01 2054700                      |
| <b>National Educational Psychologist Service<br/>(Dublin)</b>  | 0761 108660                     |
| State Examinations Commission                                  | 090 6442739                     |
| Department of Education                                        | (01) 889 6400<br>(090) 648 3600 |

### Consultation and communication regarding the plan

All staff were consulted and their views canvassed in the preparation of this policy and plan. Students and parent/guardian representatives were also consulted and asked for their comments. Our school's final policy and plan in relation to responding to critical incidents has been presented to all staff. Each member of the critical incident team has a personal copy of the plan. All new and temporary staff will be informed of the details of the plan by the Deputy Principal, Shaun MacGeidigh.

The plan will be updated annually (January)

**Ratified by the Board of Management on 25th January 2024**

