School Memorials After Suicide: Helpful or Harmful?

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people in Canada. School-aged Canadians are affected by the suicide death of a family member, friend, classmate, or peer.

Schools have a role in supporting their students. Suicide can not and should not be ignored. After a death by suicide impacts one or more members of their student population, what is the role of the school to support grieving students? Is there a role for memorial activities at school and, if so, what form should that take?

What Are the Needs of Students Affected by Suicide?

According to the Dougy Centre (2000), students who have been affected by suicide need:

- to understand that they are not alone
- to learn to manage anxiety that may result from the suicide
- to talk about why a person dies by suicide

Issues Surrounding School-Based Memorials

Contagion or copycat suicides are a significant concern for schools. Schools need to respond to grief and also must be alert to other students who may be vulnerable as a result of the death. A delicate balance must be struck that creates opportunities for students to grieve but that does not increase suicide risk for other school students by glorifying, romanticizing or sensationalizing suicide (Metzgar, 1995; Callahan et al., 1999).

Conducting memorial tributes in school settings is controversial. According to The Dougy Center (2000), school support efforts after a suicide death should be consistent with those efforts after any other form of death. Where memorial services are used for other deaths, according to the Dougy Center, such services should also be available after a suicide death. Other authors and organizations, including the National Association of School Psychologists, do not agree that memorial services in school settings after a suicide death has occurred are appropriate or helpful. Whole-school memorials may communicate suicide as an appropriate or desired response to vulnerable youth and are therefore not recommended.

Several authors suggest clear parameters and roles for schools. According to Callahan et al. (1999) and Oates (1993), rather than memorialize or glamorize the issue of suicide through memorial rituals, schools can provide leadership in channelling the energies of students into projects to help the living. Suggestions follow:

- volunteer on crisis hotlines
- tutor younger children
- serve as peer helpers in their school
- donate any funds collected to helping agencies or offer to assist the family with funeral expenses

Establishing permanent memorials is NOT recommended (Callahan et al., 1999); such activities may present youth with a constant invitation to consider suicide. Examples of activities NOT recommended include designing and installing a plaque, planting a tree, or dedicating a yearbook to the deceased youth.

Metzgar (1995) and Siehl (1990) caution that if schools elect to provide some form of memorial following a suicide death, all such efforts MUST include positive messaging. It should be made clear to students that there are other solutions to problems. It should be made clear to students that there are people to help.

How Prepared Are School Staff to Support Grieving Children?

Teachers, because of their expertise with children, are also often assumed by parents and professional helpers to have expertise in supporting grieving children. This is not necessarily the case. In a study by Mahon et al. (1999), while the majority of elementary/middle school or education students surveyed believed death related interventions belonged in schools, fewer than one-third of respondents described themselves as qualified to provide those interventions. In a study schools in Australia and England, Rowling and Holland (2000) found similar low percentages of staff were trained to provide assistance. Steps can be taken to create supportive social and cultural environments.

Recommendations for action include:

- provision of professional development opportunities
- existence of well-developed plans for managing critical incidents
- Boards of Education or other governing bodies have a fundamental role in supporting or legitimizing such efforts

Many school systems have developed policies and protocols to guide their staff after a death has impacted their students. Guidelines are available to help schools prepare for such an occurrence. Sample protocols are available at the Centre for Suicide Prevention library. Please contact

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Additional Resources


Web-Based Resources


Additional SIEC Alerts that may be helpful

Alert 53 (December 2003) Suicide Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Youth

Alert 45 (July 2001) A Suicide Attempt is Meaningful and Significant

Alert 39 (January 2000) Children and Suicide

Alert 38 (December 1999) Supporting Suicide Survivors

Alert 32 (October 1998) Considerations for School Suicide Prevention

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