



Memorial Guidelines

In Anglophone South School District, we believe in honouring and respecting the needs of the grieving process, while also acting in a way that is best for all.

All individuals engaged within our system are empowered to assist in building resilient and compassionate learners. Through collaboration, expressing concern for others, and supporting group decision making, we build capacity to move forward.

Rationale for Guidelines

Memorial guidelines in ASD-S, have been developed to support school teams in making decisions around memorials grounded in best practice and recent research. Addressing the requests of grieving students, staff, parents, and community members is easier when administrators can refer to district guidelines (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2011). It is imperative that school teams remember that their primary concern should be about the surviving students and staff (NASP, 2011).

Prohibiting any and all memorialization can be problematic. Schools can play an important role in channeling the energy and passion of the students, staff, parents, and community in a positive direction (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP] & Suicide Prevention Resource Center [SPRC], 2016).

Please note there are additional special considerations when there is a death by suicide; please see the section below, *Memorials after a Death by Suicide*.

Guiding Principles

- **Do No Harm:**
 - Memorials, **although beneficial for many, are also activating for many**, especially those already vulnerable due to their own personal trauma experiences (Steele, 2007).
 - **Not everyone in a school is affected by a death.** Some students and staff may not have known the deceased, therefore may not need to be involved in the grieving process (Underwood, n.d.).
- **Treat all Deaths in the Same Manner:**
 - Plan “appropriate commemorative activities designed to honor any member of the school community who dies for any reason in a fair and equitable way” (Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, 2009, p.24).

- Eliminate the possibility that certain deaths (person or type) will garner more attention than others (Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, 2009).
- **Choice:**
 - Memorials need to be an opportunity of choice, as we all grieve differently (Steele, 2007).
 - Memorials in the school community may pose a risk for some simply because, in this “closed” environment, it becomes almost impossible for students to avoid the physical reminders (Steele, 2007).
 - Providing a variety of memorial activities honours an individuals’ expression of grief (NASP, 2011).
- **Messaging:**
 - Promote memorials and activities that **foster a sense of hope, recovery, and positive action** (NASP, 2011).
- **Developmental Stages:**
 - Memorial activities should reflect the students’ **developmental stage**. Activities can be tailored to the cognitive and emotional development levels of all students (NASP, 2002; NASP 2003; NASP 2011).
 - Create opportunities for all students to have access to engage in memorial activities, **including those with disabilities** (NASP, 2003).
 - Involve middle school and high school students, as appropriate, in aspects of planning memorial activities (NASP, 2003).
- **Cultural and Religious Awareness:**
 - Demonstrate awareness and sensitivity toward cultural and religious related expressions, practices, and activities (NASP, 2002; NASP, 2003; NASP, 2011) of the family of the deceased.

Purpose of Memorials

Memorial events and activities can be healthy venues that promote emotional expression and provide a sense of hope and recovery for those who participate (NASP, 2011).

Marleen Wong, a director of Crisis Counselling and Intervention Services, states, “School memorials should be simple, meaningful and life affirming. **Memorials set a precedent for the future and thus need to be equitable**” (as cited in Emergency Response and Crisis Management [ERCM] Technical Assistance Center, 2007, p. 2).

Types of Memorials

Temporary

In school-related deaths, it is most appropriate to create temporary memorials. Temporary memorials allow students, staff, and families to express their grief in a positive and constructive manner (NASP, 2011). A temporary memorial fosters “teachable moments” and may fulfill the need staff and students have to feel as if they have done something helpful and meaningful (Steele, 2007).

Temporary memorials are short term. It is not recommended that temporary memorials be left up past the school year in which the death occurred (ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007).

Often the decision can be made to give the memorial items away as a gift to the family or donation (NASP, 2011). School counsellors should review students' written material or artwork before giving them to the family to ensure that all content is sensitive and appropriate (ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007).

Temporary memorials may include: a non-renewable scholarship; a one-time monetary donation to charity; a message on a poster or banner; a memory book; writing an individual or group letter; keeping a journal; creating a personal song, poem, or other art project (NASP, 2011).

Spontaneous

As one of the immediate responses to the death of a peer or staff member, students may create spontaneous memorials at a location connected to the deceased (i.e. locker, parking spot). This is an example of what is called "passive grieving" (Underwood, n.d.).

Those in charge must determine how and when to manage, and ultimately, remove the items.

It is best to do this with planning, involving both staff members and students in the decisions. Schools should avoid removing the items in a sudden or unexpected way, as this can create feelings of anger and resentment, in addition to the grief already being experienced. The timing of the removal should be considered carefully, for example, around the funeral or service, or a natural break in the school calendar if possible, such as a weekend, vacation, or holiday (ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007).

Often it is helpful to offer alternate means and locations for students to express their grief.

For example, schools may wish to make poster boards and markers available so that students can gather and write messages. It is advisable to set up the posters in an area that may be avoided by those who do not wish to participate (i.e., not in the cafeteria or at the front entrance), such as the Care Centre or School Counsellor's office, and have them monitored by school staff (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).

Spontaneous memorial objects may be offered to the family. It is important to communicate to the school community that the objects are going to the family so that people do not think they were disrespectfully removed. For example, post a statement near the memorial on the day it will be taken down (AFSP & SPRC, 2016). School counsellors should review students' written material or art work before giving them to the family to ensure that all content is sensitive and appropriate (ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007). Spontaneous memorials may include: placing a picture; flower; or small object as a token of remembrance (Underwood, n.d.).

Permanent

Permanent memorials are not recommended on schools grounds. Based upon the knowledge of traumatic exposure, as well as the complexity of school systems and school populations, it is recommended that schools do not create permanent memorials of any kind (Steele, 2007).

It is important for schools to honour all deaths (students and staff) in a consistent manner when it comes to memorialization (AFSP & SPRC, 2016; Underwood, n.d.). Considerations are needed for: possible re-traumatization; perception; costs; maintenance; sustainability; cultural norms; and location (NASP, 2011).

Permanent memorials may include: a granite monument; permanent artwork; an engraved stone; permanent plaque; annual scholarship; or a tree (AFSP & SPRC, 2016; Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2016; NASP, 2011).

Memorial Best Practices

Commonly Considered Memorial Activities

More Appropriate Memorial Activities	Less Appropriate Memorial Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cards, letters, and memory books written by students for family • Activities and projects that will make a difference, bring awareness, and possibility prevent future deaths • Service projects providing opportunities to help others • Organizing participation in a community-wide positive effort • Gifts of library books • Donations to an existing foundation (ex. Canadian Cancer Society, Mothers Against Drunk Driving – MADD, Canadian Mental Health Association) • Scholarship (non-renewable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole-school assemblies • Events dedicated to the deceased • Plaques • Full tribute pages in yearbook • Notice on the school’s outdoor message board • Apparel with pictures of deceased being worn at school • Naming rooms or venues • Creating banners

Note. Information in the above chart is sourced from ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007; NASP, 2011; NASP, 2013; and Underwood, n.d.,

Special Considerations

Graduation or Elementary/Middle Year-End Ceremony

Graduations are ceremonies to acknowledge and celebrate the successful completion of public education.

- A student who dies in their graduating year, may be recognized as a member of the graduating class (ex. name listed in program, picture in composite, traditional school practices that recognize all graduating students).
- It is **not** recommended that the nature of the death be highlighted (Underwood, n.d.).

- It is **not** recommended to leave an empty chair at the ceremony because the visual may activate a reaction from other students and attendees (Kerr, Brent, McKain & MacCommons, 2010).
- The same guidelines apply to situations in which a younger student has died. The student may be recognized at elementary or middle school end of year activities (Kerr et al., 2010).

Anniversary Dates

The anniversary of the death (and other significant dates, such as the deceased's birthday) may stir up emotions and can be an upsetting time for some students and staff (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).

- It is helpful to anticipate possible anniversary dates.
- Provide an opportunity to acknowledge the date with individuals who may require additional support, particularly with those who were especially close to the deceased.
- Anniversary and other significant dates can trigger the grief and trauma that was experienced at the time of the death (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).

Services at School

“Using a room or an area of the school for a funeral service can inextricably connect that space to the death, making it difficult for students to return there for regular classes or activities” (AFSP & SPRC, 2016, p. 26).

- As staff and student deaths are community events that impact schools, it is strongly **advised that funerals and services are held in places other than the school**, like religious or community settings (AFSP & SPRC, 2016; Underwood, n.d.).
- The school should focus on maintaining its regular schedule, structure, and routine (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).
- **Consultation with the district Superintendent is required** for any consideration of a service being held at the school.

Memorials in the Community

“Community memorials provide the same benefits as school memorials and avoid the many conflicts and challenges created when erected in closed environments such as schools” (Steele, 2007).

- Memorials need to be moved out of the school environment into the community where they can either be easily accessed by those who need their comfort and benefits or easily avoided by those who are activated by the “reminders” (Steele, 2007).
- “Exposure” or physical proximity to reminders can be activating to those experiencing grief (Steele, 2007).

Memorials after a Death by Suicide

“Most mental health professionals advocate that memorials are not appropriate when associated with suicide. The American Association of Suicidology has clear recommendations based on well-

documented research on the **contagion effect**; memorials following a suicide may glamorize death and may communicate that suicide is an appropriate or desired response to stress” (ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007, p. 1).

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to the risk of suicide contagion, and as a result it is important to memorialize the student who died by suicide in a way that does not inadvertently glamorize or romanticize either the student or the death (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).

Memorials following a suicide are particularly important to monitor. Decision makers need to remember that their **primary concern should be about the surviving students** that are left in their care. Every decision made regarding memorials after a student suicide will be extremely important, because it may **help prevent the death of another student** (NASP, 2011).

The following approaches are recommended:

- Choose memorials that are temporary, non-renewable, or in the form of a “living” memorial. These memorials will positively affect surviving students as opposed to glorifying the students that died by suicide, which increases the risk that others will copy the act (NASP, 2011).
- **Do not make a permanent memorial following a suicide** (NASP, 2011).
- If spontaneous memorials are created on school grounds, school staff should monitor them for messages that may be inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) or that indicate students who may themselves be at risk (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).
- Focus on how the student lived, rather than how they died (AFSP & SPRC, 2016).

Commonly Considered Memorial Activities after a Death by Suicide

More Appropriate Memorial Activities After Death by Suicide	Less Appropriate Memorial Activities After Death by Suicide
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making donations to a local crisis center or other mental health charitable organization • Participating in an event that raises awareness about suicide prevention • Fundraising for a charity • Buying books for the school library or hosting school programs that highlight resilience and mental health and wellness • Implementing a suicide prevention program in the school • Promoting positive mental health in collaboration with community agencies • Volunteering at a community crisis hotline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole-school assemblies • Planting trees or gardens • Full tribute pages in yearbook • Establishing a scholarship • Naming rooms or venues • Placing plaques in school corridors • Creating banners • Dedicating events • Family members of the deceased student holding an assembly/event to address the student body and describe the intense pain the suicide death has caused to their family in hopes that this will dissuade other students from taking their own lives.

- Sponsoring a mental health awareness day

Note. Information in the above chart is sourced from AFSP & SPRC, 2016; ERCM Technical Assistance Center, 2007; and Underwood, n.d.,

References and Resources

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