

# GRIEF AND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY



A child or teen in grief poses a special challenge to school faculty and staff. That challenge is multiplied when a student dies and the staff must deal with their own grief while helping classmates face their loss. Here are some proven suggestions for educators, school counselors and administrators...

**Operate with honesty.** Lies or “shades of truth” do not help students get through their grief. If a student or teacher has died, say so. If details are sketchy, say so. If you are already hearing rumors, counteract them with the facts. If the family is planning a private memorial to which students are not invited, make sure there are other opportunities for students to be involved in appropriate commemorative experiences.

**Involve parents.** Make sure parents are notified when a death impacts the school community. A handful of practical tips can be included with your letter to parents and they can be directed to resources in your community and to the Selected Independent Funeral Homes web page that offers support on coping with loss, [www.selectedfuneralhomes.org/coping-with-loss](http://www.selectedfuneralhomes.org/coping-with-loss).



**Admit the big impact.** We often like to think only a few students are impacted by the death of a classmate, but in reality, there will be some impact throughout the entire school community. Make sure teachers have a place to “decompress” and be together away from students. In other words, don’t convert the teacher’s lounge into a counseling room for students.

**Take a break from the curriculum.** Students will not concentrate effectively when their minds and hearts are on a classmate who has died. If the student or teacher was well-known, expect to slow down, talk about, and provide opportunities for students to write about the loss—as broadly as the impact was felt. Experience proves that an investment of a few hours early in the crisis experience will pay rich dividends later on.

**Embrace expression.** Students need opportunities to express their grief in varied ways. A long panel of butcher-paper on which students sign their names and write messages to the bereaved family can be extremely helpful. Younger students might want to make cards to express some of the qualities they most admired about the student or teacher who died. And students need the opportunity to participate in ritual—visitation, funeral and committal all can be wonderful experiences to help students express their grief. What doesn’t work well is attempting to manage kids’ grief into a brief break through a chat with a counselor and then expecting them to return to normal school-day activity.

**Engage students in packing memorabilia.** A perennial problem in schools is what to do with the stuffed animals, cards, plants and candles left next to a student’s locker or in the courtyard. One plan involves setting a day five to seven days after the death and announcing how the items will be removed. “On Thursday after school, all of the stuffed animals, notes and cards you have left will be packed up and given to Mr. & Mrs. Johnson,” the principal might announce. Then, enlist a few of the student’s friends to help pack up the memorabilia and deliver it to the family. Waiting several days affords students an opportunity to offer their expressions and acknowledges the importance of doing so, but avoids the weeks-long “enshrinement” that makes your campus look like a cemetery.

**Make sure your plan is updated.** While it is uncomfortable to contemplate a student’s death, not having a plan in place raises the anxiety level for everyone involved. You won’t likely follow every part of your crisis plan, but having one helps provide a place to start in the aftermath of tragedy.



For additional information and local resources, please contact your nearest member of Selected Independent Funeral Homes by visiting [www.selectedfuneralhomes.org](http://www.selectedfuneralhomes.org).