

# Building a Crisis Response Plan:

## Evidence-Based Practices for How Effective Schools Have Handled Suicide

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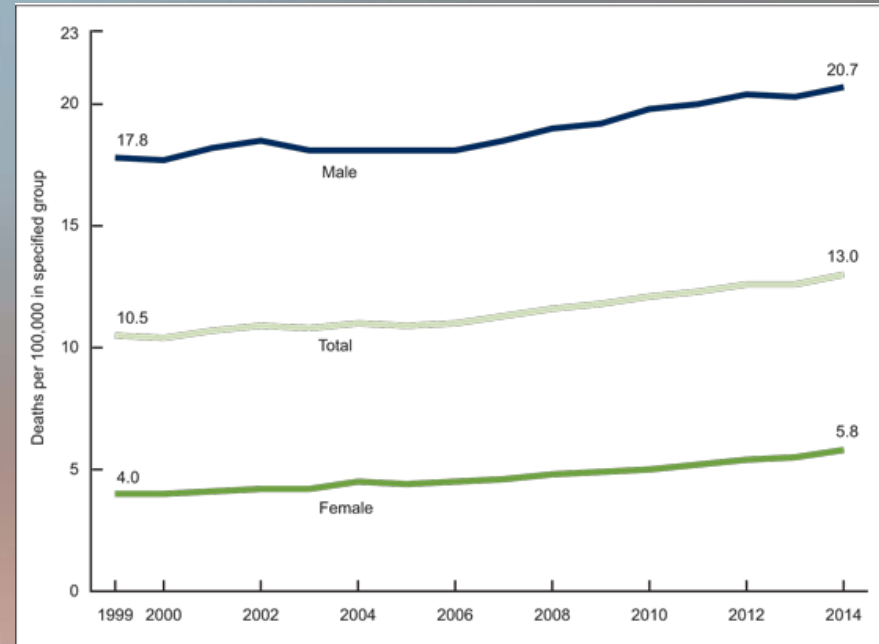
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# Why Should Every School Build a Crisis Response Plan?

- According to data by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide is on the rise; over the past decade, the rate has increased to 12.1 per 100,000
- According to Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (save.org), suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds.

Figure 1. Age-adjusted suicide rates, by sex:  
United States, 1999-2014



## Why Should Every School Have a Crisis Response Plan?

# Suicide At Manchester High School

- In my very first year of teaching, I was touched by Suicide. Just prior to Thanksgiving of 2015, we were informed via email from our principle that a terrible tragic death had occurred Saturday evening, taking the life of senior Justus Joy. On Monday morning at a staff meeting, we were informed that it was a suicide.
- Justus left behind two brothers: a middle schooler, and junior at MHS named Josiah. Although I never personally met or knew Justus, I had Josiah as a student the 2015-2016 school year.
- Many of you reading this presentation have unfortunately likely been touched by suicide. This presentation is designed to educate teachers, administrators, school counselors, parents, students, etc. how to cope with suicide. Because unfortunately, it is likely that at some point in your career as an educator, suicide will touch you too, if it has not already.

# Why Should Every School Build a Crisis Response Plan?

- Postvention:
  - According to the Northern County Psychiatric Associates (Baltimore, MD):
    - Attempted or completed suicide has powerful effects on staff and students
    - Individuals close to the deceased may have years of distress
    - One study found an increased incidence of major depression and PTSD 1.5-3 years after the suicide
    - The “cluster” effect: where many adolescents commit suicide within a short period of time, creating a contagion effect
    - Media sensationalization of the deceased can contribute to the cluster effect

# Building a Crisis Response Plan: Outline

- The following is a basic outline of the steps to be taken following a suicide
  - Administration should collect as much information as soon as possible
    - He/she should meet with teachers and staff to inform them of the tragedy
  - Teachers/other staff should inform each class of students
    - After being informed, time should be dedicated to allowing the students to talk about the suicide
  - The school should have extra counselors, school social workers and psychologists available for students and staff, potentially borrowed from other schools in the districts , neighboring districts, or other licensed professionals in the community
  - Rumor control: With the prevalence of social media, rumor control is important. There should be a designated individual to deal with the media

# Other Questions to Consider Postvention

- Who will be the contact for the bereaved family?
- Will we utilize a building or district crisis team? If so, what training have they had?
- Who will inform the faculty and staff of the student's suicide? How much information will they receive?
- Where will we set up a "safe room" for students to gather? Who will staff that room?
- Will substitutes be available if a teacher's grief interferes with teaching?
- Will someone in the building or at the district handle media inquiries?
- How will other "high-risk" students be identified and referred to counseling services?
- How will we handle sticky situations, like a request for a memorial, or the student's locker, or a story in the school newspaper?

**Building an Infrastructure:** This basic information (can be adjusted for each school's needs) should be completed before starting the process of developing a crisis plan. This section will be a reference about whom to contact if a crisis arises.

Location	Position	Name	Office Phone	Email	Days at Location	Personal Phone
District	Superintendent					
	Assistant Superintendent					
	Nursing Supervisor					
	Counseling supervisor					
	Communications Officer					
	Safety/Security supervisor					
	Threat Assessment Coordinator					
High School	Principal					
	Assistant Principal					
	School Counselors					
	School Nurse					
	School Social Worker					
	School Psychologist					
	Prevention/Intervention Specialist					
	Chemical Dependency Counselor					
SRO/SSO						

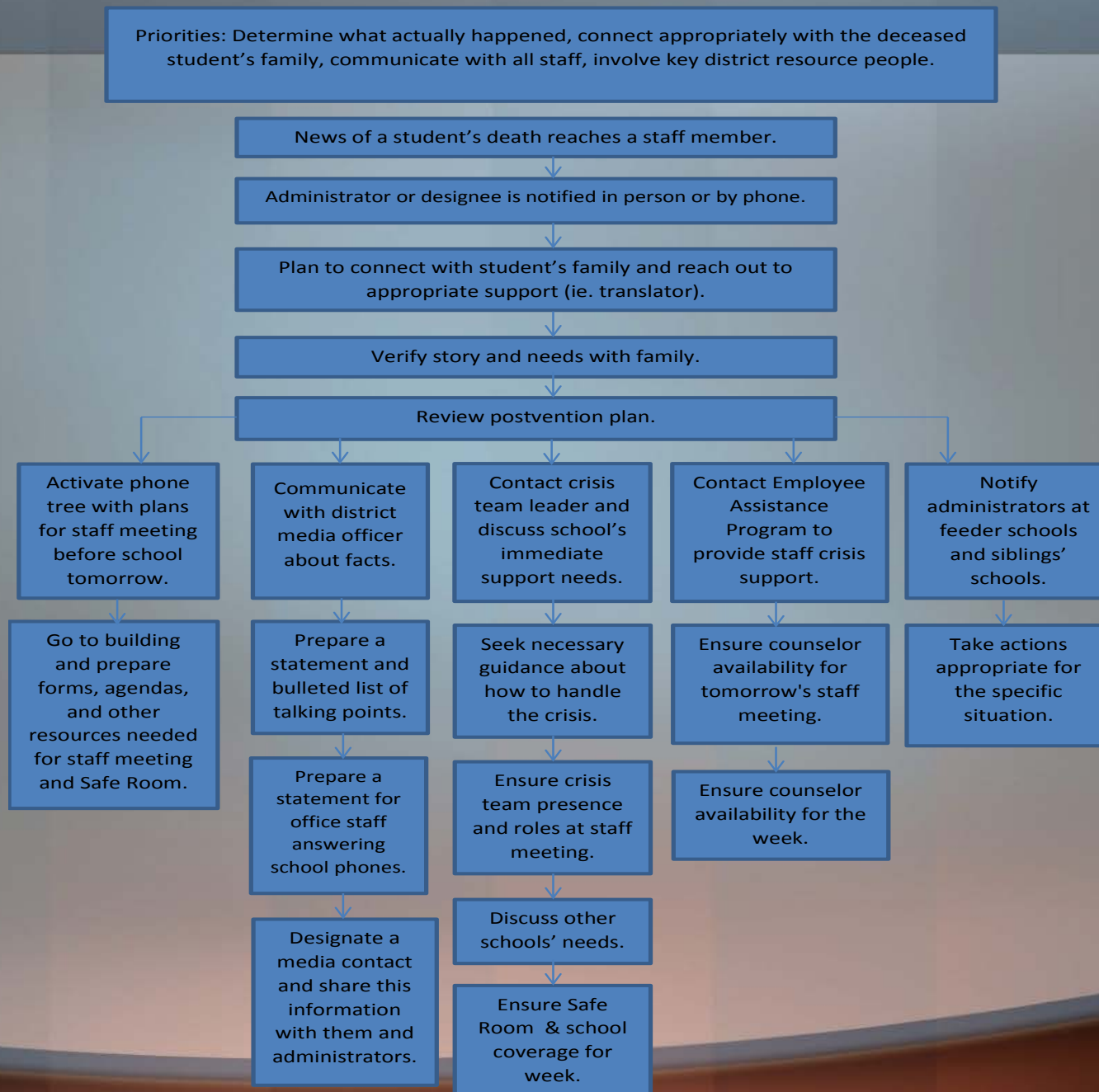
Language	Staff who speak this language	Available translators/interpreters	Community resources with services in this language	Community leaders who can assist families in this language

In order to support students and families from diverse linguistic and cultural groups, it is recommended that there be at least one staff member who can communicate in at least the four most common languages in the district.

# Confirming The News and Convening Crisis Team

- Upon receiving news of a student's death, including an unconfirmed rumor, a staff member must immediately contact the building administrator or designee. Contact must be made whether this is during our outside school hours.
- The building administrator will confirm the veracity of the information. This could include communication with the deceased student's family.
- Consider the family's language, religion, culture, and relationship with the school. Will you need the assistance of a translator or community leader? How will you ensure cultural competency and a compassionate, supportive stance?
- Discuss with the family how they want the death described to the school community. (For example, are they uncomfortable with it being referred to as a suicide? Is an ongoing investigation hampering communication?)
- Upon confirming that the information is correct, the building administrator or designee will activate the school's phone tree or email and notify all staff that there has been a student death and there will be a staff meeting of at least an hour before school the next morning.
- The administrator and crisis team contact will discuss:
  - The crisis team's feedback on how to handle the crisis.
  - Who from the crisis team will attend the morning staff meeting and what their roles will be.
  - The crisis team's presence in the school and role in Safe Room coverage.
  - The needs of other district schools, such as feeder schools and family members' schools.



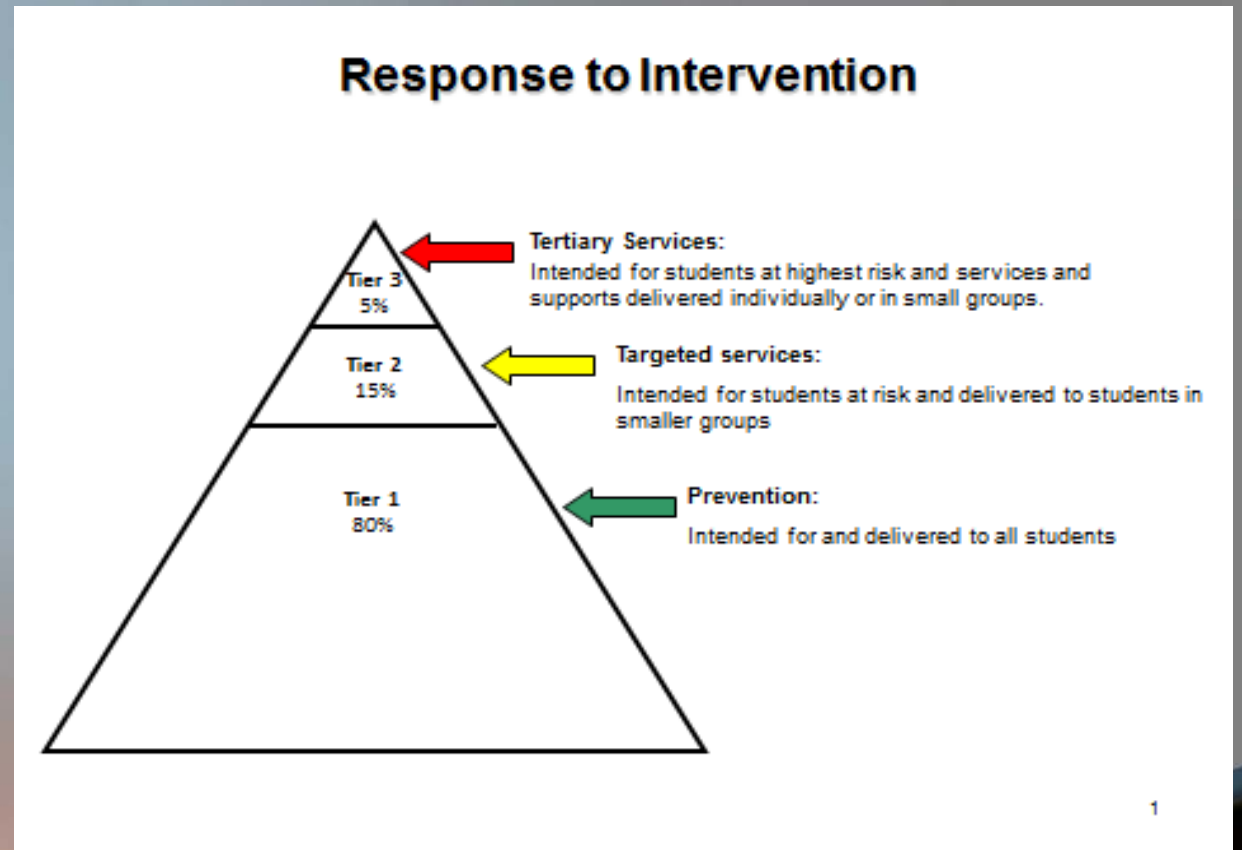


# Before School Begins on The Next Day

- A Safe Room will be designated and set up with appropriate seating, necessary forms for students to sign in and out, tissues, information about grief, and other necessary items. The ideal Safe Room is a large room with several seating areas whose location is known to all students (for example, the school library). This should be set up and ready before the staff meeting.
- The deceased student's name will be immediately removed from the school's attendance roster, automated call system, and any other place that a call home could be initiated.
- A staff meeting, about an hour, will be held and end before students arrive for the school day. ALL staff should attend, including instructional staff, health staff, available transportation staff, school security staff, food service workers, maintenance staff, and any contractors or outside workers present in the building (for example, construction workers working on the building).
  
- The staff meeting agenda will include the following:
  - Verifiable facts about the death and information about the family's needs and preferences.
  - Time for staff to ask questions and express feelings.
  - Information about grief counseling and support available through the Employee Assistance Program and procedures for accessing it.
  - Review of the school and district's postvention plans.
  - Identification of crisis team members and introductions if they are not known to staff.
  - Dissemination of statement to be read by teachers during the first period of the day.
  - Location of the Safe Room and what will take place there.
  - Discussion of students who immediately come to mind as at risk during this crisis.
  - Discussion of roles:
    - Safe room staffing and counseling support until the end of the school day.
    - At least two adults should be in the Safe Room at all times. At least one should be a person with advanced training in suicide prevention.
    - Which support team member will follow the deceased student's schedule for the day.
    - This person's role will be to help facilitate discussions in the classroom and provide 1:1 support for any student in crisis.
  - Extra patrols of the halls and grounds.
  - Telephone coverage at the school and who will instruct student volunteers not to answer school phones today.
  - District media contact; what staff and students should do if approached by media.
  - Discussion of procedures:
    - How to refer a student affected by the crisis to the Safe Room.
    - Whom to notify and how if a student is behaving suspiciously, or attempting to leave.

# Supporting Students and Staff: The RTI Triangle

- We can think of suicide prevention using the Response to Intervention triangle. Prevention activities engage all three levels, with some actions targeting the entire staff and student body, while other focus on those more/most affected by the crisis, while some target students in an emergency situation after the loss of a classmate or friend



# Tier 1 Supports

- Help students identify and express emotions
- Encourage practical coping strategies (relaxation skills, talking, reading, exercising, how have they coped with past difficulties)
- Schedule meetings with students in small groups; adjust academic schedule in order to spend with students to help address their needs; if possible have counselors come to the classroom to talk/give accurate information
- Provide access to all students to counselors, school social workers, school psychologist, etc. immediately following the death
- Reach out to students in a deliberate and timely way
- Meet with students in small groups so that adults might identify students needing Tier 2-3 supports

## Tier 2-3 Supports

- These supports would build upon/ be in addition to Tier one supports including:
  - Personal/ regular access with school psychologist
  - Referral to an outside Psychologist or Psychiatrist for PTSD, Depression, etc.
  - Potential 504 Plans to accommodate close friends or relatives of the deceased
  - Consistent support from teachers, administrators, and all school personnel

# Memorialization

- If invited by the family, students and staff should be allowed to attend funeral/memorial services at no penalty professionally or academically
- Students may wish to create memorials for the deceased; the school should allow for such memorials, but monitor memorials to risk inadvertently glamorizing the death, or for inappropriate or hostile messages.
- Students may wish to dedicate certain events, pages in a yearbook or a speech at graduation to honor the deceased. This should be done in accordance with the families wishes and should be closely monitored by the school.

# Suicide Contagion Prevention

- Suicide contagion or the cluster effect is when one suicide death may contribute to another. It accounts for 1-5 percent of all suicide deaths annually.
- In the aftermath of a suicide, it is important for schools to recognize those who might be at heightened risk for suicide due to underlying mental disorders or behavioral problems already identified by the school. These individuals might need to receive tier 2 interventions.

# Bringing In Outside Resources

- Following a traffic suicide, often times different agencies of the surrounding community will volunteer their services free of charge to the affected school.
- Services beneficial to students and staff could include:
  - Licensed counselors/mental health providers
  - Licensed Therapy Dogs & Trainers
  - Suicide Prevention Programs/ Organizations
  - Speakers/friends/families of suicide



# Conclusion

- The suicide of a school community member is unimaginable and impossible to truly plan for
- However, by having a Crisis Response Plan ready to be enabled, schools can reduce the amount of confusion, anxiety and trauma the school community experiences
- Important factors to remember are to always involve the family of the deceased before making any decisions, and keep the students involved as well
- Continue to monitor students in the months after the event to prevent contagion and to assess their grief progress
- Take advantage of any and all outside resources that make themselves available to the school district

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# Additional Resources

- Websites:

- Youth Suicide Prevention Program: [www.yspp.org](http://www.yspp.org)
- A PDF “tool kit” guide for schools: [https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App\\_Files/Media/PDF/sprc\\_online\\_library.pdf](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/App_Files/Media/PDF/sprc_online_library.pdf)
- PDF of Postvention Guidelines for School Personnel : <http://www.capefearpsych.org/documents/SuicideinSchools.pdf>

- Books

- Helping Children Grieve by Theresa M. Huntley
- A Special Scar: The Experiences of People Bereaved by Suicide by Alison Wertheimer
- After a Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids by The Dougy Center
- After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief by Bob Baugher & Jack Jordon

- National Organizations:

- <http://www.samhsa.gov/safe-schools-healthy-students/resources/suicide-prevention>
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention