

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

A Toolkit for Schools
Responding to a
Suicide or Sudden Death



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If there is a suicide attempt on campus, contact 911 and initiate **Disaster Incident Response System (DIR-S)** and shelter in place.

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Timeline and Responsibilities

Day 1: Before School Starts

1. Crisis Response Lead (CRL) verifies the death with law enforcement and/or the [USBE Suicide Prevention Specialist](#).
2. CRL consults with Crisis Response Team, state supports, or others to determine the potential impact and resources needed to adequately respond.
3. CRL contacts the District Team, and if needed, the [Community Team and State supports](#). Seek out bilingual counselors.
4. CRL contacts the family of the deceased. If possible, set up a time to meet in person to offer condolences and determine what information to share with students and staff, and how the school can support the family. Principal, director of student services, and counseling team lead meet with the family and determine who will be the liaison to the family hereafter.
5. CRL identifies a crisis team member to remove the student's name from all notification systems to ensure families do not receive notices.
6. CRL contacts Public Information Officer (PIO) to plan a proactive [external messaging strategy](#) and adapt prepared messaging templates.
 - Assign PIO or member of the Crisis Response Team to monitor social media pages for inflammatory statements or copycat behaviors.
 - CRL arranges for translation of prepared message templates for parents.
 - Prepare a brief message and appropriate resources/contact information for administrative assistants who may receive phone calls from parents or the media.
7. CRL or CRL Assistant initiates school- and district-level calling trees, emails, text etc. to contact all school personnel; set up school personnel meetings for early the next day before school starts, or as soon as possible, to inform staff of the death and crisis response protocols.
8. CRL assigns a team member to coordinate substitutes for any teachers who are too emotionally impacted to teach, and brief substitutes on information shared in the morning meeting if they weren't able to attend.
9. CRL or CRL Assistant, school mental health professionals, and the family of the deceased identify students and staff who are likely to be highly impacted by the crisis (i.e., close friends, siblings, girlfriend/boyfriend, teammates, and students with known

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Day 1: Before School Starts

suicidal ideation). Assign Crisis Response Team members to check in with these individuals one on one as soon as possible. Document which students were seen and follow up with parents/guardians.

10. School administration facilitates the school personnel meeting. Share accurate information about the death, honoring family's requests and student's privacy. Go over plans for the day, including locations of crisis counseling rooms or other supports.

► CRL provides a scripted announcement for staff to read to students at a determined time regarding the death of the student. See [examples below](#) and modify for the current situation:

- Student notification to be read at the beginning of the day
 - Cause of death unknown or not disclosed by the family
 - Suicide death
- Parent/guardian notification to be emailed to parents that morning
 - Cause of death unknown
 - Suicide death
 - Safety incident at school
- Faculty/Staff Notification

RESOURCES

- [Children Teens and Suicide Loss from AFSP](#)
- [Tips for Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)
- [Helping School Age Children with Traumatic Grief, Tips for Caregivers](#)
- [USB E Suicide Prevention Brochure](#)

- Remind staff about the school's protocol following the death of a student. Let the know about the expected procedures for the school day, including whether or not outside responders will be assisting (District Crisis Teams, Local Mental Health Authorities, etc.).
- Prepare staff for student reactions and questions, and provide staff with informational handouts about crisis reactions and suicide.
- Instruct staff that the method of suicide (firearm, medication overdose, etc.) should not be shared with students because it increases risk of suicide contagion.
- Describe common adult crisis responses, encourage healthy coping strategies, and remind staff of resources available to them.
- Share with staff how to handle parent inquiries and [plans](#) for communicating with parents, including who the parents can contact for information or resources.

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Day 1: Before School Starts

- Instruct staff that the method of suicide (firearm, medication overdose, etc.) should not be shared with students because it increases risk of suicide contagion.
- 11. CRL or CRL Assistant distributes a tracking sheet to the Crisis Response Team to record information for each student with whom they meet. Assign a Crisis Response Team member from the school to collect these records at the end of each day and follow up with students and parents.
- 12. CRL or CRL Assistant distributes a map of the school to all guest Crisis Response Team members so they can find the location of the crisis counseling room(s), the classrooms they are assigned to visit, or the hallways they are assigned to monitor.

Day 1: When School Starts

1. Notify students regarding the death of the student at the same time as parents are being notified via email. Teachers and/or Crisis Response Team members read the provided scripted letter in small groups, such as homerooms, at the beginning of the school day.

Under no circumstances should school personnel announce a death over an intercom, at an assembly, or through email to students.
2. Teachers provide students with the facts, resources available today, and the school day structure. Resume typical school schedules after students have a brief opportunity to ask questions. Escort students who would like support, or who are having crisis reactions, to predetermined counseling rooms.
3. Counselors and Crisis Response Team members ask students who are struggling if this experience has led them to have their own thoughts of suicide. If the answer is yes, implement the steps outlined in the district Mental Health Policy, including assessment, safety planning, parent notification, and referral.
4. Family liaison continues to offer support and communicate back to students/staff regarding the family's wishes.
5. Crisis teams implement an "empty chair" strategy; have a trained crisis response person follow the deceased student's schedule for the day and look for students in need of support. Crisis team members can also walk the halls and look for students who appear to be struggling.
6. Designated rooms/offices, monitored by a school mental health professional or clinical counselor, remain available for students with crisis reactions for one full week or longer.

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Day 1: When School Starts

- Counseling staff and administrative assistant provide water, snacks, tissues, comfort items, grief activities, etc.
- 7. CRL identifies a volunteer to provide lunch/snacks for the Crisis Response Team (optional, but highly encouraged).
 - Provide self-care handouts, warning signs of [suicide resources](#), etc.
 - Remind staff of any Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) available
- 8. Any spontaneous “[memorials](#)” are to be monitored by school administration and removed after one week. What is done for one must be done for all.
- 9. CRL reminds Crisis Response Team members to follow up with parents of any students who receive counseling in regard to the crisis response.
- 10. CRL coordinates an end-of-day meeting with all Crisis Response Team members to debrief. Discuss the plan for the following day(s) and remind staff to [practice self-care](#).

Day Two through Seven: After the Death or Attempt

1. The Crisis Response Team remains in the school and is available to meet with students.
 - Describe the resources available at school in the morning announcements, do not share cause of death or means.
2. If any relevant funeral wishes have been communicated from the family, school administration may share this in an email notification to parents.
3. Counselors and Crisis Response Team members ask students who are struggling if this experience has led them to have their own thoughts of suicide. If the answer is yes, implement the steps outlined in the district Mental Health Policy, including assessment, safety planning, parent notification, and referral .
4. Family liaison maintains contact with the family of the deceased student to offer support and community resources.
 - If there are any siblings or other family members attending the same same school, district, or “feeder school,” discuss what resources are available to these family members and how to use them.
 - If a staff member passes, review resources in schools that family members attend or work in.

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1-2 Weeks After the Death or Attempt

1. School mental health professionals actively check in with students and staff who were at risk or sought counseling. Let them know they can stop by to talk with counselors whenever they want.
2. CRL and Crisis Response Team members review the crisis plan and make adjustments based on what worked well or didn't work during the past event.
3. The family liaison continues to check in with the family to see if there is anything else that the school/community can do to be of assistance, and return student's belongings and any items from [spontaneous memorialization](#) (gifts, letters, photos, etc.)
4. School administration (in consultation with USBE or other partners) meets to identify strategies for the upcoming year to increase student resilience, [provide support during milestones](#) (e.g., graduation, the loss anniversary) and prevent/respond to future crises.



Ongoing

1. For as long as the need remains, school mental health professionals actively check in with siblings of the deceased, faculty, and students who were at-risk or sought counseling. Grief and increased risk of mental health concerns or suicide often continue for years after a significant or traumatic loss.

Milestones and Anniversary of the Loss

1. School mental health professionals plan to proactively engage with students during ["important milestones"](#) like birthdays, anniversaries, sporting events, graduation, etc., to offer support.
2. School mental health professionals check in with students, siblings of the deceased, and staff who were close to the deceased near the anniversary of the loss. Grief and increased risk of mental health concerns or suicide often continue for years after a significant or traumatic loss.

Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Responders

CRL - Crisis Response Lead

- The CRL is generally the School Principal, or Superintendent however if a district level response is needed, the Director of Student Services may take the CRL role
- Assures that all staff have been trained annually, and have access to the crisis plan
- Establishes and updates calling tree/notification plan for staff each school year
- Has overall responsibility throughout the crisis
- Is the central point of contact
- Monitors overall postvention activities throughout the school
- Makes contact with the deceased student's family (offers condolences, offers assistance, discusses what information they are comfortable disclosing to the school community, inquires about funeral arrangements, asks which friends might need additional support)
- In conjunction with the district Public Information Officer, oversees communication with the different groups in the school community (administration, staff, students, and parents), the media, district and local agencies
- Initiates meetings for Crisis Response Teams and staff, including the day one staff personnel meeting and the end of day one Crisis Response Team debrief.
- Determines whether additional grief counselors, crisis responders, or other resources are needed
 - Activates district Crisis Response Team, Community Mental Health Providers, and state-level Crisis Response Teams as needed (Utah State Board of Education [USBE] and Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS])
 - Activates bilingual counselors and substitute teachers as needed
- Drafts notifications (to staff, parents, students), disseminates informational handouts for staff to help their students.



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Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Responders

CRL Assistant(s)

- Assists the Lead, and is prepared to take their place if the Lead is not available during a crisis
- Identifies social media accounts that may need attention or monitoring
- Shares updates with Crisis Response Team members; monitor activities throughout the school
- Works with the counseling staff to organize safe rooms for students and staff in need of assistance
- Communicates with parents when concerns arise about particular students
- Removes the deceased student's name from all notification systems to ensure families do not receive notices
- Arranges for Spanish or other translation of notification scripts and letters as needed
- Distributes building maps to any Crisis Response Team members unfamiliar with the building

Counseling Staff

- Determines location for students with crisis reactions to meet with members of the crisis team
- Coordinates tracking, parental notification, and follow-up for students who are seen by the Crisis Response Team
- Meets directly with students who ask for support, or are having observable crisis reactions, in small groups or one-on-one.
- Provides emotional support, risk assessment, and referrals to community supports, and to students and staff impacted by the crisis, as needed.

School Resource Officer and Facilities Manager

- Secures buildings and grounds
- Redirects any media that may try to enter school grounds to contact the District Public Information Officer

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Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Responders

Designated Administrative Assistant

- Manages front office
- Has a prepared response for phone calls and emails from concerned parents, refers media to the District Public Information Officer, etc.
- Arranges to respond to the physical needs of those in need of counseling supports, which could include providing water, tissues, and snacks, and then also arranges lunch for the Crisis Response Team

School Nurse

- Provides first aid and helps ensure the physical health and safety of students

District Public Information Office

- Responds to [media inquiries](#) about the crisis in a safe manner that protects the needs and privacy of the school community, including the family of the deceased student. Additional resources on safe messaging to prevent contagion and promote healing after a suicide death can be found on [Live On Utah](#)

District Crisis Response Team

- Can be activated to provide additional support to the school Crisis Response Team
- Can provide consultation to the Crisis Response Lead and the District Public Information officer
- Can take on any responsibilities of a school Crisis Response Team member if they are not available during the crisis, or if they are too impacted by the crisis to participate in the crisis response
- Can be available on site to provide emotional support, risk assessment, and referral for students and staff impacted by the crisis
- Can activate community or state-level crisis services, as needed

Community Mental Health Partners

- Can be activated to provide additional support to the school and district Crisis Response Teams
- Can provide trained mental health clinicians on site, as available, to provide emotional support, risk assessment, and referral for students and staff impacted by the crisis

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Roles and Responsibilities of Crisis Responders

Utah Disaster Response Network

- Can be activated to provide [additional support](#) to the school, district, and community Crisis Response Teams, by USBE and DHHS
- Can provide trained mental health clinicians on site, as available, to provide emotional support, risk assessment, and referral for students and staff impacted by the crisis

Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

- Provides consultation and technical support, such as devising solutions for unique situations during and after a crisis response
- Can be activated to provide additional support to the school and district Crisis Response Teams
- Can take on any responsibilities of a school crisis team member if they are not available during the crisis, or if they are too impacted by the crisis to participate in the crisis response
- Can provide trained school counselors and mental health clinicians on site, as available, to provide emotional support, risk assessment, and referral for students and staff impacted by the crisis

External Communication Recommendations: Responding to Questions

School and district administrative assistants should be prepared to respond to family, student, and media questions. A copy of the parent and student notification email can be available for them to refer to and share with those who have questions. Space is provided for each item below so you can draft statements specific to the situation.

1. When asked about the cause of death, refer parents and students to the letter that was distributed by the school administration. Do not share additional graphic or private information. Sharing rumors or means of suicide can cause additional harm.
2. Share what resources are available to students and their families. Connect students and families to a school mental health professional if needed or requested.
3. Direct inquiries to the Public Information Officer.

Death Notification Templates

The following templates should be personalized for the student and the situation. If there are multiple deaths the scripted announcements should be distinctly different from each other.

Death Notification Templates

Letters to Students

This information should be given to teachers and other staff to read to students at a time that has been designated to share with the entire student body (e.g. homeroom or first period).

When the death is a suicide, and the family is willing to share that information:

Option 1:

I am so sorry to tell you all that one of our students, **[NAME]**, has passed away. I'm also very sad to tell you that the cause of death was suicide. Many of you may also feel very sad. Others may feel other emotions, such as anger or confusion. It's okay to feel whatever emotions you might be feeling. When someone takes their own life, it leads to a lot of questions, some of which may never be completely answered. While we may never know why **[NAME]** ended their life, we do know that suicide has many causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're upset or struggling to reach out for help. Suicide is not the answer. Rumors may come out about what happened, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. I'm going to do my best to give you the most accurate information as soon as I know it. Each of us will react to **[NAME]**'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Some of us may have known **[NAME]** well, and some of us may have not. Either way, we may have strong feelings. We might find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork for a little while. Or, we might find that focusing on school helps take our minds off what has happened. Either is okay. I want you to know that your teachers and I are here for you. We also have counselors here to help us all cope with what has happened. If you'd like to talk to one of them, just let me or one of your teachers know, or look for the counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]** between classes or during lunch. We are all here for you. We are all in this together, and the school staff will do whatever we can to help you get through this.

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Students

When the death is a suicide, and the family is willing to share that information:

Option 2:

With great sadness, I am here to tell you that one of your classmates/teachers/school staff, **[NAME]**, has died by suicide on (**INSERT DATE or time such as “last night”**). Whenever people take their own life, it leaves all of us with many questions and feelings. I want you to know that all of our teachers and staff are here to help in any way we can.

Suicide can be difficult to understand. While we may never know why **[NAME]** ended their life, we do know that suicide has many causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're upset or struggling to reach out for help. No matter what, it is very important to know that there is help, and that suicide is not the answer.

I understand that many of you may have upsetting feelings and questions about **[NAME]**'s death. If you would like, we will take a portion of this class period to talk and answer your questions. At times like this, it is okay to have many different feelings, including sadness, anger, guilt and disbelief. It is okay to cry. Together, we can discuss whatever you may be feeling or want to talk about. If I cannot answer your questions, or you would like to talk to someone privately, there are support rooms available with counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]**. Anyone who would like to talk to someone in the support rooms may do so now.

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Students

When the cause is unconfirmed, is uncertain, or the family does not wish to disclose the cause of death

Option 1:

I am so sorry to tell you all that one of our students, **[NAME]**, has died. The cause of death has not yet been determined. We are aware that there has been some talk that this might have been a suicide death. Rumors may begin to come out, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. I'm going to do my best to give you the most accurate information as soon as I know it. Since the subject has been raised, I do want to take this chance to remind you that suicide, when it does occur, is very complicated. No one single thing causes it. But in many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're upset or struggling to reach out for help. Suicide is not the answer. Each of us will react to **[NAME]**'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Right now, I'm feeling very sad, and many of you may feel sad too. Others may feel anger or confusion. It's okay to feel whatever emotions you might be feeling. Some of us may have known **[NAME]** well, and some of us may have not. Either way, we may have strong feelings. You might find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork for a little while. Or, you might find that focusing on school helps take your mind off what has happened. Either is okay. I want you to know that your teachers and I are here for you. We also have counselors here to help us all understand what happened. If you'd like to talk to one of them, just let me or one of your teachers know, or you can seek out the counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]** between classes or during your lunch. We are all here for you. We are all in this together, and the school staff will do whatever we can to help you get through this.

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Students

When the cause is unconfirmed, is uncertain, or the family does not wish to disclose the cause of death

Option 2:

With great sadness, I am here to tell you that one of your classmates/teachers/school staff, **[NAME]**, has died on **(INSERT DATE or time such as “last night”)**.

We understand that there have been rumors that **[NAME]**'s death was by suicide. The cause of **[NAME]**'s death has not yet been determined, is uncertain, or has not been shared, and therefore, we do not know whether or not it was due to suicide. We ask that you do not contribute to these rumors as there is the possibility of spreading information that is untrue, making the death all the more difficult to cope with for **[NAME]**'s family and friends. As information that can be shared becomes available, we will do our best to share this with you. Since there have been questions raised about suicide and we know this is an important topic, perhaps we can talk very briefly about suicide.

Suicide can be difficult to understand. We know that suicide has many causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're upset or struggling to reach out for help. No matter what, it is very important to know that there are ways to help and that suicide should never be an option. We do not know the cause of **[NAME]**'s death, but did not want to ignore questions or concerns that some of you may have about depression or suicide.

I understand that many of you may have upsetting feelings and questions about **[NAME]**'s death. If you would like, we will take a portion of this class period to talk and answer your questions. At times like this, it is okay to have many different feelings, including sadness, anger, guilt and disbelief. It is okay to cry. Together, we can discuss whatever you may be feeling or want to talk about. If I cannot answer your questions, or you would like to talk to someone privately, there are support rooms available with counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]**. Anyone who would like to go to talk to someone in the support rooms may do so now.

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Students

When cause of death is unconfirmed; brief

Option 3:

It is with great sadness that I tell you about a loss to our school family. On **[DATE]**, **[NAME]** passed away.

I understand that many of you may have upsetting feelings and questions about **[NAME]**'s death. I will try to answer any questions that I can. If you would like, we will take a portion of this class period to talk about what has happened. At times like this, it is okay to have many different feelings, including sadness, anger, and disbelief. It is okay to cry. Together, we can talk about whatever you may be feeling or want to talk about. If I can not answer your questions, or you would like to talk to someone privately, there are support rooms available with counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]**. Anyone who would like to go to talk to someone in the support rooms may do so now.

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Death Notification Templates

Letters to Parents

This information should be emailed to parents/guardians before, or simultaneously with the student notification.

When the death is a suicide, and the family is willing, share that information

Option 1: Students have already been notified

[DATE]

Dear Parent,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. **[NAME]**, one of our **[GRADE]** students has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with their family and friends. All of the students were given the news of the death by their teacher in **[CLASS PERIOD]** this morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that was read to them.

The cause of death was suicide. Suicide is a very complicated act. Although we may never know why **[NAME]** ended their life, we do know that suicide has multiple causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it. But these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you or your child are upset or struggling to reach out for help. Suicide is not the answer. I am including some information that may be helpful to you in discussing suicide with your child. Members of our Crisis Response Team are available to meet with students individually and in groups today, as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional assistance. Note that children who are already vulnerable may be at greater risk due to exposure to the suicide of a peer. If you or your child needs help right away, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988, call 911, text/call using the SafeUT app, or take your child to the nearest crisis center or emergency department. For more information, see the USBE Suicide Prevention brochure [here](#).

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the school mental health professionals. We can be reached by calling **[PHONE NUMBER, EXTENSION]**. We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

[PRINCIPAL'S NAME]

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Parents

When the death is a suicide, and the family is willing, share that information

Option 2: Students have NOT been notified

[DATE]

Dear Parent,

I am so sorry to tell you all that [NAME], one of our [GRADE] students has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with their family and friends. The students will be given the news of the death by their teacher in [CLASS PERIOD] tomorrow morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that will be read to them.

The cause of death was suicide. Suicide is a very complicated act. Although we may never know why [NAME] ended their life, we do know that suicide has multiple causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it. But these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you or your child are upset or struggling to reach out for help. Suicide is not the answer. I am including some information that may be helpful to you in discussing suicide with your child. Members of our Crisis Response Team are available to meet with students individually and in groups today, as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional assistance. Note that children who are already vulnerable may be at greater risk due to exposure to the suicide of a peer. If you or your child needs help right away, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988, call 911, text/call using the SafeUT app, or take your child to the nearest crisis center or emergency department. For more information, see the USBE Suicide Prevention brochure [here](#).

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the school mental health professionals. We can be reached by calling [PHONE NUMBER, EXTENSION]. We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

[PRINCIPAL'S NAME]

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Parents

When the cause is unconfirmed, is uncertain, or the family does not wish to disclose the cause of death

Option 1: Students have already been notified

[DATE]

Dear Parent,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. **[NAME]**, one of our **[GRADE]** students has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with their family and friends. All of the students were given the news of the death by their teacher in **[CLASS PERIOD]** this morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that was read to them.

The cause of death has not yet been determined by the authorities, is uncertain, or has not been shared. Rumors may begin to circulate, and we have asked the students not to spread them since they may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. We will do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us. Members of our Crisis Response Team are available to meet with students individually and in groups today, as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional assistance. If you or your child needs help right away, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988, call 911, text/call using the SafeUT app, or take your child to the nearest crisis center or emergency department. For more information, see the USBE Suicide Prevention brochure [here](#).

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the school mental health professionals. We can be reached by calling **[PHONE NUMBER, EXTENSION]**. We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

[PRINCIPAL'S NAME]

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Death Notification Templates

Letters to Parents

When the cause is unconfirmed, is uncertain, or the family does not wish to disclose the cause of death

Option 2: Students have NOT been notified

[DATE]

Dear Parent,

I am so sorry to tell you all that **[NAME]**, one of our **[GRADE]** students has died. Our thoughts and sympathies are with their family and friends. The students will be given the news of the death by their teacher in **[CLASS PERIOD]** tomorrow morning. I have included a copy of the announcement that will be read to them.

The cause of death has not yet been determined by the authorities, is uncertain, or has not been shared. Rumors may begin to circulate, and we have asked the students not to spread them since they may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. We will do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes known to us. Members of our Crisis Response Team are available to meet with students individually and in groups today, as well as over the coming days and weeks. Please contact the school office if you feel your child is in need of additional assistance. If you or your child needs help right away, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988, call 911, text/call using the SafeUT app, or take your child to the nearest crisis center or emergency department. For more information, see the USBE Suicide Prevention brochure [here](#).

Information about the funeral service will be made available as soon as we have it. If your child wishes to attend, we strongly encourage you to accompany him or her to the service. If the funeral is scheduled during school hours, students who wish to attend will need parental permission to be released from school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the school mental health professionals. We can be reached by calling **[PHONE NUMBER, EXTENSION]**. We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

[PRINCIPAL'S NAME]

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Death Notification Templates

Letters to Parents

Safety Incident

Dear parents,

We experienced a medical emergency today that resulted in a temporary lockdown at our school. The student(s) involved is receiving the best medical care possible.

We recognize that students may experience distress because of today's event. Rumors may begin to come out, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful, unfair, or even dangerous to our students and faculty involved in this situation. We will do our best to give you accurate information as it becomes available.

We want you to know that we care about all of our students here and are here to support them specifically for this situation, and for any other needs that may arise. Tomorrow at the beginning of the day, and throughout the week, we will have additional counseling services available to students and we encourage our students to utilize them to process any feelings they may be experiencing.

If your student is not able to attend counseling services in person at school, the following are resources that can be utilized in the community.

SAFE UT - <https://safeut.med.utah.edu/>

Utah Crisis Line- 988

With care,

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Death Notification Templates

Letters to Faculty and Staff

Option 1

[DATE]

To all faculty and staff,

The recent death of **[NAME]** is expected to make a significant impact on our entire school community. Our crisis team has been mobilized to respond to this tragic event. On **[DATE]**, **[NAME]** died by suicide. We expect a variety of reactions to this loss from our students, parents, and to you as members of our staff.

To assist all members of our school community, an emergency staff meeting will be held at **[TIME]** on **[DATE]** in the **[MEETING LOCATION]**. At that time, our crisis team will provide further details and answer questions. We will also discuss how to present the information to our students. In the meantime, please refer all inquiries from outside sources to **[NAME OF THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER OR COMMUNICATION COORDINATOR]**.

If you are asked questions by individual students prior to the time of our meeting, you can acknowledge that this death has occurred. However, please avoid discussion of details; tell anyone who asks for details that the school staff will provide information to everyone shortly. Please refer any student who appears to be in crisis or having significant difficulty to **[NAME OF COUNSELING SERVICES COORDINATOR]**.

Suicide is a difficult topic to discuss. Students and staff will have questions and we will talk, in our meeting, about how to address these and how to provide support.

As this tragedy has affected all of us in different ways, we encourage you to also seek assistance, as needed, from **[NAME OF COUNSELING SERVICES COORDINATOR]**.

Emergency Staff Meeting Details

Time: **[Enter text]**

Date: **[Enter text]**

Location: **[Enter text]**

If you have any questions or concerns before the meeting, please contact **[NAME OF CRISIS TEAM COORDINATOR]**.

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Death Notification Templates

Letters to Faculty and Staff

Staff Death Notification

Option 1

[DATE]

To all faculty and staff,

The recent death of **[NAME]** is expected to make a significant impact on our entire school community. Our crisis team has been mobilized to respond to this tragic event.

On **[DATE]**, **[NAME]** died by **[INSERT BRIEF FACTS ABOUT DEATH]**. We expect a variety of reactions to this loss from our students, parents, and to you as members of our staff.

To effectively assist all members of our school community, an emergency staff meeting will be held at **[TIME]** on **[DATE]** in the **[MEETING LOCATION]**. At that time, our crisis team will provide further details and answer questions. We will also discuss how to present the information to our students. In the meantime, please refer all inquiries from outside sources to **[NAME OF THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER OR COMMUNICATION COORDINATOR]**.

With students, you can acknowledge that this death has occurred. However, please avoid discussion of details; simply tell students that the school staff will provide information to everyone shortly. Please refer any student who appears to be in crisis or who is having significant difficulty to **[NAME OF COUNSELING SERVICES COORDINATOR]**. As this tragedy has also affected our staff, we encourage you to also seek assistance, if desired.

Emergency Staff Meeting Details

Time: **[Enter text]**

Date: **[Enter text]**

Location: **[Enter text]**

If you have any questions or concerns before the meeting, please contact **[NAME OF CRISIS TEAM COORDINATOR]**.

Memorial Guidelines after Suicide Death



DO

DO be consistent in the ways you memorialize suicide and other losses.



DO NOT

DO NOT have policies or traditions in place that you would not want to uphold for every student death. What is done for one, should be done for all.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Have a consistent policy that no permanent memorials are allowed, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death. Treat all deaths in the same manner. If there is a history of dedicating the yearbook (or a page of the yearbook) to students who have died by other causes, that policy is equally applicable to a student who has died by suicide. Final editorial decisions should be made by an adult to ensure that it conforms to the standards in [After a Suicide Toolkit for Schools](#). The staff member in charge of the yearbook should work with the principal and school mental health professionals on these decisions.

Graduation: If there is a tradition of including a tribute to deceased student's who would have graduated with the class, individuals who have died by suicide should likewise be included. Schools may wish to include a brief statement acknowledging and naming those students from the graduating class who have died. Final decisions about what to include in such tributes should be made by the principal and appropriate staff.



DO

DO allow monitored, time-limited memorials, if students desire.



DO NOT

DO NOT allow memorials that are permanent, disruptive to learning, or that glamorize suicide or the individual who died by suicide (e.g., posting pictures of the student throughout the school).

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

If a spontaneous memorial develops around the students locker, have staff monitor the site and donate the notes and items to the family at the end of the week.

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Memorial Guidelines After Suicide Death



DO

DO use messaging and memorials to rally around the cause of suicide prevention and encourage use of resources and positive coping.



DO NOT

DO NOT participate in messaging or memorial activities that have a hopeless, blaming, or angry tone.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Invite students to remember the individual by participating in the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Walk. The focus should be on mental health and/or suicide prevention. Underneath the individual's yearbook picture it might read, "In your memory, we will work to erase the prejudice surrounding mental health problems and suicide." The yearbook page might also include pictures of classmates engaging in a suicide prevention event, such as an AFSP Out of the Darkness Walk.



DO

DO allow students who are immediately impacted an excused absence to attend the funeral.



DO NOT

DO NOT hold the funeral or memorial service at the school; bus students to the funeral, or invite all students in the school to a funeral or memorial service.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

If students ask to hold a memorial at the school, suggest an alternate way to remember their peer. If they are insistent on having a memorial, offer to have adults trained in mental health present at the event for support and encourage a small intimate event for those close to the deceased.



Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Memorial Guidelines After Suicide Death



DO

DO represent the problem of suicide accurately; recognize that suicide is complex and multifaceted.



DO NOT

DO NOT overstate the frequency of suicide, or oversimplify the causes of suicide as this may encourage blaming or hopelessness.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Express that suicide is a complex and rare event, but we can all help prevent suicide by taking care of our mental health and asking for help when we are struggling.



DO

DO be honest about the struggles and strengths of the deceased and the tragic consequences of their early death.

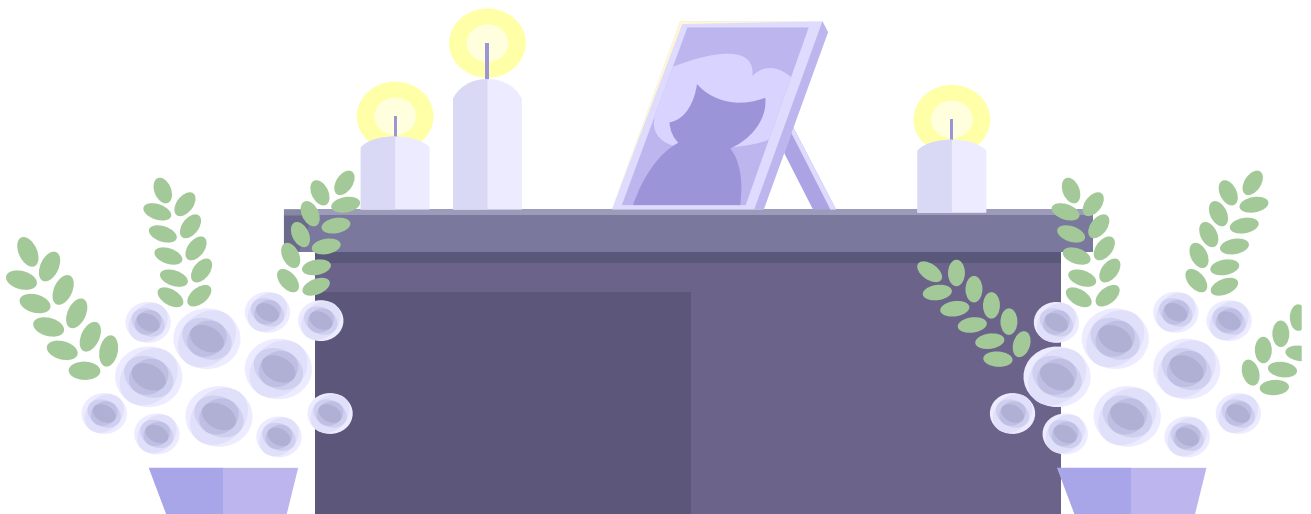


DO NOT

DO NOT turn the deceased into a saint or celebrity, or romanticize the way they died.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

At a funeral or media interview, express that the loss of this person's life is a terrible tragedy, and we hope that others who are thinking about suicide will take this opportunity to come forward and have the courage to ask for help.



Grief and Healing After a Suicide Loss: Considerations for Significant Dates and Anniversaries

“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. It is helpful to anticipate this and provide an opportunity to acknowledge the date, particularly with those students who were especially close to the student who died. These students may also need additional support since mourning can be a long-term process, and an anniversary of a loss can trigger the grief and trauma they experienced at the time of the death.”

- After A Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools

Milestones After a Loss

In addition to the anniversary of the death, there may be several important milestones and significant dates that stir up emotions, or that could be times of increased risk for some students and staff, such as:

- Graduation
- Birthdays
- Sporting Events
- Yearbook
- School Dances
- Etc.



If students and community members want to memorialize a student in a way that might be harmful to others at risk of suicide, it may help to validate their good intentions, educate them about how youth at risk of suicide might be impacted, and brainstorm safer alternatives.

For further support or consultation, please contact Cathy Davis at the [Utah State Board of Education](https://schools.utah.gov) at cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov or call (801) 538-7861.

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Grief and Healing After a Suicide Loss Considerations for Significant Dates and Anniversaries



DO

- Focus on suicide prevention rather than on person who died.
- Include students who are interested in activities such as:
 - Fundraising
www.afsp.org/chapter/utah
 - Promoting resources and help-seeking behavior (Signs of Suicide program
tinyurl.com/2p8pnkwr)
- Include students who are interested in efforts to improve school climate (acts of kindness, Gay Straight Alliance, or bullying prevention).



DO NOT

Glamorize the person who died or make them into a celebrity (i.e., when a sports team wears the deceased student's jersey, or classmates post their picture in the school newspaper).



DO

- Reach out proactively, via in-person visit, card, or phone call, to adults and students who were close to the person who died.
- Remind them that it is normal for anniversaries or milestones to be difficult, and that they are not alone in their grief.
- Use the deceased person's name and share memories of their life.



DO NOT

Ignore the anniversary of the loss or the fact that the loss happened, out of fear of triggering or upsetting loss survivors.

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Grief and Healing After a Suicide Loss Considerations for Significant Dates and Anniversaries



DO

- Focus any memorial activities on normalizing life, hope, recovery and help-seeking.
 - For example, display 100 handprints to show the 100 youth who reach out for help to SafeUT every day, with a large SafeUT logo; or collect and share stories of help-seeking and mental health recovery.



DO NOT

Focus on death or suicide data (i.e., five backpacks in the cafeteria to show the five students who have passed away).



Responding to Media After a Suicide

Helpful Tips for Public Information Officers

As a member of the media and your school district, you have a critical role in preventing suicides. The stories and messages you share impact those affected by, and those considering suicide; indeed, how you interact with media partners after a suicide can shape a community's attitude toward suicide prevention and recovery after a loss for months, or even years to come. We seek your partnership to save lives and reduce suffering, while informing the public in a safe way. Please consider the following recommendations when responding to a student death or suicide attempt.

Work with local media to ensure all communications are in the best interest of the family, students, and school community

- Prepare media partners before a crisis occurs on how their role impacts the school and community. Develop relationships with local media and educate local editorial staff on the importance of the media's role when they respond to a tragedy at a school. Have these conversations annually. Consider developing a media resource to distribute to local media so they know what to expect from the school and the school district in advance of any student death.
- Consider the timing of media communications: give the school and family time to coordinate the response before sharing any information with the media. If the death occurred in a public setting, is being shared widely on social media, or is likely to attract media attention for any reason, communicate with media partners early that a crisis plan is being activated, that students currently present at school are safe, and share resources available to those impacted. Request that media partners not report on the story until the school crisis team has been activated to support students impacted by the event, and/or the school has time to create a messaging plan that respects the family's wishes.
- Encourage the media to respect family privacy.
- Monitor social media related to the event in collaboration with a designated member of the crisis response team. Communicate to parents and the public that there is help for people and families experiencing a mental health crisis. Provide the Lifeline number 988, SafeUT App, and other [local resources](#).
- Remind media partners to follow safe messaging guidelines when reporting on suicide. Suicide messaging best practices can be found on Reporting on Suicide: <https://reportingonsuicide.org>
- Additional resources are available: [Live On Utah Safe Messaging Resources](#)

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Responding to Media After a Suicide

HOW WE TALK ABOUT SUICIDE MATTERS

Decades of research from around the world shows that certain types of news reports, fictional accounts, and portrayals of suicide (including mass media, news media, books, movies, T.V. shows, social media, etc.) can lead to increases in suicide, particularly among youth. In contrast, safe messaging, which fosters hope and promotes help seeking, saves lives.

Balancing media coverage of suicide with positive public health efforts, stories of individual recovery, and resources for help can change public misconceptions, correct myths, build hope, and encourage individuals to seek help.



DO

- Give hope by sharing resources and warning signs, and encouraging others to seek help.
Resources include:
 - **SafeUT App**
 - **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
988
 - **Trevor Lifeline** 1-866-488-7386
 - **Live on Utah**
<https://liveonutah.org/give-help/>
- Inform without sensationalizing.
- Convey that suicide is complex.
- Use nonjudgemental language such as "suicide attempt," "died by suicide," or "ended his/her/their life"



DO NOT

- Do not contribute to a fatalistic narrative that suicide rates are "skyrocketing," or that suicide happens "without warning."
- Do not share details such as as suicide method, location, or suicide note.
- Do not convey that the suicide was caused by a single event (such as a result of bullying, a break-up, etc.).
- Do not refer to a suicide as "successful," or a "failed attempt." Do not use the term "committed suicide."

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Tips for Talking about Suicide

Suicide is a difficult topic for most people to talk about. This tool suggests ways to talk about key issues that may come up when someone dies by suicide.

Give accurate info about suicide	By Saying...
<p>Suicide is a complicated behavior. It is not caused by a single event.</p> <p>In many cases, mental health conditions, such as depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD, or psychosis, or a substance use disorder are present leading up to a suicide. Mental health conditions affect how people feel and prevent them from thinking clearly. Having a mental health problem is actually common and nothing to be ashamed of. Help is available.</p> <p>Talking about suicide in a calm, straightforward way does not put the idea into people's minds.</p>	<p>"The cause of [NAME]'s death was suicide. Suicide is not caused by a single event. In many cases, the person has a mental health or substance use disorder and then other life issues occur at the same time leading to overwhelming mental and/or physical pain, distress, and hopelessness."</p> <p>"There are effective treatments to help people with mental health or substance abuse problems, or who are having suicidal thoughts."</p> <p>"Mental health problems are not something to be ashamed of. They are a type of health issue."</p>
Address blaming and scapegoating	By Saying...
<p>It is common to try to answer the question "why?" after a suicide death. Sometimes this turns into blaming others for the death.</p>	<p>"Blaming others or the person who died does not consider the fact that the person was experiencing a lot of distress and pain. Blaming is not fair and can hurt another person deeply."</p>
Do not focus on the method	By Saying...
<p>Talking in detail about the method can create images that are upsetting and can increase the risk of imitative behavior by vulnerable individuals.</p> <p>The focus should not be on how someone killed themselves, but rather on how to cope with feelings of sadness, loss, anger, etc.</p>	<p>"Let's talk about how [NAME]'s death has affected you and ways you can handle it."</p> <p>"How can you deal with your loss and grief?"</p>

Healing Our Schools After a Loss

Tips for Talking about Suicide

Address anger	By Saying...
Accept expressions of anger at the deceased and explain that these feelings are normal.	"It is okay to feel angry. These feelings are normal, and it doesn't mean that you didn't care about [NAME]. You can be angry at someone's behavior and still care deeply about that person."
Address feelings of responsibility	By Saying...
Help students understand that they are not responsible for the suicide of the deceased. Reassure those who feel responsible or think they could have done something to save the deceased.	"This death is not your fault. We cannot always see the signs because a suicidal person may hide them." "We cannot always predict someone else's behavior."
Promote help-seeking	By Saying...
Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult if they or a friend are feeling depressed.	"Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness." "We are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried or depressed, or had thoughts of suicide?" "If you are concerned about yourself or a friend, talk with a trusted adult."

Find more tips at:

www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/AfteraSuicideToolkitforSchools.pdf

Small Group Intervention and Triage

Any students who request support or show observable crisis reactions on the day of the event should be invited and escorted to the designated room(s) for Small Group Intervention and Triage. These small groups can be facilitated by clinical counselors or trained school counselors, and are particularly useful when there are more than a few students with crisis reactions who would benefit from talking to a member of the crisis team and one-on-one meetings are not feasible. However, the same overall structure could be applied to a one-on-one meeting with a student. For full instructions on how to facilitate these small groups, please see the [“Crisis Response: Healing our Schools & Ourselves”](#) training developed by the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

1. Purpose of the small groups and the group facilitators are introduced. (5 minutes)
Review any ground rules (i.e., be respectful of others, you don’t have to talk if you don’t feel comfortable, your parents will be contacted later to let them know you received support, etc.).
2. Answer questions and dispel rumors. (5-10 minutes).
 - Help students understand the crisis.
 - Do not discuss frightening or unsafe details. If asked, you can explain why we don’t share graphic details.
3. Educate students regarding common crisis reactions. Discuss and promote helpful/healthy coping strategies versus unhelpful/unhealthy coping strategies. (15 minutes).
 - Support healthy norms about help seeking and discourage norms supportive of suicide. For example: “_____ was a good person and they made a tragic, bad decision. I wish they had asked for help instead. What happened to _____ will not happen to you because we are here for you; you can ask us for help and we will be there with you when you need us.”
 - Describe and normalize common physical, cognitive, and emotional reactions.
 - Discuss helpful and healthy coping vs. unhelpful and unhealthy coping strategies.
 - Identify social supports and crisis resources.
 - Ask all students to share what coping skill(s) they plan on using before closing the group.
4. Close

Contact Information

There are trained, caring experts who can help you respond to a suicide incident.

- For school-specific questions, for content expertise and postvention support:

Cathy Davis

Suicide Prevention Specialist and Crisis Team Lead

[Utah State Board of Education](#)

cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov

(801) 538-7861

or

Michelle Knight

Project AWARE Manager and Crisis Team Co-Lead

[Utah State Board of Education](#)

michelle.knight@schools.utah.gov

(610) 844-7771

- For community suicide prevention content expertise:

Carol Ruddell

Suicide Prevention and Crisis Services Administrator

[Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health](#)

cgruddell@utah.gov

(385) 368-1777

- For tips on working with media partners and reporting on suicide:

Jenny Johnson

Public Information Officer

[Utah Department of Health](#)

jennyjohnson@utah.gov

(801) 209-2591

Sources

Information in this document was sourced from the following:

- [After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [PREPaRE](#)
- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
- [The National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
- [Signs of Suicide](#)
- [LiveON Utah Suicide Prevention Campaign](#)