

# Critical Incident Resource



**Tri-County Regional School Board**  
Nova Scotia, Canada

**Students First**

**Approved:**

## CRITICAL INCIDENT RESOURCE

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# **I. Preface**

- A. Introduction**
- B. School Responsibilities**
- C. Legal Considerations**

## **I. PREFACE**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

*-Adapted from Responding to a Critical Incident, Resource Guide for Schools as referenced in the Bibliography.*

A critical incident is an event which may have a traumatizing impact on the school population, parents or the community to such an extent that the school's mandate of education cannot be fulfilled. Schools and school districts often deal with sudden, unexpected incidents that have the potential to adversely affect the students, staff and community. Sudden deaths, serious injuries and violence or abuse can have a significant effect on a school population. Other traumatic events such as fires, flooding or other threats to the school or community can have an impact on staff and students.

Critical incidents can result in intense feelings such as sadness, anxiety, guilt or anger in students and staff. Schools must make plans in advance for interventions that can be activated in order to reduce the negative impact of critical incidents on the school community.

A pre-planned protocol for supporting students and staff can be effective in reducing psychological, physical, and social difficulties. The main purpose in providing support to staff and students is to empower them and their families to help themselves and to enhance their skills for future critical incidents in their lives.

This resource is intended to assist schools in developing protocols for responding to critical incidents. It focuses on proactive plans to deal with the traumatic after-effects of a critical incident. It outlines a generic protocol that includes steps to be taken in response to a critical incident and includes materials to help school staff understand and carry out their support functions after a crisis.

Critical incidents affecting a school community include not only those crises that occur during the school day and on school property. Incidents that occur on school property after hours or away from school property, such as on a field trip or at a sporting event, may also require immediate response from school authorities. All schools must have plans in place for handling emergency situations as they are happening.

## **B. SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **1. PREPARING FOR CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE**

Planning should include readiness to deal with emergencies and a plan for responding to the traumatic effects of a critical incident. Planning should include:

- identification of members of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team,
- development of the School-based Critical Incident Response Plan to handle the traumatic after-effects of a crisis,
- protocol for the effective management of emergency situations,
- participation in training for handling both emergencies and responses to critical incidents, and
- scheduled reviews, as needed, of School-based Critical Incident Response Plan according to Policy 746.

Safety of the students and staff should be the first consideration in developing emergency procedures. Other key issues to be considered in the plans include:

- how to assess the severity of the situation,
- the method to be used to call for assistance,
- procedures for defusing, controlling the crisis, and accessing further help,
- the role of the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team and whether to hand over the incident to that team, and
- meeting time for Teams to decide what further action to take and whether the plan was successful.

### **2. RESPONDING TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT**

Once the safety of the staff and students is assured, the protocol for responding after a critical incident is as follows:

- The Superintendent of Schools or designate should be notified as soon as possible when a critical incident has occurred.
- The School-based Critical Incident Response Team should be freed from their regular roles and responsibilities temporarily so that they can carry out the plans and respond quickly and efficiently to the needs of students and staff.
- The School-based Critical Incident Response Team, in conjunction with the Coordinator of Student Services, will determine if additional support from the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team is needed and ensure that the Superintendent of Schools or designate is aware of the decision.
- It is essential to review the handling of a critical incident and follow up with recommendations for improvements to the plan. With each use of the plan, the people involved will discover ways to refine and improve it.
- If the nature of a critical incident is one in which the school community comes face to face with serious social issues, such as spousal abuse, racism, or discrimination based on sexual orientation, this information will be reported to the Superintendent of Schools or designate in the initial report of the critical incident. The Coordinator of Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights will also be contacted.

### **C. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Adapted from Responding to a Critical Incident, Resource Guide for Schools as referenced in the Bibliography*

As part of the preparation of School and Board Plans, issues of records management and privacy need to be understood. Teams will consult with the Board's information and privacy administrator to ensure that plans are consistent with the requirements of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPOP). The requirements of FOIPOP apply only to written records and not to oral communications. However, any written record based on an oral communication, such as a handout, is subject to the requirements of the act (see page 32-33 for more information on FOIPOP).

Schools are also cautioned that the provisions of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) apply to any report that contains information about an alleged offence committed by a young offender (see page 33 for more information).

## **II. Critical Incident Response Teams**

- A. Tri-County Regional School Board Critical Incident Response Team**
- B. School-based Critical Incident Response Team**
- C. Individual Responsibilities**

## II. CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAMS

### A. TRI-COUNTY REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

The Tri-County Regional School Board (TCRSB) Critical Incident Response Team is available for assistance when any critical incident occurs. This team acts as a resource/support for school teams and in addition to a school team depending on the magnitude (severity/extent/impact) of the event.

The TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team may be deployed at the request of the school and/or at the discretion of the Superintendent of Schools or designate. The School-based Critical Incident Response Team, in consultation with the Coordinator of Student Services, will determine the type and amount of assistance required.

The Superintendent of Schools or designate will organize this Team at the beginning of each school year.

#### RESPONSIBILITIES

##### **Preplanning occurs before September 30.**

The TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team will:

- Update initial contact information
- Forward initial contact information to principals

The Coordinator of Student Services will meet with the members of the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team to review the Critical Incident Resource.

##### **Responding to a request from a School-based Critical Incident Response Team**

- Coordinator of Student Services consults with School Administration or designate to verify the facts and to determine a plan of action
- Establish a central base and a communication network (i.e. phones), if required
- Assist School Administration/School-based Critical Incident Response Team with decisions when necessary regarding:
  - reassignment of personnel
  - substitute teachers
  - transportation
  - type of supports
  - staff meetings
  - media/public relations
  - safety issues
  - addressing misinformation
- Assist School Administration/School-based Critical Incident Response Team with the arrangement of meetings and/or support from appropriate resources
- Assist School Administration/School-based Critical Incident Response Team in preparing statements to be read to students (ensuring that all schools impacted receive the same statement), information letters to parents, and ensures that the relevant information is forwarded to Tri County Regional School Board members.
- Maintain a list of students who may require follow-up support

**Follow-up**

- The TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team members present may meet with school team/school staff at the end of the day to discuss the day's progress
- The responding members of the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team meet at the end of each day to discuss the day's progress and following the conclusion of the critical incident to discuss personal reactions to the incident and to review the process and make recommendations for future planning

## **B. SCHOOL-BASED CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM**

The role of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team is to develop a critical incident plan and enact that plan should it be deemed necessary. This Team is to be organized at the beginning of each school year. Each Team will consist of the Principal, a minimum of two staff members, and where possible a guidance counsellor from the school.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **Preplanning occurs before September 30.**

The School-Based Team will:

- update and review the Critical Incident Response Plan and phone tree
- submit School-based Critical Incident Response Plan and Team membership to the Superintendent of Schools or designate by the end of September
- decide the protocol with regards to “memorials” created by students/staff (a “memorial” in one instance, but not in the next, may raise questions of fairness and favoritism that can escalate emotions and introduce conflict unnecessarily (see page 49)
- review the Plan with all staff including teachers, support staff, and volunteers
- designate areas in the school for counselling and gathering centres (see Supporting Document A: Temporary Counselling Drop-in Centres, pg. 44)
- identify and update list of substitute/retired teachers and substitute support staff to contact if necessary

#### **Responding**

- School-based team determines the degree of impact of the incident and how to respond as soon as possible after verifying the facts of an incident
- develop a course of action using the school’s Critical Incident Response Plan
- determine if the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team needs to be brought in
- meet with the staff as soon as possible to discuss the course of action and its implementation
- monitor classes where assistance is necessary
- may provide direct assistance to individuals and classes
- identify any individual students and staff who may be “at risk” or need additional support; maintain a list
- identify any individual students and staff who may need to go home; call home if necessary
- be alert to absent students and staff
- assign space for critical incident team members to provide support
- maintain a list of students who may require follow-up support

#### **Follow-up**

- meet with the staff at the end of each day to discuss the day’s progress
- the Team should meet daily for a few days following the event to review and determine further action, if any is necessary
- after an appropriate amount of time, a further staff meeting may be beneficial; member(s) of the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team may be invited to these sessions

- meet following the critical incident to discuss personal reactions to the incident and to review the process and make recommendations for future planning

## **C. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **1. SCHOOL PRINCIPAL (or designate)**

- contact Superintendent of Schools or designate and maintain liaison with Superintendent of Schools or designate
- contact with the media should take place through the Superintendent or designate
- gather facts – confirm/clarify details of the event
- inform area schools where potentially affected students may attend
- arrange meeting with the School Team and/or TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team as soon as possible
- contact the family to determine what information can be disseminated
- arrange for staff meeting before the beginning of the school day
- identify staff in need of support and arrange additional personnel, as necessary
- prepare scripts and notices to staff and/or parents
- reorganize school activities as necessary
- contact families directly affected by the event
- keep staff updated
- remain highly visible
- hold staff meeting at the end of the first day and each following day, as necessary
- if a death is involved, arrange for removal of student's name from the active roster, computer, etc. and remove personal items from locker or desk (*This should not be done immediately*)
- meet with the school team to determine follow-up
- return to normal routine as soon as possible

### **2. GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR (if applicable)**

- support critical incident response team members and assign space to offer support
- reschedule guidance oriented activities
- develop list of students who may be “at risk”; for example, students who have suicidal ideation may be at high risk if a suicide has occurred or someone who has just experienced tremendous loss may be at risk if a death occurs.
- maintain a list of students who may require follow-up support
- call parents of students who are extremely affected

### **3. STAFF**

- attend all staff meetings as required and inform your class as directed
- allow students to discuss the event and their reactions to it, recognizing that there will be many different responses; teachers may request assistance from the School-based Team/TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team
- inform students of availability and location of counsellors
- identify students in need of support especially those close to the victim or those having a major reaction; send a list of students you feel need to be seen to the office
- arrange to have distraught students accompanied to a designated counselling area
- class activities should be modified as necessary to meet the needs of the students
- resume normal activities as soon as possible
- recognize your reaction to the event and access support as needed

# **III. School-Based Critical Incident Response Plan Guidelines**

## **A. Developing a Critical Incident Response Plan**

## **B. Suggested Critical Incident Protocol**

**Step 1 – Gathering the Facts**

**Step 2 – Contacting the Board**

**Step 3 – Activating the School Team**

**Step 4 – Communicating with Staff**

**Step 5 – Setting up Counselling Centres**

**Step 6 – Informing Students**

**Step 7 – Informing Parents**

**Step 8 – Discussions and Planning Staff**

**Step 9 – Providing Funeral Information**

**Step 10 – Planning Memorial Activities**

**Step 11 – Reviewing the Events**

## **C. Time Line for Responding**

### **III. SCHOOL-BASED CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE PLAN GUIDELINES**

#### **A. DEVELOPING A CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE PLAN**

Adapted from Responding to a Critical Incident, Resource Guide for Schools

There are many things to consider in the process of developing the plan, from practical questions of telephone lists to the very difficult tasks of diplomacy and ensuring sensitivity to the emotional needs of those affected. Each school community is different and has unique needs. It is important to consider the following areas of concern when developing a plan.

#### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Given the diversity that exists in school and the community, staff members will need to give consideration to developing plans with strategies that are flexible to meet this diversity. These strategies will need to be appropriate for individuals and groups who may respond differently than staff would expect from their own cultural perspective. There are some important ideas to consider when developing and implementing a critical incident response plan to address cultural diversity in the school:

- Respect that beliefs and practices in regards to religion, death, and the grieving process differ amongst cultures
- Individuals and groups from diverse cultural backgrounds may respond differently to stressful situations,
- Services employed to respond to a critical incident may need to go outside the school or region to community support staff that possess additional skills such as fluency in other languages.

#### **INDIVIDUALS AT RISK**

Some individuals in the school community are particularly at risk following a critical incident. Children or adults who have a close relationship with a person who dies may be at risk and need support. Individuals who have had a difficult relationship with the person who dies may also be at risk and need support. Staff or students who have suffered a personal loss may be strongly affected by a death or other crisis affecting the school. Students who are already at risk for suicide, especially those who have made previous suicide attempts, may be at an increased risk in the aftermath of a crisis situation, particularly if the critical incident is a student suicide. Appropriate responses will decrease the likelihood of imitation, sometimes referred to as “copy cat suicides”. Staff and students who are close to a person who commits suicide will usually feel both anger and guilt that they were unable to prevent the death. They may require reassurance and assistance in understanding their own feelings and help finding counselling.

Young people may feel isolated and alone with their pain after a loss or tragedy. The school must respond with support to assure students that they are not alone, that their feelings and responses are normal, and that help is available. Advance planning can assist school staff members in recognizing students who need help dealing with a crisis. Critical incident training can provide school staff with the skills to initiate effective action.

**VULNERABLE STUDENTS**

Some students are more vulnerable following exposure to a critical incident because of their circumstances. Students with special needs, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, students who have English as a second language, and students who may lack parental guidance while residing in Canada, illustrate just a few circumstances that may warrant extra attention. For example, students with behaviour disorders and frequently accompanying low self-esteem may react disproportionately to a crisis or trauma, even if the event does not directly affect them. Students who have difficulties such as poor communication skills or intellectual disabilities may need additional support to understand and deal with the incident. Some students are disrupted by changes in their normal routine and the response to a critical incident may even further disrupt their coping ability. Some students are more susceptible to depression, self-destructive behaviours, and are at greater risk for suicide. This may be due, in part, to the fact that they have difficulty understanding and expressing their feelings or because they suffer from feelings of isolation. Critical Incident Response Teams should take particular care in planning support for these individual students. Parents may need to be involved in planning for some children; for example, the plan might include a student being removed temporarily from the school environment. Whenever possible, however, the Response Team should implement school-based interventions for most students.

**STAFF NEEDS**

School staff may be surprised at their own responses to a tragedy in the school community. Staff who are close to the deceased or directly affected by the traumatic event may require extra support to carry out their roles in a school plan. Some may experience anxiety or sadness that seem out of proportion to their relationship to the person involved in the critical incident. This can be due in part to the existence of unresolved losses. All staff should be kept well informed and given an opportunity to discuss their own feelings. The nature of the critical incident and the level of personal involvement in helping students cope may bring up issues in their own lives that require counselling support.

Because critical incidents can be traumatic, the normal coping mechanisms of experienced teachers and other staff members can break down. Adults can feel severe distress symptoms that make it difficult for them to work effectively. Staff may need help in dealing with stress. Even if they believe that they are coping well with the crisis, staff may feel symptoms of stress such as fatigue, upset stomach, headaches, chest pains, poor concentration, numbing, a feeling of being overwhelmed, or other reactions. It is important to monitor reactions and possibly make decisions for individuals.

Plans for critical incidents should include how to provide stress counselling for staff. Staff should be given the opportunity to participate in critical incident stress counselling if they choose. Facilitators carrying out the counselling should have training in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing.

## **B. SUGGESTED SCHOOL-BASED CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE PROTOCOL**

### **STEP 1 – GATHERING THE FACTS**

1. Principal confirms the critical incident with appropriate sources of reliable information:
  - immediate family
  - police
  - Board personnel
  - Community resource personnel such as Early Response Service members
2. Principal collects information on the critical incident, including:
  - verification of the details
  - identification of individuals involved
  - evaluation of the emotional status of school to determine the immediate safety needs of students and staff
3. Principal consults with the families affected to determine their wishes concerning public announcements and information for school staff and students
  - express condolences if you have already verified (through reliable sources) that a death has occurred
  - if calling to verify news of a tragic event do not be invasive in asking for details, simply ask for confirmation of the incident
  - determine the wishes of the family regarding what information may be released to teachers/students (e.g. some families do not want public acknowledgement of suicide)
  - determine the wishes of the family regarding school involvement in the funeral, possible memorial service at school or other memorial activities (flowers, charitable donations, etc.)

### **STEP 2 – CONTACTING THE BOARD**

The Principal telephones the Superintendent of Schools or designate. If the Superintendent of Schools or designate is unavailable, the Principal contacts the Coordinator of Student Services.

### **STEP 3 – ACTIVATING THE SCHOOL TEAM**

1. The Principal contacts the members of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team and determines an appropriate plan of action that takes into consideration both the wishes of the family or families and the needs of the school (*Guidelines for a School-based Critical Incident Response Team meeting are provided on page 36*).

In brief, the team should:

- determine what needs to be done
- clarify each person's tasks
- ensure that confidentiality is maintained until information is shared with the whole staff and clarify family privacy issues

2. The School Team notifies the rest of the staff including secretarial, custodial, and other support staff of a special staff meeting. If the critical incident occurred during an evening or weekend, a scripted telephone tree message can be used to call staff to a meeting before the next school day. Care should be taken about using the phone tree:
  - ensure that each person understands the message about the staff meeting by asking them to repeat the message back to the caller
  - avoid leaving a message on an answering machine/voice mail or with another person
  - reassign telephoning responsibility for people who may be most affected by the incident
  
3. Tasks for the School-based Team before the start of the school day, if possible:
  - confirm further details of the event
  - plan a meeting to inform staff
  - prepare a written statement for the staff meeting
  - ensure that the Superintendent or designate is provided with detailed information necessary to effectively carry out the role
  - determine the family's wishes regarding personal property if the incident has been a sudden death and ensure that personal property is secure (e.g., replace the lock on the individual's locker)
  - Refer to the protocol decided in the preplanning with regards to "memorials" created by students/staff
  - assess whether substitutes will be needed and advise the appropriate person to contact them
  - identify members of the school community that may be most affected by the incident and plan support for these people
  - assess need for additional counselling support in the school and ask the TCRSB Team to assist in making the necessary arrangements
  - decide whether a letter will go home with students informing parents of the critical incident
  
4. Tasks for the School-based Team during the school day:
  - supply a brief, written statement for office staff to use in referring incoming queries or media calls to the appropriate person
  - activate plans for drop-in counselling centres and assign counsellors and other staff as appropriate
  - determine if additional support will be needed from the TCRSB Team
  - lower the flag when appropriate
  - prepare the letter to parents if one is needed (*see pages 51-54 for sample letters*)

#### **STEP 4 – COMMUNICATING WITH STAFF**

1. The Principal informs all staff of the critical incident at an emergency staff meeting or by phone tree if the incident occurs outside of school hours (*see page 35 for sample phone trees*). This meeting should be held prior to the start of school, if possible. In addition to teachers, be sure to inform all staff. **After the meeting, ensure that all staff that were unable to attend the meeting are informed.**

2. At the emergency staff meeting include the following:
  - advise staff to deal with students at their own comfort level
  - reassure staff that they will be supported in their efforts to give comfort to students and that additional help is available to anyone who needs it, staff or students
  - reintroduce members of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team
  - introduce any people from the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team or the community who are in attendance at the meeting and may be present in the school providing support to staff or students
  
3. Develop a plan for the day **with the staff**:
  - maintain a regular school schedule, if possible
  - cancel special activities, if necessary
  - carefully state the information that should be given to students during class discussion and provide all staff with necessary information
  - inform the staff of the counselling services that are available to staff, students and parents
  - in the case of a sudden death or suicide, consider assigning a counsellor to visit the scheduled classes of the deceased
  - identify students who are closest friends or relatives of the deceased or injured and make plans to inform them with additional sensitivity and support
  - identify students at risk, those who are vulnerable to stress or changes in routines, and make specific plans for each student (this task can be assigned to a key staff member such as a counsellor, or resource teacher)
  - ensure that staff members who are absent get information and make plans to assist substitute teachers with classroom discussions
  - plan for informing students who are absent
  
4. Additional staff meetings may be needed:
  - Keep staff informed throughout the day by calling short update meetings during breaks.
  - Gather information about student and staff needs throughout the day.

### **STEP 5 – SETTING UP COUNSELLING CENTRES**

Plans for the designation of counselling centres in the event of a critical incident should be in place. When a traumatic event occurs, there is not sufficient time to carefully discuss how this service will be organized.

Specific rooms or areas of the school can be designated for dealing with a potentially large number of people who are grieving or experiencing high levels of stress following a critical incident. *(See page 44 for more information on setting up counselling centres)*

**STEP 6 – INFORMING STUDENTS**

1. Be sure there is a teacher in each classroom as the students arrive for the day.
2. Give information on the critical incident in a low-key and factual manner, which may include:
  - what happened
  - when and where the events occurred
  - who was there at the time of the incident
  - what happened after the event
  - who might be seriously affected by the incident because of their relationship with people directly affected by the traumatic event
  - what is going to happen next
  - provide information on the funeral arrangements when available
3. Give the students the opportunity to react, discuss, and ask questions.
  - Allow time for the students to express their feelings. Keep in mind that reaction times may vary.
  - Give students permission to express what they uniquely feel. Listen and be empathetic.
  - Consider using activities to help students process their grief, such as art, poetry or creative journal writing.
4. Once the talk seems to be over, begin the regular class routines with flexibility to respond to more questions throughout the day.

Teachers will need to be prepared to hear some unexpected questions and to respond in a respectful manner. They will need to model, by their behaviour that the critical incident is serious while at the same time show warmth and understanding for all students.

Teachers should watch carefully for individual students who are having a hard time coping to ensure they get access to help in the counselling centres. It is better to over-refer than under-refer. Teachers should not try to second-guess the level of grief of a student or staff member, as people respond to trauma and grieve differently.

Following a critical incident, a student may report other traumatic events in their lives such as child abuse. All staff should be clear on the protocol for reporting child abuse and neglect and be prepared to take action to get help for the student in areas that may seem unrelated to the current trauma situation.

**STEP 7 – INFORMING PARENTS**

In general, parents who are well informed are better equipped to support their children at home. Send a letter home with the students to inform parents of the incident, if appropriate (*see pages 51-54 for sample letters*). Information shared in such a letter should be carefully worded to ensure that personal and family privacy is respected. As this letter is a written record, disclosure of personal information is covered by FOIPOP. Personal information, however, should only be disclosed to the extent that it is permitted under FOIPOP (*see page 32-33 for more information regarding FOIPOP*).

**STEP 8 – STAFF DISCUSSION AND PLANNING**

It is imperative at the end of the first day that staff meets to discuss the day's events and make plans for the following days. Staff should also be given a chance to discuss their own feelings about the event and procedures followed.

**STEP 9 – PROVIDING FUNERAL INFORMATION**

In the case of a death, inform staff and students of plans for funeral arrangements and/or memorial services.

- When appropriate, students and staff should have the opportunity to attend the funeral. To do this, the School Team should arrange permission from Board level administration to dismiss students.
- Decisions about allowing funeral attendance should be governed by the wishes of the family. Student and staff attendance at the funeral can provide support for the family if that is the family's choice. Students should be informed of the family's wishes regarding attendance at the funeral service.
- Ensure that students who plan to attend the funeral are prepared by helping them anticipate what happens at funerals. Explain the purpose of various rituals, appropriate etiquette at the ceremony, and other topics as necessary.

**STEP 10 – PLANNING MEMORIAL ACTIVITIES**

Family wishes should guide planning of a remembrance activity after a critical incident that involved a student or staff death (*see sample memorial activities on page 49*).

- Large assemblies are not recommended for acute grief situations.
- Students or staff may wish to express their grief and sympathy by contributing something in the name(s) of the deceased: a scholarship fund, school landscaping, a school plaque, books for the library, construction of a showcase, or some other appropriate means.
- Staff may need to provide leadership to students wishing to establish an appropriate remembrance, as judgment of peers may be impaired following a traumatic event.

**STEP 11 – REVIEWING THE EVENTS**

As a final step, the School Team should meet to review the events while they are still recent, preferably within two weeks. This will serve several purposes: improve the plans, raise staff skills about the use of the protocol, and tie up loose ends and concerns following the critical incident. The meeting should include:

- A review of how well the plan guided the actions of staff, identifying improvements that can be made in the school plan for future situations.
- An evaluation of how well the actions taken as part of the plan were carried out. Appropriate changes can be made for next time, including additional training, if needed.
- A plan to write letters of appreciation to all who helped.

### **C. TIME LINE FOR RESPONDING**

*Adapted from Halifax Regional School Board, Crisis Intervention Guide as referenced in the Bibliography*

#### **DAY ONE**

1. School-Based Critical Incident Response Team (and TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team, if necessary) arrive at the school at least 30 minutes before the staff meeting to finalize plans and define roles and responsibilities.
2. Staff meeting occurs about 30 minutes before the first students arrive
3. Teachers go to classroom and others go to designated areas so they are present when students begin arriving.
4. Counselling Centre is to be set up.
5. Plan is followed as designed for the day.
6. The person answering the phone will have a written message to use when answering questions.
7. A list of community resources is to be available.
8. If a letter is to be sent home to parents, have this prepared by the end of the day.
9. Staff Meeting concludes the day.

Note: During the first day the staff and student reactions are very intense. The first hour of the day often is the most tense and emotional. The Critical Incident Response Teams will be visible in the school, especially in smaller schools. It is important, however, that they are as unobtrusive as possible.

#### **DAY TWO**

1. The day should begin with a brief staff meeting. At this time staff should be updated and the plan for the day is discussed. As much as possible, this day should begin a return to normal routines and structures.
2. Prepare any further statements to be made to the students. This is especially important if there has been serious injury, staff and students will want progress reports.
3. Counselling Centre should be set up again as needed; usually there is a reduction of services.
4. Students who are having extreme difficulty should be monitored.
5. A member of the Critical Incident Response Teams should quietly be moving through the building to monitor and offer assistance as required.
6. Determine how the school will extend support and/or sympathy to the family.
7. Again, a brief staff meeting should be held at the end of the day.
8. Critical Incident Response Teams to meet to determine further plan as necessary.

#### **DAY THREE**

1. Things should be back to routine.
2. Announce any further information as needed, such as memorial service, funeral arrangements, or progress reports.
3. A brief staff meeting should be held to check in with staff.
4. A meeting should be held for the School Team to discuss and determine the need for follow-up support.

## **IV. Communications**

- A. Communication Action Plan**
- B. Communications Centre**
- C. Giving and Receiving Messages**
- D. Dealing with the Media**
- E. Informing Parents/Guardians**
- F. Informing Students**
- G. Class Discussion**
- H. Legal Considerations**

## IV. COMMUNICATIONS

### A. COMMUNICATION ACTION PLAN

During a crisis, communication is an extremely important issue. It is recommended that all incoming and outgoing communications be recorded. Media requests for information should be forwarded to the Superintendent or designate.

A communication action plan allows you to quickly identify who needs to be contacted, with what message and avoids any errors of omission in gathering and distributing information.

After you have selected all of the target groups that need to be contacted, it is important to record:

- the order of importance,
- who should make the contact,
- when the contact is to be made,
- the format (phone call, letter) and content (core and supporting messages), and
- when contacts are made.

Remember it is normal, in times of stress, to become less effective or ineffective communicators. Regardless of form or content, all messages need to be organized and factual and designed with the target group (audience) in mind. When possible, it is advisable to prepare a written summary or in some cases a complete and formal statement before making contact.

## **B. COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE**

During a critical incident it is important to set up a central location for gathering and distributing information. School staff and Critical Incident Response Team members should be instructed to refer all information and questions to the Communications Centre. This ensures that all information is consistent and factual.

### **Staff assigned to the communications centre need to be:**

- calm
- capable of being diplomatic
- good communicators
- sensitive to issues of confidentiality

### **Staff assigned to the communications centre will require:**

- specific guidelines regarding what information needs to be gathered and what information may be released
- a copy of the Communication Action Plan
- record forms for incoming and outgoing messages (*see page 42*)
- tools for communication, such as walkie-talkies, cell phone, etc.

## **C. GIVING AND RECEIVING MESSAGES**

### **1. When formulating messages, consider the following:**

- the needs of the audience
- the messages to be communicated
- the objectives to be achieved
- the regulations under FOIPOP
- developing a script with a concise factual message about the nature of the critical incident
- if you are giving instructions, state clearly what you want done (e.g. remain on standby, come to the school)
- if you expect a person to come to you, tell them where to park, what entrance to use and who to ask for
- a statement about who is receiving or sending the message

### **2. Keep a record of all communication including:**

- the name of the person and to whom they are speaking
- the time of the contact
- the message given
- the form of communication

## **D. DEALING WITH THE MEDIA**

The media may become involved whenever a critical incident occurs. In some situations (e.g. when you need to get information out to large numbers of people) the media can be extremely helpful. In other situations (e.g. during a major disaster) they may simply add to the confusion. In still other situations (e.g. when a reporter is aggressive and adversarial) they can create additional stress.

During crisis situations, schools may find that the news media are planning to report on the events as they occur. It is important to have an established protocol in order to protect school personnel and the student body from misrepresentation or exploitation, and to ensure that the information provided to the media is appropriate, accurate and prompt. In addition, consultation may need to take place with Board officials or legal advisors to ensure that Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy requirements are followed as well as limitations to publishing information under the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). Prior to speaking with news media, the principal or designate shall consult with the Superintendent of Schools or designate.

**Tri-County Regional School Board Policy #103 Media Releases should be followed with regards to official press releases.**

It is important to remember the following:

- the media is a fact of life
- the media may become adversarial in their attempts to get the news behind the news
- the media will place you, your staff and procedures under scrutiny
- the media is a competitive business with all reporters attempting to get the scoop
- the wishes of the family are crucial in making decisions about the information provided to the media
- the manner and content of the information released to the media can have serious legal implications for the school district.
- keep staff informed through one person designated to control rumours
- set geographic and time limits; it is your right to determine who is allowed on your property, where they are allowed to be, and how long they can be there
- do not refuse to speak to the press; direct them to the appropriate person
- explain all restrictions (e.g. no student can be interviewed without parental permission; staff can be interviewed only with administrative approval; no one can be interviewed on school property)

## **E. INFORMING PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Parents of students directly involved in a critical incident that happens at school should be contacted immediately and provided with details of the incident and information about their child before information is given to other parents.

Parents will want information when a critical incident in the school community may be affecting their children. Special communications to parents can be extremely helpful in gaining their support for the school and in reaching satisfactory closure to the incident for students. In some cases, communication by telephone may be advisable. In other cases, where the number of contacts precludes telephone contact, a letter is more useful.

### **Notifying parents regarding in-school or out-of-school incidents during school functions/trips**

- Report the facts that you have been able to verify, do not speculate
- If you want them to come to the school tell them which entrance to use and the name of the staff that will meet them

### **Receiving call/visits from parents wanting information regarding a critical incident:**

- Report the facts you have been able to verify. Have a written statement and refer any other questions to the Principal or designate.
- During major crises or disasters, you may need to designate lines. You may consider using the school's main office as the Information Centre. Ensure there is ongoing communication with the Board Office at all times to provide them with updated factual information.
- Make plans to accommodate parents who come to the school following a critical incident. During major crises or disasters when parents may arrive in great numbers at the school it is important to designate an area (e.g. cafeteria, gym or designated outside area) where they can meet with staff to obtain information. In these cases you may need staff to direct parents to the appropriate place and to direct vehicle traffic.
- Parents or other concerned community members may gravitate to the school in response to a critical incident. They may wish to take their children home or may be looking for information or help with their own emotional responses to the incident. If parents arrive to collect students, have students sign-out.
- Support materials for parents on how to help students deal with trauma can be made available and information about community resources can be provided.

### **Addressing parents as a group when a critical incident occurs:**

- Involve community agencies as appropriate (e.g. RCMP, Early Response Service).
- Discuss the facts and dispel rumours.
- Enlist parent support in dealing with the aftermath of the incident and re-establishing normalcy.
- Provide parents with the information they may need to help their children cope.

- Use this meeting to display the school's commitment to helping the children recover and preventing similar incidents in the future.
- If there is a possibility that the school may be legally liable have the Board Lawyer present. Do not confirm or deny culpability.

### **Addressing parents by telephone**

The person doing the telephoning should be comfortable with the role:

- prepare a script similar to the one used to announce the event to students, which covers the facts of the critical incident
- be sensitive to possible emotional reactions by a parent and use active listening skills to calm an upset parent
- personally contact the parents of any student who has had a difficult time coping with the traumatic event and give information about community mental health resources which parents may wish to access for their children
- reassure parents that the school is responding to the critical incident and describe the response activities

### **Addressing parents in writing**

Depending on the impact of the critical incident, a letter may be sent home. Information to be included should be checked carefully with the police or other relevant persons.

Clearing the content of the communication to parents with the Superintendent of Schools or designate is mandatory. Care needs to be exercised in following Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act requirements. This letter could include the following information:

- the nature of the critical incident and appropriate details,
- what the students have been told,
- possible grief/stress reactions that parents may expect in their children,
- suggestions of how they might respond to their children's reactions,
- in the case of a death, the funeral arrangements, and
- resources available to parents.

## **F. INFORMING STUDENTS**

The manner in which a critical incident is announced to the students can have a major impact on the emotional responses of the whole school community. Before making the announcement of a traumatic event, such as an accident or sudden death, which is not already widely known in the school or community, the Principal should consider the following in order to set the tone for handling the incident:

- Inform the staff first, since you will be relying on them to assist students coping with the news. Whenever possible, do this in person and provide teachers with a written statement to read to their class. Include facts and plans.
- Identify students directly affected (e.g. best friends, next of kin) and those at risk of having intense emotional reactions. **These students may need to be told before the rest of your students.**
- Inform students as soon as possible
- Have identified students withdrawn from class and meet in a quiet location(s). Before informing them, decide who will tell them and how you might deal with their reactions. Students experiencing intense emotional reactions may need to be escorted to other area(s) where Guidance Personnel and/or Critical Incident Response team members are waiting to assist. It may be necessary to contact their parents based on their reaction and inform them of the incident.
- Ensure that the family's right to privacy is respected.
- Reduce potential for creating a highly charged emotional climate by informing students in their regular classroom setting. Avoid the use of the public address system or an assembly to inform students of a critical incident. It is harder to control students in a large group, it is not possible to gauge individual student's reactions, and it is difficult to meet the needs of students in such a large group.
- Deliver the message simultaneously so that all students in the building will hear about it at the same time.
- After delivering the message in the classroom, allow sufficient time for students to begin to discuss their feelings, as many students will need the opportunity to talk about their reactions. Teachers who are not comfortable with such discussions are encouraged to ask for assistance. Be as truthful as possible when responding to the questions of students but keep in mind that early information available about a traumatic event may not be accurate.
- Use discretion regarding any details of the critical incident.
- Suspend class changes, if necessary, to allow students to remain together for some time to deal with their reactions.
- Assure students that they will be kept informed, as information is available.

## **G. CLASS DISCUSSION**

Classroom discussions will vary in length depending upon whether the critical incident occurred at school where students may have witnessed some aspect of the event, the age of the students, and their emotional involvement with the injured or deceased. Some discussions may be as brief as a few minutes, while others will continue for an extended time.

### **1. ADVICE FOR TEACHERS**

The following general principles can be helpful when working with students of all ages:

- Give the facts regarding the critical incident in a concrete, clear and accurate manner.
- Be sensitive to possible cultural differences in methods of grieving.
- Avoid imposing your own theology and/or personal beliefs.
- Assess which students are in need of additional support and refer them to the designated counselling centre and have someone accompany them there.
- Give information about the designated counselling centre.
- It may provide comfort for students to feel they have participated in some overt act to express their feelings and reach out to grieving families affected by the critical incident. Teachers will need to use their own judgment to guide the appropriateness of student activities, and they may need to be cleared with the school principal or counsellor (*possible suggestions can be found on page 47*).

### **2. STATEMENTS TO AVOID**

- Avoid euphemisms for death such as “passed away”, “gone”, or “sleep” which may confuse or frighten the child. Avoid the general statement, “If you need anything, tell me...” It is better to say “Would it help if I...?” Students may find it difficult to verbalize their own needs and will require assistance to find a way to describe the support they want.
- Avoid saying “I know just how you feel.” It is more empathetic to say, “You must be having a lot of feelings right now...”
- Avoid blaming or judging.

### **3. SUGGESTIONS FOLLOWING A SUICIDE**

This type of sudden loss may bring with it guilt, shame, self-doubt and self-blame as well as feelings of anger, betrayal and rejection. Bereavement and mourning can be more intense and extreme in the case of a suicide. School counsellors who have been trained in suicide prevention should have a key role in providing support to staff and students. Most students over eight years of age are old enough to understand the suicidal act. Be truthful, but not dwell on the details of how the student took his or her own life. If the family has agreed that the death was a suicide, it is appropriate to use that term. If not, the class discussions will need to be conducted as for a sudden death.

## **H. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Various statutes regulate the collection, use and disclosure of information by Boards of Education. The facts of every case of critical incident will determine when it is legally appropriate to collect, use and disclose personal information and to whom that information may be disclosed.

### **1. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND PROTECTION OF PRIVACY ACT**

This Act often referred to by its acronym FOIPOP restricts the collection and disclosure of written personal information by Boards and regulates the storage of such information.

#### **AUTHORITY TO COLLECT AND DISCLOSE PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Information may be collected under FOIPOP for various purposes, one of which is that the information relates directly to and is necessary for the operating program or activity of the public body.

Sections 26 and 27 of the Act permit the disclosure of personal information on various bases, including the following:

- with the consent of the individual to whom the information relates,
- for the purpose that the personal information was obtained or a consistent use with the purpose,
- to a public body or law enforcement agency in Canada to assist in an investigation undertaken for the purpose of law enforcement proceedings, or from which law enforcement proceedings are likely to result.

Under FOIPOP one of the basis for disclosing personal information is called “consistent use”. That is, the disclosure of the information is permitted if it is directly related to the purpose of which it was received, and it is necessary to use it to operate the school or meet other statutory obligations. Meeting the emotional needs of students and staff so that the school can function might be considered a “consistent use”.

If information was obtained to provide counselling to students and staff as a result of a critical incident then that information can be used for that purpose or a “consistent use”.

It is hard to determine what will or will not be considered a consistent use without looking at a specific factual situation with each critical incident. The facts will determine whether personal information can be disclosed under consistent use. For personal information to be disclosed on this basis, the information must have a reasonable and direct connection with the purpose for which it was obtained, and the use of it must be consistent with the statutory duties of the school board (such as providing an educational program to students) or it is necessary for the school board to operate a legally authorized program.

It is important to understand that personal information related to a deceased person is still covered by FOIPOP. The Act also regulates how personal information is used within a

public body as well as disclosure to the public. FOIPOP regulates the oral or written disclosure of any written record held by the Board.

## **2. The Youth Criminal Justice Act**

Notices, announcements, written copies of announcements, letters or information for parents and press releases about critical incidents need to be written carefully to meet the requirements of legislation related to young offenders. The Youth Criminal Justice Act, often referred to as YCJA, limits the publication of names of young offenders.

Sections 110 and 111 of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (Canada) states that no report can be published respecting the offence committed or alleged to have been committed by a young person, in which the name of the young person (who is the alleged perpetrator) or the name of a young person or child who is the victim or witness is mentioned.

There are two exceptions to this general rule. The first exception is if there is an order under Section 16 of the YCJA. This refers to cases in which a youth court orders a young person to be tried in adult court. The other exception is in a case in which a judge makes an order that permits a report that identifies the young person.

Disclosure to any professional or person engaged in supervisory care of a young person, a representative of any school board or school, or any other educational or training institution can only be made if it is necessary to ensure the safety of staff, students and other persons. Keeping a record of this type of information is also restricted to this same requirement.

## **V. Forms, Agendas, Checklists**

**A. Telephone Tree Samples**

**B. School-based Critical Incident Response Team Meeting Guidelines**

**C. Checklist for School-based Critical Incident Response Team**

**D. Checklist for Teachers**

**E. Checklist for other School Staff**

**F. School Team Membership**

**G. Identifying Possible Risk Factors**

**H. Incoming/Outgoing Messages Record**

### V. FORMS, AGENDAS, CHECKLISTS

#### A. TELEPHONE TREE SAMPLES

These are sample telephone trees and be should customized for each school.

##### **Sample 1**

Principal Calls: Superintendent of Schools or designate/Director of Programs and Student Services  
 Vice Principal (Name and home phone)  
 Counsellor (name and home phone)  
 Teachers with unlisted phone numbers (list names & home phones)

Vice Principal Calls:

Team Member A ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Team Member B ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Cafeteria Staff ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Custodial Staff ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Secretarial Staff ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

School Counsellor Calls:

Team Member C ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Team Member D ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Resource Person A ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Resource Person B ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

Team Member A Calls:

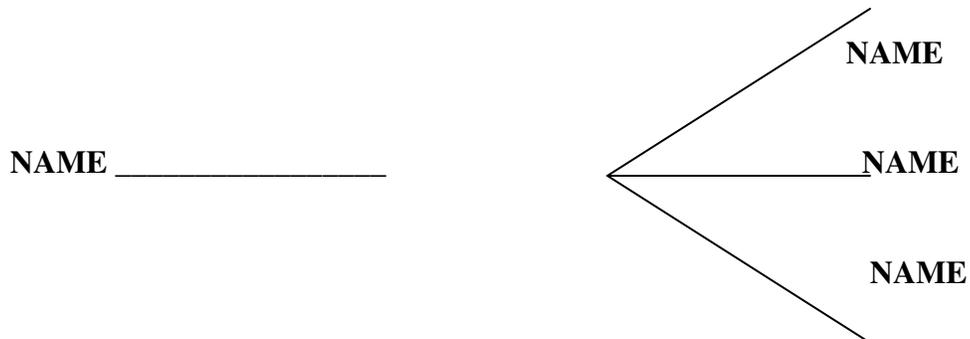
Staff Member A ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Staff Member B ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Staff Member C ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

Team Member B Calls:

Staff Member E ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Staff Member F ( \_\_\_\_\_ )  
 Staff Member G ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

##### **Sample 2**

DIRECTIONS: Extend a chart like this far enough to fill in the names and phone numbers of all staff members. Each person then has three people to call when he/she receives a call about a crisis. Distribute to all staff.



## **B. SCHOOL-BASED CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM MEETING GUIDELINES**

### **A. CHECK THE FACTS**

- ♦ Ensure that as much factual information as possible is obtained:
  1. names of persons involved
  2. relationship to school, students and/or staff
  3. extent of the critical incident
  4. details of the event: Who? What? When? Where? Why or how?

### **B. DETERMINE POSSIBLE IMPACT**

- ♦ Determine the magnitude of the impact:
  1. School(s)
  2. Community
  3. School Board
  4. School Team

### **C. DETERMINE SUPPORT PERSONNEL**

- ♦ Determine who will assist with the situation:
  1. Regional team?
  2. Other resource people? (Any outside professionals on school team)

### **D. DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION LIST**

- ♦ Administration, in consultation with the Superintendent of Schools or designate, will decide
  1. Who will be responsible for communication?
  2. Who will be told and what will they be told?
  3. How will communication be made and when?
    - a. staff
    - b. students
    - c. support staff
    - d. parents
    - e. others
  4. Who will facilitate meetings that will be held?
  5. Who will develop the agenda for the general staff meeting?
  6. What will the boundaries of confidentiality be?
  7. Who will operate the phones and what will be said to those calling?
  8. Will a letter be sent home and who will write it?

### **E. OTHER**

1. How will you deal with members of the community when they come to the school for support or to get information? Who will coordinate this?
2. In the event of a death, will there be a memorial service and will staff and students be able to attend?

### **C. CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM**

The following items are sample actions for a checklist that can be adapted by the School Critical Incident Response Teams to suit the plan developed in a particular school.

- Meet as soon as possible after verifying the facts of an incident to determine degree of impact of the incident and whether to respond
- Develop a plan of action using the team agenda
- Meet with the staff as soon as possible to discuss the School Plan; follow the staff meeting agenda
- Implement the School Plan
- Monitor classes where assistance is necessary
- Provide direct assistance to individuals and classes
- Identify any individual students that may require additional community mental health resources or other support. Ensure that parents are informed; maintain a list
- Identify staff that may require extra support because of their closeness to the deceased or those who have experienced recent losses
- Identify any individual students and staff who may need to go home and determine procedure; call home if necessary
- Assign a team member to classes where the teacher has requested this type of assistance
- Assist counsellors in arranging counselling centres and grief groups
- Contact other schools where siblings, teammates, or close friends of people directly affected by the critical incident may be attending. In case of a staff death, all schools in the district should be contacted.
- Be alert to absent students and determine if contact needs to be made
- Arrange Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, as necessary
- In carrying out any activities related to using or creating records, consult with your Board's information and privacy administrator

#### **Follow-up**

- Meet with the staff at the end of the first day to discuss the day's progress, and to plan for the next day's activities.
- Meet daily for a few days following the event to review and determine further action, if any is necessary; meet at the end of each day for discussion.
- Assist in organizing the school or staff's role in visitation, funeral, or memorial activities in the case of a student or staff death.
- Ensure that school records related to the student are handled in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

### **D. CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS**

The following items are sample actions for a teacher checklist that can be adapted by the School Teams to fit the plan developed in a particular school.

Teachers play a vital role in helping students or staff deal with their feelings regarding critical incidents such as the death of a student or staff member. If a teacher is uncomfortable in carrying out the actions of this checklist, assistance should be requested from the School Critical Incident Response Team.

- Attend staff meeting and obtain all possible information.
- Follow instructions in handout received regarding the School Plan from the Principal and School Critical Incident Response Team.
- Request a School Critical Incident Response Team member to lead the class discussion if you feel uncomfortable.
- Allow students to express their feelings openly and facilitate the classroom discussion by modeling listening and sharing feelings and reactions with students.
- Direct any students who appear to need further assistance to the appropriate support personnel; allow students to go to the designated counselling centres. Arrange for someone to accompany young children or students who are in distress. Keep a list of these students and give it to the School Critical Incident Response Team.
- Provide the names of any students or staff considered to be at risk or in need of counselling support to the School Critical Incident Response Team.
- Attend after-school staff meeting.
- Participate in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, as necessary.

### **E. CHECKLIST FOR OTHER SCHOOL STAFF**

*Adapted from Responding to a Critical Incident, Resource Guide for Schools as referenced in the Bibliography.*

All school personnel are affected by a critical incident such as a disaster or the death of a student or staff member; everyone should be clear about his/her role in dealing with a tragic event. The following is a sample checklist for school personnel who are not teachers that can be adapted by a School-based Critical Incident Response Team to fit the plan developed in a particular school.

- If possible, attend the staff meeting to be informed about the traumatic event and the plans for the school day. If you are unable to attend, contact a member of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team and get the information.
- Ensure that you are informed of appropriate strategies to handle students' questions or comments. Redirecting students to teachers or counselling staff may be an appropriate response.
- Ensure that you are clear on procedures for handling requests or calls from parents, news media and others. Be aware that extra personnel may be in the building, but report anyone who appears to be on school grounds inappropriately to the Principal immediately.
- Provide names of any students or staff whom you are concerned about to the School-based Critical Incident Response Team.
- Attend the after-school staff meeting.
- Participate in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, as necessary.

**F. SCHOOL TEAM MEMBERSHIP**

School: \_\_\_\_\_ School Year: \_\_\_\_\_

School Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Principal: \_\_\_\_\_ Cellular: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Coordinator: _____ Phone: _____
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<b>School Team Members</b>
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<b>Name</b>	<b>Phone Numbers</b>	<b>Position</b>

## **G. IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE RISK FACTORS**

Students and staff members may experience a difficult adjustment period following trauma or loss in their lives. The nature of the precipitating event alone does not determine the impact. The individual's reaction is affected also by his/her perception of the event, personality and temperament, previous history of trauma and/or loss, and coping strategies.

It should be noted that one or more risk factors or warning signs does not necessarily indicate that an individual requires intervention. It is necessary to assess the number of risk factors and how they interact. Also, monitor the degree of severity and chronology of the warning signs.

### **Possible Risk Factors**

- family turmoil/unstable family situation
- parental separation or divorce
- remarriage of parent
- sense of abandonment by one or both parents
- serious illness of a friend or family member
- death of a friend or family member due to accident or illness
- previous suicide of friend or family member
- murder of a friend or family member
- death of media idol (musician, actor)
- break-up with a boy/girlfriend
- recent move to a new home and/or school
- different racial, ethnic, cultural background from most of peers
- history of physical, mental, emotional, sexual abuse
- history of other trauma (i.e. accident, kidnapping, rape, home lost to fire)
- poor coping skills
- difficulty managing anger
- impulsivity
- lack of problem-solving strategies
- learning difficulties
- poor self-esteem
- history of failure
- unhealthy peer group choices
- poor peer relations (isolated, alienated)
- lack of supportive network of friends and family



# Supporting Documents

- A. Temporary Counselling Drop-In Centres**
- B. Grief Information**
- C. Suicide Warning Signs**
- D. Memorial Activities**
- E. Sample Communications**

## **VI. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**

### **A. TEMPORARY COUNSELLING DROP-IN CENTRES**

Setting up a temporary drop-in counselling centre following a critical incident is an effective way to support students, particularly those considered a high risk. All available school counsellors, along with members of TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team with possible support from available outside professionals and selected members of the School-based Critical Incident Response Team, can staff the drop-in centre. The duration of this service will depend upon the nature and impact of the incident. The following suggestions for planning and operating such a service have been used successfully by schools.

**Note: Counselling Centres must be staffed by qualified counsellors**

#### **CONSIDERATIONS**

- It is important that support is available to all students, at the moment they need it, in a private and supportive setting.
- Ensure that all students are aware of the counselling centre. This centre should be easily accessed during the day.
- Staff at the centre consists of school counsellors, TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team and outside professionals if necessary.
- Small group counselling sessions are helpful for some if personnel assigned to the centre have experience and training in counselling.
- Staff in the centre should have written information to give the students, such as normal stages of grief and guidelines for how to arrange support from mental health workers.

#### **GUIDELINES FOR SETTING UP A DROP-IN COUNSELLING CENTRE**

1. Provide a Drop-in Counselling Centre all day for the first day that news of a critical incident such as a sudden death is disseminated.
2. Ensure that one or more counsellor(s)/facilitator is in the centre at all times. Other staff should be available for relief purposes. Counselling in the centre may be with individuals or small groups.
3. Staff who provide counselling in the centre should organize themselves to maintain continuity in spite of the “drop-in” process, so that adults may consult with each other about identifying high-risk students as well as for general support and help.

## **B. GRIEF INFORMATION**

### **THE GRIEF PROCESS**

Grief is a natural and normal process. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response. Grieving is a common life process.

Grief is the healthiest way to accept a loss and put it into perspective. It helps us to face the reality of loss, to recover, and to grow through the experience. The expression of grief may differ with each individual, yet follow a broad common framework. It is important to understand the process of grief.

No matter what type of loss is experienced, the same process is generally gone through each time, although the length and intensity of the experience will differ. The stages of grief are not necessarily in a particular order. An individual may flow back and forth between stages. There is no set time for an individual to spend in each stage. To reach a level of acceptance may take months or years.

### **Stages of Grief**

- ◆ Denial: *“It can’t be or this can’t be happening to me!”*  
This is a period of rejecting the idea or not believing what is taking place. This is a temporary defense to help insulate us while gathering other defenses and resources to cope.
- ◆ Anger: *“Why \_\_\_\_\_?”*  
Anger manifests in many ways and can be directed or misdirected at anything or anyone including the person who died. If guilt is a part of the response, anger will generally be more intense. Accept anger as a part of grief. Anger may need to be channeled in the proper direction.
- ◆ Bargaining: *“What if \_\_\_\_\_ - or if only \_\_\_\_\_?”*  
Bargaining with outside influences (God, physician, minister, etc.) exchanging something or some deed for someone we want to keep. This is an attempt to postpone the inevitable.
- ◆ Depression: *“What’s the use?”*  
Depression is natural during grief. Some feel like life is out of control or overwhelming. Others feel like withdrawing from activities and people. Fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, nausea, changes in eating habits and recurring dreams are symptoms. There may be strong feeling of isolation and sometimes guilt. Highs and lows are evident as reality sets in.
- ◆ Acceptance  
Final stage when the past is not dwelt on and the future holds hope. It’s a time when the loss is accepted and individuals move on with life.

**POSSIBLE REACTIONS TO GRIEF (Outside of individual's typical behaviour)****Emotional**

Fear of abandonment	Peacefulness
Confusion	Spiritual connection
Guilt	Numbness
Helplessness	Despair
Feeling of being lost	Anger
Sadness	Sense of unreality
Hopelessness	Bitterness

**Physical**

Tightness of the throat	Increase/decrease in activity
Dry mouth	Sleep disturbance
Shortness of breath	Decreases resistance to illness
Fatigue	Appetite Changes
Lethargy	Over sensitivity to noise

**Behavioural Reactions**

Searching for what is lost	Detachment from surroundings
Lack of concentration	Disorientation regarding time and place
Spontaneity	Withdrawal from personal activities
Dreaming of the deceased	"Seeing" the deceased
Forgetfulness	Avoiding reminders of the deceased
Treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased	

**AGE SPECIFIC REACTIONS**

Age 6-10: primary method of expression is play, art, and music

- Reduced attention span
- Radical changes in behaviour (out of character)
- Fantasizing event with saviour at the end
- Mistrust of adults

Age 10-12 in girls, 12-14 in boys: more childlike in attitude

- Anger at unfairness
- Excitement of survival
- Attributes symbolic meaning to events (omens)
- Self-critical
- Psychosomatic illness

Age 13-18 in girls, 15-18 in boys: similar to adults

- Judgmental
- Mortality crisis
- Move to adult responsibilities to assume control
- Suspicious and guarded
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Loss of impulse control

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PROVIDING COMFORT**

- Children need concrete terms and explanations not vague responses. Don't be afraid to say the word "death".
- Understand that mourning is appropriate for all ages.
- Be supportive
- Be aware of your own feelings
- Be a listener
- Allow children to release their emotion; understand that this will be done in a variety of ways at different age levels. Children are more likely to respond with behaviour, especially those who have difficulty verbally.
- Help students name feelings
- Help students understand that they are not alone
- Expect a lot of questions; answer only with facts; avoid speculation; it's okay to say you don't know.
- Seek help from counsellors if uncomfortable or you anticipate an unusual reaction
- Children may feel frightened because they feel powerless; therefore support and routine are necessary.
- Children worry about themselves and other loved ones dying.
- Sometimes children feel that somehow they could have reversed the death or are in some ways responsible.
- Children need to do something physical and concrete

## **C. SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS**

### **CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR**

Normally active people may become withdrawn; cautious individuals may start taking unusual risks. Any significant change may be cause for concern.

### **PROBLEMS IN SCHOOL**

A dramatic drop in grades, falling asleep in class, emotional outburst or other uncharacteristic behaviour may be cause for concern.

### **THEMES OF DEATH**

A desire to end one's life may show up in areas such as the person's artwork, poetry and essays.

### **A PREVIOUS SUICIDE ATTEMPT**

A significant number of young people who commit suicide have attempted suicide before.

### **SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

Alcohol and other drug abuse appear to be significantly linked to increased risk taking and suicide attempts among young people.

### **SIGNS OF DEPRESSION**

These may include changes in eating and sleeping habits, anxiety, restlessness, and fatigue, feelings of hopelessness and guilt, and loss of interest in usual activities. Alcohol and drug abuse are common ways for people to medicate themselves from depressive feelings.

### **VERBAL STATEMENTS**

Comments such as "You'd be better off without me" or "I wish I were dead" should always be taken seriously.

### **GIVING AWAY POSSESSIONS**

Someone who has decided to commit suicide may give away personal possessions: music, favorite articles of clothing, etc.

### **POOR COPING SKILLS**

The inability to see many options for solving problems and lacking confidence in a brighter future make young people vulnerable.

### **OTHER**

These may include physical complaints, frequent accidents, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, sexual promiscuity, or prolonged grief after a loss.

**\*Please refer someone who is exhibiting any of these warning signs to a mental health professional, such as a guidance counsellor, school psychologist, etc.**

## **D. MEMORIAL ACTIVITIES**

### **GUIDELINES**

Memorial services are to take place after school hours. When a death occurs, it is sometimes appropriate for the school to hold a memorial service. Each school team will establish standards and guidelines regarding the planning and implementing of memorial activities and flying the flag at half mast. Students and staff who were closest to the deceased should be involved in the organization of the event.

### **Considerations when planning the service:**

- Family members must to be consulted and invited to attend. They should also be invited to be a part of the planning.
- Inviting members of the clergy or religious leaders of the faith of the deceased may be considered.
- The leader of the service should be chosen carefully. It should be someone who the community, staff and students respect and someone who can maintain control and reverence.

### **Questions to ask in preparation for a memorial service:**

- Is a memorial service indicated in this crisis?
- How many students will be attending?
- Where will it be held?
- Who will officiate?
- Who will coordinate the event?
- What family members will attend?
- What will be the content of the event (e.g., music, speakers, slideshow, etc?)
- What community members should be invited?

### **SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOLLOWING A DEATH**

After a death, it is important for students to do something concrete. This helps individuals deal with the loss and helps bring some sense of control. Some suggestions are as follows:

- Fly the flag at half-mast
- Observe a moment of silence
- Send flowers to the family
- Visit the funeral home
- Conduct a memorial service
- Collect donations for the family of the deceased or a charity in memory
- Create sympathy cards
- Write letters
- Attend a funeral service
- Plant a tree or shrub in memory
- Hang a picture, painting or plaque in the school
- Create a mural, quilt, etc
- Prepare and deliver food to the home
- Set up a bulletin board in the school where in memory poems, stories, cards, and other reminders of the deceased can be located

- Develop a scholarship or bursary
- Place a dedication in the school paper or yearbook

### E. SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS

The following are examples of letters that can be used to plan communication with parents/guardians.

#### Sample Parent Letter – 1

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian:

We have suffered a tragedy at our school. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, one of our students, (*student's name*), died suddenly and unexpectedly. In addition to our grief over the loss of this member of our school community, we are sensitive to the fact that such an event has an impact on other students.

In response, the school has implemented a plan that allows students an opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings with trained professional staff. We expect that some will seek out this help, while others may not. Those who do will be given an opportunity to express their feelings and grief. This is not intended to take the place of outside professional counselling or religious care.

Anticipating that your child may have a reaction to this event, we have some information available to you at your request that could be helpful as you respond to your child's concerns. If you should determine that your child needs further professional counselling, please feel free to contact the school for phone numbers of local agencies that are available to assist you.

Please do not hesitate to contact the school regarding your requests at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,  
(*Principal's Name*), Principal

#### Sample Parent Letter – 2

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the Death of a Grade 2 student in our school. (*student's name*) died from injuries suffered in a car accident which occurred last evening.

Students will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. A wide range of reactions is normal in the grief process and can vary from withdrawal, to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of Bill.

Special counselling services have been made available to students today and will continue to be available throughout the week and longer, if needed.

If you think your child needs additional counselling support, please do not hesitate to contact the school office at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,  
(*Principal's Name*), Principal

**Sample Letter Announcing A Funeral**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian:

The recent death of (name of deceased) a grade \_\_\_\_ student at our school has had a major impact on staff and students at (name of school). Our crisis intervention team has been called together to respond to the needs of our school community at this difficult time.

Funeral arrangements have been completed for (name of deceased). The service will be held on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_ a.m./p.m. at (site of funeral).

We understand that some of our students will wish to attend the service. If your child plans to attend the funeral, we would appreciate a note or phone call informing us that you have given permission for him/her to do so. We recommend that a parent or other adult relative accompany students. Transportation is the responsibility of each family.

Classes will be held as usual for those students who will not be attending the service.

Sincerely  
(Principal's Name), Principal

Note: Under certain circumstances, such as the death of a staff member, the school may be closed in order to allow all students and staff the opportunity to attend the funeral service. Attendance at the funeral should be presented as an option in the letter to parents, subject to their approval.

Future commemorative activities may also be outlined at this time.

**SAMPLE MESSAGES**

Announcements of tragedy are like any other form of personal communication; they should be simple, straight-forward, and unique. These examples can only give you a general idea. They are not intended to be "Fill-in-the-blank" forms. Staff members who know the student or students involved and the school community can give the personal touch that is needed at such a time.

The teacher shares the facts of the event as per the prepared announcement. The information disseminated must be restricted to those facts approved by the deceased person's family and/or the police.

After the message is given, students should be assured that they will have a chance to talk about the critical incident.

**AFTER SUSPECTED SUICIDE**

A tragedy has happened. \_\_\_\_\_, a Grade \_\_ student has died suddenly. Details of \_\_\_\_\_'s premature death will not be released to protect the privacy of family members. You will be given information about funeral arrangements as soon as possible.

This kind of tragic news is hard to accept. You may experience many feelings over the next few days. Everyone deals with loss differently. It is important to respect the way others grieve. Counsellors are available in room 215. Feel free to go and talk to the counsellors. They want to listen to your feelings and concerns.

### **AFTER A DEATH Sample 1**

We are taking this time to think about \_\_\_\_\_, a Grade \_\_ student at our school who died last night in a car accident. \_\_\_\_\_ was traveling with her family on Route \_\_. We do not know any details about the accident at this time except that the rest of the family is safe and no one else was injured seriously.

\_\_\_\_\_’s funeral is being held at \_\_\_\_\_ Church on \_\_\_\_\_. A funeral is a special time to remember a person who has died. The school will let your families know about the specific time and address of the funeral in a written note that will be sent home tomorrow.

Let’s take a moment of silence to think of \_\_\_\_\_, to remember all the good things about him/her, and to say goodbye. In our silence we will send him/her our loving thoughts.

### **AFTER A DEATH Sample 2**

\_\_\_\_\_ will not be in school today. His/her mother was killed in an automobile crash last night. A truck on Highway 101 struck her car. \_\_\_\_\_ will be very sad for a long time. Perhaps we can discuss some ways \_\_\_\_\_ might be feeling and how we can all help him.

### **AFTER A DEATH Sample 3**

We have something very sad to tell you today. \_\_\_\_\_ was driving home in the rain last night. His/her car swerved into an oncoming lane, was struck by another car and went off the road. \_\_\_\_\_ died in the crash.

### **AFTER A DEATH Sample 4**

Our school has suffered a great loss. \_\_\_\_\_, the science teacher, has been ill with cancer for many months now. We just received word \_\_\_\_\_ has died. We will be commemorating \_\_\_\_\_’s contribution to our school community. At this time, I’d like each class to discuss the ways they would like to commemorate the life work of \_\_\_\_\_.

### **AFTER A DEATH Sample 5**

I’m afraid that I have something very sad to share with you today. I learned last night of the death of someone very special to us. \_\_\_\_\_ was a student/teacher in (class). I don’t know a whole lot about the incident at this time, but I will share with you what I know so far about what happened. I will also continue to share with you anything I learn over the next few days.

We will all have a chance to share our thoughts and feelings about this unfortunate incident. We will also discuss what we can do as a class to help the family of \_\_\_\_ and to show that \_\_\_\_ was a very special member of our school.

Each of you will react to this news in your own personal way, and that is perfectly okay. Some of you will feel sad for a short time and then move on, while others of you may find this extremely difficult to deal with. For the next few days, we will have a team of crisis counsellors available to us should any of you find that you wish to speak to someone privately about your feelings and reactions.

### **AFTER A FIRE IN A FEEDER SCHOOL**

Last night a very frightening thing happened in our community. \_\_\_\_ School was destroyed by fire. Many of you attended \_\_\_\_ School when you were younger and some of you may have brothers or sisters who attend there now.

Luckily, no one was hurt in the fire. But schools mean more to people than just a building. We all have feelings about a school that go beyond the actual walls and roof – many hours of your childhood were spent there. You will have lots of memories connected with the building and you should not be surprised if you feel sad or angry about this happening. Your brothers and sisters who attended \_\_\_\_ School may be quite upset about the changes that this will mean for them, and they may experience fears because the school was a haven of safety for them.

The police and fire departments have informed us that they do not yet know how the fire started, but we will let you know any facts that are communicated to us as soon as possible.

## **VII. References**

Information from this document has been drawn and adapted in part from the following sources.

Annapolis Valley Regional School Board (1999). Crisis Intervention Guide

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1997) Quick Response, A Step-By-Step Guide to Crisis Management for Principals, Counsellors and Teachers, Washington. Developed by Education Service District 105, Yakima, Washington

Halifax Regional School Board (2000). Crisis Intervention Guide

National Association of School Psychologists (Spring 1999) Crisis Loss, Information for Educators. NASP Communique, Special Edition

North Queens School (2000). Critical Incident Handbook

Peterson, Suni & Straub, Ron L. (1992). School Crisis Survival Guide, Management Techniques and Materials. West Nyack, New York. The Centre for Applied Research in Education.

Rafuse, Wendy. Stress Management Tips

Solow, Phyllis (1978). A Guide Through Grief

Special Education (2000). Responding to Critical Incidents: A Resource Guide for Schools. British Columbia Ministry of Education

**VIII. Appendix**

**TRI-COUNTY REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD**  
**POLICY & PROCEDURES**  
**POLICY #746**

It is the policy of the Tri-County Regional School Board to help alleviate any difficulties that occur in a school or school board when a death or serious crisis occurs within the school population. In preparation for this, there shall be established a Tri-County Regional School Board Critical Incident Response Team and school-based Critical Incident Response Teams whose guidelines must be reviewed and updated annually.

Definition of Critical Incident:

A critical incident is an event which has a traumatizing impact on the school population, parents or the community to such an extent that the school's mandate of education cannot be fulfilled. Schools and school districts often deal with sudden, unexpected incidents that have the potential to adversely affect the students, staff and community. Sudden deaths, serious injuries and violence or abuse can have a significant effect on a school population. Other traumatic events such as fires, flooding or other threats to the school or community can have an impact on staff and students.

SCHOOL-BASED CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

1. All schools must have a school-based Critical Incident Response Team in place at all times. The Team shall consist of (i) the Principal; (ii) a minimum of two staff members; (iii) the school guidance counsellor (if applicable).
2. By September 30<sup>th</sup> of each school year, the school-based Critical Incident Response Team shall:
  - a) update the School-Based Critical Incident Response Plan, and
  - b) review procedures with all staff, i.e., teachers, custodians, administrative assistants, program support assistants, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, supervisors.
3. In the event of a critical incident, the following steps will be followed:
  - a) The Principal or designate should verify the facts and details of the incident, in consultation with the Superintendent of Schools or designate.
  - b) The school-based team shall determine an initial plan of action.
  - c) The Superintendent of Schools or designate shall be contacted at this point, and a decision will be made on whether assistance by the Tri-County Regional School Board Critical Incident Response Team (TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team) is required.
  - d) If the TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team is required, the Superintendent of Schools or designate shall call the Coordinator of

- Student Services who will determine the resources required, in conjunction with the school-based team.
- e) If required, the TCRSB and the School-based Critical Incident Response Teams shall coordinate activities to re-establish a stable school environment.
  - f) Invoke School-based Critical Incident Response Plan.

### TCRSB CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

1. The Superintendent of Schools or designate is the person in charge should any region-wide crisis occur.
2. The TCRSB Critical Incident Response Team shall be established by the Superintendent of Schools or designate and shall consist of the following persons at minimum:
  - a) the Student Services Coordinator,
  - b) a Principal from each county,
  - c) a School Counsellor from each county,
  - d) a School Psychologist and other personnel as appropriate (i.e. representatives from the police, mental health).
3. In the event of a critical incident, the following will be carried out by the Superintendent of Schools or designate:
  - a) Verify the facts and details of the incident, in consultation with the school principal(s).
  - b) Contact the Coordinator of Student Services.
  - c) Advise the school(s) directly affected by the crisis.
  - d) Arrange for the proper authorities to be advised and call for the assistance of such bodies as decided upon (i.e., police, fire department, Department of Health, emergency measures organization, transportation supervisor.
  - e) Arrange for the appropriate press release when necessary..
  - f) Prepare a full report for the next School Board meeting.
4. The following will be carried out by the Coordinator of Student Services or designate:
  - a) Call the principal.
  - b) Contact required team members and present facts.
  - c) Determine the response plan, in conjunction, with the School-based Critical Incident Team.