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# Responding to Student or Teacher Death: Preplanning Crisis Intervention

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*Crisis caused by the sudden death of a student or teacher can be averted or diminished via a preplanned team intervention approach. The guidelines and strategies of a field-proven intervention program are described.*

People in crisis often experience anxiety, feelings of vulnerability, and difficulty (Lindermann, 1944; Specter & Claiborn, 1973). The sudden death of a student or teacher may produce a crisis for students and faculty alike.

Much has recently been written about response plans to schoolwide crises of this nature (Allan & Anderson, 1986; Hunt, 1987; Pelej, 1987; Stevenson, 1986; Zinner, 1987). This article describes a preplanned crisis intervention approach that has been implemented successfully by the Easton, Massachusetts, public schools.

## MEMBERSHIP AND PURPOSE

The 12 members of the Easton crisis team include guidance counselors, school psychologists, and administrators. In combination, these individuals have strong clinical skills, knowledge of how school buildings function, experience with crisis intervention and education in systems thinking.

The simplest procedure to activate the crisis intervention team is a prearranged telephone chain. A call from the building administrator is sufficient to initiate an assessment/intervention meeting.

During this meeting between the administrator and crisis team, the following areas are addressed: the intensity and nature of the building crisis, the emotional needs of students and staff, identification of the high-risk population, parental involvement and contact, and short-term and/or long-term intervention strategies. Following the evaluation of these five areas, a collective decision is made about the intervention strategies to be employed.

Following is a partial list of strategies which the Easton crisis team has employed. Any combination of these intervention strategies or others can be scheduled over 2 or 3 days of building support.

1. The building maintains its regular schedule, but a counseling center (or centers) is set up to help small groups of students cope with the crisis. Students who need help and support or who are too upset to be in class could spend time in these centers.

2. The building's regular schedule is suspended and classes are assigned to large group meetings, where the students can listen and talk with crisis team members or consultants.

3. Crisis team members can lead classroom discussions.

4. Crisis team members speak with faculty at staff meetings about their concerns.

5. A base is established in the building for staff support, as they try to handle their classes during the crisis (wake, funeral, etc.). Refreshments and coffee are helpful.

6. Members of the crisis team cover classes for those teachers who seem especially upset or who need time to recover from the shock of the bad news.

7. Team members help the teachers develop activities for dealing with death and dying in the classroom.

8. Many individuals, students and teachers alike, will be reminded of loved ones they may have lost. Team members can talk with these individuals and help them cope with their revisited grief.

9. Parents of children who need special attention are called for information sharing and/or parental guidance.

10. Crisis team members help the building administrator develop a press release and a strategy for dealing with the media (when necessary).

## APPLICATION

An example of this approach is that of the suicide death of a third-grade teacher in the Easton public schools. During the assessment/intervention meeting, the team calculated that the crisis would last for a few days and would extend to the entire school.

Crisis team members employed a number of intervention strategies. Two team members and the principal worked solely with the third grade, providing group discussion, classroom activities, and individual counseling. Other crisis team members handled the phones and contacted specific parents and developed a press release and a letter to all parents. The mini-counseling centers were very busy helping scores of children through the grief and tears. Teacher time-out was provided by the team. In the end the team nurtured the healing process and fostered a return to normalcy.

In the following weeks the administrators, teachers, and even parents expressed appreciation and reported that the intervention process was immensely valuable.

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