

Teacher Deaths

Far more schools are prepared for a student death than the death of a teacher. There are probably several dynamics that contribute to this. Certainly just the sheer numbers of students in a school make it far more likely that a school will lose a student than a teacher. Because the death of a young person is further out of the realm of the norm, we tend to think that the younger the person who dies, the more difficult it will be for the survivors. But a greater influence in this lack of preparedness may come from our own reluctance to look at our own mortality. If we prepare for a teacher death, it hits closer to home to us that we could die unexpectedly and "early." Also, though the death of the child seems like the most difficult death to handle, school staff are often much more immobilized with the death of a colleague.

The greatest detriment of being poorly prepared for the death of an adult in the school community is that too often, too little is done. Because the adults will all be able to go to the funeral, they will have the chance to have that turning point that the memorial event provides - that time when you look the family members in the eye and share your condolences. That moment when the finality of it is inarguable. That moment when you've sent cards or letters or flowers and you've done what you could do, and you turn the corner toward regaining normalcy in life. This may be the greatest reason that schools often neglect to do a Life Tribute or memorial event created by the students and overseen by staff. Often staff and administration report that their reluctance is that they think or feel they won't be able to "hold it together."

There is one common thread in the cases in which CMI (Crisis Management Institute) is asked to return to support a school repeatedly in the aftermath of a death. Nearly always it is because the school decided not to do a life tribute and the students have not found closure. And it seems more common that schools decide to do some kind of alternative when a teacher dies than when it is a student.

There are several challenges that occur when a staff person dies, especially when it is a teacher:

- The new teacher may have great difficulty bonding with the class because s/he is "the wrong person" to be there.
- Students are apt to misbehave when they are having anxiety, fear, sadness or anger if there is no channel for the emotion, if there is no ongoing adult support and conversation, and if there is no opportunity to give meaning to the death. Kids give meaning to death as early as four years old, and yet we rarely help them do so. Without the opportunity to process the death, students make up their own meaning, and often it can be detrimental. Younger students may be telling themselves that if they'd been better kids, s/he wouldn't have died, or some other form of magical thinking. Older students might be deciding that life really isn't fair, that the good die young, or other philosophical thoughts.
- Colleagues in the building are bereft in ways that make it all the more difficult to bring it up to the children and process the loss for fear of tearing up, crying or "losing it" emotionally.
- While often the school has dealt with a student death, so there is some kind of precedence, it may be that the school has never lost an adult to an unexpected death.
- Students give meaning to all deaths, and if we don't take time to help them uncover their newly formed beliefs, they may make up stories about what the death means in ways that will be emotionally crippling for them.
- We teach students just as much by what we don't do as by what we do. That means that by doing less to recognize and process the death of an adult, we reinforce to students that we should just go on as if nothing happened.
- Death always provides a teachable moment. We forget, sometimes, that it provides a teachable moment for all adults in the setting as much as it does for the students. We will



learn a great deal about how students grieve and the importance of adults in their lives if we take time to process their losses with them.

- Students are more resilient than we think. They will do better to see us be real about our own reactions, even if it means that we cry as we talk to them, than if we put on steel armor and trudge through the day. They don't need us to be strong so much as to be real, to be understanding of their needs too, to be listeners, to make room for them to process the loss, and to help them with a new language for navigating difficult waters that they'll find many times as they journey through life.
- This is an opportunity to teach them life skills, including how we come together to share memories, to do things (write letters, raise funds, etc.)

Some common thinking errors in regard to this include:

- We can come up with some other way of showing respect and not have to hold a life tribute - we could have a fund-raiser, a field day of activity in tribute to a PE teacher who dies, a reading day for a librarian, and so on. All of these activities can be a way of commemorating a life, but it doesn't accomplish - for the students - what being able to organize a formal gathering, inviting the family to attend, and having students stand up to tell what they'll miss will do.
- If we adults don't hold it together during a life tribute, the students will feel worse than if we just go forward without some kind of memorial event. Actually, students simply need us to be able to speak openly of our tears and reassure them that they didn't make us cry, that we had those tears inside us already ever since we'd heard of the death, and that sadness is a healthy and natural response to losing someone we love. In fact, who would we be if we simply shrugged our shoulders and went on about our lives?
- Students need us to be strong and not show too much emotion. In truth, students often feel safer with someone who feels real, whose outward emotions are some kind of match to the unspoken energy or emotional state they "feel" from us.
- Children should be protected from the harsh realities of life, so we shouldn't bring it up to them. In reality, children already know that death is part of life. Some may have lost family members or pets. They are more frightened by being left alone to wonder.
- If the children don't bring it up, they must not be struggling with it. Instead, what is true is that children are very respectful of our nonverbal communication, so when they sense our reluctance to speak of something, they are respectful of our boundaries and are not apt to bring it up. Often they don't have language for their new discomforts.

As schools put together plans for responding to crises and tragedies, it is essential that the death of an adult who works or volunteers in the school is also considered. These are much more difficult to deal with if nothing is in place ahead of time. Remember, also, that what you do with one death sets precedence for future losses. There can be some aspects of the tributes that can and should be specific to the person who has died, but if you allow the family to speak to students, you would be hard pressed not to allow the next family to do so as well.

So the most important things to address are usually:

- The importance of having a life tribute or memorial event.
- Ongoing support for the new teacher, who is likely to have challenges that have nothing to do with him or her.
- Having someone who can process with the class what it means to have lost the teacher. This needs to happen several times over a period of weeks, not just once.
- Having some kind of special ritual to help the class bond with the new teacher as soon as possible - usually within a week.
- Giving the students a last opportunity to acknowledge the loss at the end of the school year.