

The Recent Tragedy in Southern Russia Thoughts for Teachers

Each of you have students of varying degrees of worldliness, awareness, parent support or lack of support, and so on. Age of students, geographical location, local vulnerabilities (such as dams, military installations, nuclear plants, etc.) also make a difference both in risk and in students' awareness. No one guideline could cover all of the bases, but this is a place to start in your thoughts about how to support your students in the aftermath of national and international events such as the tragedy in southern Russia.

As always, when CMI sends out guidelines because of a current event, they are just that – guidelines. Every school community has students of varying degrees of worldliness, awareness, parent support or lack of it, and so on. None of this should be taken to be “the truth,” but rather as food for thought. Please feel free to be in touch with us if you have specific concerns or questions, and we'll be glad to help you think through what might be your most effective approach. The needs of schools will vary a great deal – just consider the differences in concerns for students in schools on military bases, those in rural farming communities and those in New York City. This is just a place to start.

Our job is all about educating students, which includes working with the whole child. As teachers, you know that this means addressing students' fears so they can feel safe enough to learn. Many of you who have received our flyers in the past or have had training from CMI know our term, “Using the teachable moment in tragedy” to teach empathy, and to improve school climate and prevention.

Prior to 9/11/01, we'd have had fewer students who might make the generalization that our schools here in the US might be vulnerable to terrorism. But, because terrorism has so profoundly entered our collective psyche, and because school shootings are something in our history, there are likely to be students in some of our schools who are thinking about the possibility that a terrorist attack in the United States could focus on a school.

This is a difficult situation, and knowing whether it is bothering kids in your class may be a difficult call. Often kids wait for us to bring things up, even if they're feeling anxious. Yet, because of the horrific magnitude of this event, we don't want to add the heaviness of this to the collective psyche of our youth.

There are two crucial steps for teachers to consider. One is how to create an environment in the classroom in which students really do come forward to you with their fears and concerns. This is only possible if there is an inherent message in the classroom every day that lets students know that you are there for them in more than just learning a content area. Create space in your classroom and in class time so students talk reflectively about the bigger issues in life. This is done very differently, depending on the age or grade level of your students, but all students benefit from having a sense that teachers are there for them and interested in them personally.

The second is to be very prepared for the possibility that students will bring this up with you. Be prepared with some thoughts about how you would handle this in a classroom discussion. Here are some tips (which have to be modified, depending on the developmental stage of the students):

- Begin by stating the obvious. “I wondered whether many of you might be concerned about this and whether or how to bring it up. I'm glad that, if it is on your minds, you would let me know. What happened in Russia at that school was terrible, and I'm hoping that we can all have a sense

of empathy for that whole city. When things like this happen, we all have different kinds of reactions, thoughts and fears. What are some of the reactions any of you have had?"

- As students respond, remember that it is most important for them to speak freely, rather than having you respond right away with some reason that they really don't need to worry. The naming of something is the beginning of a sense of control and empowerment, so the goal is to have the most number of students speak as possible.
- You might next make statements that "normalize" their fears and reactions. "I can see that there is a wide range of thoughts and reactions about this, but I also see that most of you aren't alone in your thoughts and fears – more of your peers have those reactions than you may realize."
- Next you might look toward empowering students by helping them examine what they can do to make a difference. "Although we think of terrorists as somebody we never met or never knew, we also know that for any of us who experience violence, the greatest likelihood is that it will come from someone we know – someone who bullies us at school, or relationships we get into that allow one person to dominate or control another. What are some of the things we can do here at school that help us feel safe?" Reinforce the value of peer mentoring programs, peer mediation, anti-bullying programs and anything else they bring up. Point out that there are things students can do that make a difference in the hallways of the school every day.
- Finally, move into asking what they'd like adults to understand about what could help students feel safer. "What do you wish teachers understood about what it is like to be in school every day?" They may be more likely to tell you things they wish other teachers understood than you, so don't take this personally. And don't make excuses for other teachers. Some statements that might be reinforcing could include:
 - "I think it is important for teachers to think about that."
 - "I can imagine that other students feel the same way."
 - "That is something the school could work on."

When we adults feel overwhelmed or powerless in a situation (which is certainly the case when it comes to the possibility of terrorism in schools), we tend to deny ("Oh, that could never happen here."), minimize ("Oh, it happened a long way away, so you really don't have to worry about being safe here."), or redirect the conversation ("Are you going to the dance Saturday night?"). All of these responses leave students feeling isolated, vulnerable and alone, harboring their fears.

One reassurance is that very bright people who work for our government have thwarted their plans every day since 9/11/01, so we can know that they continue to work very diligently. It is not reassuring for students for us to say "It could never happen here."

One last thought – we learned a great deal from following up with children who were and were not exposed to television coverage of the disaster on 9/11/01. Watching television coverage of that event left students much more vulnerable to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although it is crucial to be honest with students about what did occur, it is not necessarily helpful for students to see television coverage. We are unable to edit graphic coverage out as it comes across the screen. There are many less traumatizing ways for students to grasp the truth and to trust that you are being honest with them than to expose them to graphic television coverage. Limit, or better yet, eliminate their exposure.