Death at School: A Crisis Response

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Abstract

A crisis response plan is a critical document needed by all school communities. This plan should hold key information so that all personnel can respond effectively. With student death being one of the most common crises to affect a school, special focus is needed. Proper planning, training, and execution of the crisis response plan will lead to a healthier healing process for all students and staff. This paper focuses on crucial elements of a crisis response plan, a brief description of grief and loss in students, and specific steps a school community should follow in the event of a student death.
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Introduction

A phone call changes everything. The death of a student or member of a school community changes lives. It is an unfortunate reality that almost all school counselors will face in their tenure. Poland and Poland (2004) state that the school’s ability in handling these traumatic events plays a large role in the healing process of all individuals involved. To be prepared, by developing a crisis response plan, helps guarantee that all grieving members of the school community receive the support that is needed.

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the importance of planning and creating a crisis response plan with an emphasis on handling the death of a student. A crisis response plan is crucial to help bring safety and stability to school communities in times of great need (Studer & Salter, 2010). Preparing, planning, training, executing, and reviewing are all important components in the development of an effective crisis response plan. One must understand that a crisis response plan contains many important components including the roles of crisis response team members and protocol on how to handle a variety of crises.

Student death is one of the most common types of school crises to occur. An effective crisis response plan must have detailed information on this subject. Areas of focus included are: grief and bereavement and how they manifest in children and adolescents, procedure on handling notification of the school community, managing media and memorials, and finally, the transition to help all students process the loss and move forward.
Review of Literature

Grief and Loss

Death is a biological fact and is one in which all humans will face. When examining the death of an individual in a school community, it must be understood that grief is a normal response and should be looked at as an appropriate reaction. To avoid confusion, a working definition of grief is “an emotional suffering caused by death or bereavement” (Charkow, 1998). Grief will often look different in all individuals especially when taking into consideration their cognitive developmental stage as well as their relationship with the deceased. If the death is that of a peer, most students find this to be even more devastating (Poland & Poland, 2004).

Developmental levels vary from source to source. According to Fiorelli (2011), levels often viewed when associated to grief include: Preschool to Early Childhood (ages 2-7), Preadolescent (ages 7-12), and Adolescent (ages 13-18).

When dealing with students in the Preschool to Early Childhood stage, children frequently look at death as temporary. More often than not, death is something they may come to understand but believe it will never happen to them, only emphasizing their difficulty to distinguish between reality and fantasy (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2007). Death is looked at as something or someone that can get them and is often believed to be a punishment for some type of wrongdoing. As the Preschool to Early Childhood children develop, connections of various events are also common. For example, when a grandparent dies from a stomach problem, children may think that they too, will die from a stomachache. Because this age group “is present-orientated, their grief reactions are brief although often very intense” (Fiorelli, 2011,
It is important to be honest in the explanation of death and to give reassurance and comfort.

Students who fall in the Preadolescent stage begin to realize that death is real and permanent. At the same time, it is still difficult for this developmental group to understand that it is universal and that death may happen to them. The biological component of death becomes more compelling, which often results in Preadolescents asking questions about the death process as they are curious in nature. Additionally, as the death becomes more of a reality, it is not uncommon for Preadolescents to transfer behaviors from the deceased unto themselves (Fiorelli, 2011). As Papalia, Olds, and Feldman (2007) discuss, it is important to be honest and answer questions that are being brought forward. By allowing children to be a part of the decision making experience, it will help with their need for independence while still offering help as they identify the changes that have occurred in their life.

Already going through major physical and emotional changes, adolescents often struggle with questions that have no concrete answers when dealing with death. They possess a more mature understanding of what dying truly means. As they try to separate themselves from family, providing counseling can be difficult. Often they “experience powerful and deep emotions that they may feel no one can understand” (Fiorelli, 2011, p. 639). This is fueled by their view of being “…invincible and not subject to the rules that govern others. The death of a peer may not only constitute the loss of a classmate but also may point out the reality of his or her own mortality” (Poland & Poland, 2004, p.9). More often than not, death is not something that adolescents focus on. Although the tendency is for adolescents to pull away during times of grief, simply providing them the opportunity to have someone listen is often the best approach in the allowance of expression of emotions.
Though the understanding of death varies by developmental age, the way grief is manifested is often similar. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (as discussed in the American School Counselor Association [ASCA] Coping with the Sudden Death of a Student Crisis Book, 2006-2012) developed the five stages of grief as: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. It is important to understand that not all individuals will enter every stage nor will they enter them in sequence. Denial is often represented in the beginning with the hope that somehow the information was a mistake and the death did not actually happen. Anger often occurs after the reality has sunk in and frequently manifests itself by blaming others who may have been involved in the event or simply an innocent bystander. Bargaining occurs when promises are made in order to change the outcome. It is usually the result of feelings of guilt. Depression results in the student or individual feeling sad and alone. Acceptance of the death is the finale, as the individuals accept the reality of the situation. Another pattern often used when discussing grief is that of the classic grief work model. In comparison to Kubler-Ross’s five stages, the grief work model focuses in on three stages: shock and disbelief, preoccupation with the memory of the dead person, and resolution (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007).

Shock and disbelief occurs immediately following a death. These emotions leave the survivors confused, sad, and gradually forced to accept the reality of the loss. During the preoccupation stage, friends and family come to terms with the death but often have difficulty accepting and moving forward. The final stage of resolution results in the survivors adjusting to new life while allowing the memories of the deceased to bring feelings of warmness and happy remembrance. Whether focusing on Kubler-Ross’s five stages or the grief work model, the way children deal with death is often similar. With children, stages of grief are most frequently
expressed in the appearance of behavioral or physical symptoms (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007).

The behavioral and physical symptoms often expressed in times of grief are varied. It must be noted that not all children will experience these symptoms and once again, the developmental level of the child will play a role in the symptoms exhibited. Preschool to Early Childhood children often have symptoms such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, stomachaches, fear or anxiety of separation from loved ones, difficulty in concentration, and regression from previously accomplished tasks (ASCA, 2006-2012). As a caregiver, it is important to realize that all children react differently. While one might increase their activity and throw temper tantrums, another may be silent and withdrawn.

Preadolescents and Adolescents will experience many of the same symptoms listed previously. However, additional symptoms may include: sobbing, anxiety, hostility towards the deceased, depression, increase in poor grades, and termination of current friendships (ASCA, 2006-2012). School is often where symptoms are most frequently seen. Lack in motivation and failure to complete assignments, whether for a short or extended period, often occur. In dealing with grief, adolescents often find ways that are detrimental to themselves or others. These behaviors may include drugs, alcohol, violence, and sexual promiscuity (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2007). No matter the developmental age, all children need a person who can listen and provide comfort and support as death and grief are inevitable.

The reality is that 90% of all children will have lost a loved one by the end of high school, and 1 in every 1,500 secondary students die each year (Fiorelli, 2011). Statistics like that
make it vital for school communities to have a crisis response plan in place that focuses in on the death of a student.

**The Crisis Plan**

A crisis response plan has the ability to be different for every school district and building. It is meant to reflect the needs of the school community. A crisis response plan is “…a written set of guidelines to help schools prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies and crises” (National Education Association [NEA], n.d., p.4). A district crisis response plan is often used as a way to establish safety policies and instructions for all buildings and would be closely followed in the development of each school building’s plan. The school building crisis response plan would include a more detailed list of instructions such as staff responsibilities and specific locations/rooms in which students and staff of that building would understand. According to the NEA’s School Crisis Guide, many key elements play into the development of these plans such as prevention, response team identification, policies and procedures, locations, communication, training and practicing, and recovery after the crisis (NEA, n.d.).

The response team is often the start of any crisis plan. This group is in charge of creating and reviewing the response plan for the school district. Often broke into two separate categories, district and school, members should be diverse and have the ability to act in all emergencies (NEA, n.d.). Often led by the superintendent or principal, other members should include the police liaison, school counselor, and several key staff members such as the school nurse, transportation director, and teaching staff. The response team is often in charge of assisting with trainings as well as taking key roles in the event of an emergency. The team must understand that the crisis response plan should be flexible but communicate clearly what the expectations are for
all individuals involved. Coordinating with community sources, such as fire and police, as well as parents would also fall into the development stages (Poland & Poland, 2004).

Training and communication is vital in any crisis response plan. All staff and students should be trained on the various emergency events that could occur. Practice should occur on a regular basis so the response becomes polished. Added influences such as having emergency response teams participate is beneficial so all parties involved are well-versed in their actions. New staff members and substitute teachers or staff should also be prepared for all situations. Communication is a necessity when developing and training a crisis response plan. Guidelines for communicating with staff and students as well as parents and media will be an important tool. Keeping all involved on the same page will help restore order and support the school community both in training and in the event of a crisis (NEA, n.d.).

In the event of a crisis occurring, the recovery from the event will also need to be planned. A standard response to all crises, no matter the origin, is individuals will experience different levels of grief. As stated in Jenkins, Dunham, and Contreras-Bloomdahl (2011), most school faculty members feel inadequate in their trainings for dealing with students who are grieving. Again, the response team and communication play a large role in assisting with those inadequate feelings. NEA’s School Crisis Guide discusses the need for counseling support for both students and staff. This should be made available in both a group and individual settings. With that, extra support such as substitute teachers or additional counselors should be on hand to assist where needed. Communication to all staff and students should be direct and provide a plan, which covers discussion information and plans for resuming classroom instruction when the time is right (NEA, n.d.). Each school community must personalize their crisis response plan to fit their requirements.
Death of a Student

The unexpected death of a student, which was closely followed by suicide and transportation accidents, is listed as the most common crises that impact a school community (Studer & Salter, 2010). A crisis response plan specifically designated for this situation is warranted for all school communities. It should be reviewed and revised frequently as to allow the school community leaders the ability to work through the steps that have already been developed and make changes as necessary. The way a school community responds to a death will set the stage for how well people cope with the loss (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006). A crisis response plan must be thorough and as previously stated, has many key elements. When dealing with a student death, crisis response plan key information includes: verification and notification, initial interventions, and long-term follow up care (Poland & Poland, 2004).

Verification of the facts, most often done by the principal or superintendent, should be the first step in any school’s crisis response plan (ASCA, 2006-2012). These facts would include who the deceased is and how he or she died. Confirmation of the death can be done in a variety of ways, such as utilizing the local police, contacting the victim’s faith leader or most often, conferring with the victim’s family (Poland & Poland, 2004). It is important to be respectful and offer condolences from the school. The family may set-up a contact person for all future conversations and may give specific details that they wish to have released as well as details that they do not want publicly known (Poland & Poland, 2004). Once verification has occurred, the next step is to work through the notification of other school community members.

The crisis management team is often the first to be notified as a crisis response plan includes roles for each member. These roles, though varied, often include: assisting in the
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notification of staff, assessing the potential effect of the death, and supporting all efforts involved in handling the situation (ASCA, 2006-2012). Notifying the staff is a primary task. It is important so that staff members have time to process the information before having to deal with their regular duties. Teachers play a vital role as “it is teachers who directly interact with students…after a death occurs” (Jenkins, Dunham & Contreras-Bloomdahl, 2011, p.3). Often the first person the students interact with, a teacher is instrumental in helping the students in a crisis. A bond often exists in a classroom and can be used to help students cope with the tragedy and assist with the grieving process (Poland & Poland, 2004). Because of this bond, some teachers may also be distraught over the event. It is important to have staff on hand who can fill in for a teacher who is unable to fulfill normal duties. A staff meeting prior to the school day allows for the creation of an environment for staff to support each other and allows for the crisis response team to provide additional information (Poland & Poland, 2004). Handouts with instructions, expectations of classroom discussions, and other materials that teachers may find useful should be provided. Staff meetings are also beneficial at the end of the day to allow for further updates. As time passes, regular meetings can be used to discuss how the staff is handling the situation as well as evaluate how the crisis response plan worked.

After notification of the staff, crisis team members also need to assist in assessing the impact of the death on the school community. Many things need to be taken into consideration. According to ASCA (2006-2012), there are three variables that help determine the potential effect of the death. They are: who the deceased was, the circumstances of the death, and where the death occurred. Though consistency in the way the death is handled is a must, the popularity of a student may increase the number of individuals mourning the loss (Poland & Poland, 2004). If the deceased was a member of an extra-curricular group or activity, it would help identify
students who would most likely need extra support due to the closeness of the relationship. ASCA (2006-2012) also states that the location of the death plays a large role with the response increasing for students and staff if it occurred at school or in a school-related activity.

The cause of death is also something that needs to be taken into consideration. Unexpected deaths, such as accidents and suicide, often lead to more heightened response than one of natural causes, such as a terminal illness (ASCA, 2006-2012). Simply put, when the death is unexpected, it is more difficult for all developmental age levels to comprehend or understand the loss. Often unexpected deaths propel more questions and fears from students, as it is an indication of their own mortality (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). Terminal illness also can cause some of these same fears, though, often students and staff have more time to prepare for the death. Suicide, although handled similar to all other deaths, does require a few special accommodations. First, it is important to emphasize that “suicide is a permanent solution to temporary problems” (ASCA, 2006-2012, p.19). Staff should focus on helping students grieve and learn about warning signs of suicide while providing ways to cope with stress and frustration. Facts may be given to students, consistent with what the family has given permission to share, and should not focus on the details of the death. According to the National Association of School Psychologists [NASP] (2012), it is also important to emphasize that no one is to blame for the suicide and that care should be taken to not glamorize the act. The attention that can be given to suicide has the chance of influencing vulnerable students. Grieving for the deceased will be consistent with other deaths, though; guilt and anger are often increased in survivors who feel helpless in the tragedy (ASCA, 2006-2012). No matter the type of death that has occurred, student notice must be handled carefully.
After notification of staff and the assessment of impact on the school community have transpired, student notification should occur. In today’s technology-driven world, most students may have already heard about the death. It is important to make an announcement so that all students receive the same information, as many different versions of the story may exist. The best approach is to share truthful and direct information that has been approved by the family. Students need to trust the information in order to begin the grieving process (Poland & Poland, 2004). From there, staff within the school community must simply be available on an as-needed basis for the students.

Once the initial intervention stage has begun, communication among staff and students is ever vital. An established location where students and staff can go to reflect individually or as a group is ideal (Poland & Poland, 2004). This room should be staffed with trained professionals, like school counselors, who can assist those who are having difficulty. School counselors, other than teachers, are often the first professional that students will meet with when dealing with a death or tragedy (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006). When dealing with adolescents, having a space large enough for groups to gather is significant, as often they find solace in a peer setting (Fiorelli, 2011). The location for this setting should also be stocked with a variety of activities for students to use as a helpful tool to cope. Soft music, paper to write letters, large banners that can be signed as a memorial, Kleenex, and any other materials that trained staff finds appropriate should be included and at the student’s disposal. At this time it is also crucial to note which students and staff may be the most impacted by the death. Students and staff who were close with the deceased or who have suffered a loss in a recent time may need additional, private support (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). Another group that may need additional support or explanation is students with disabilities. “Some students may have difficulty understanding the
finality of death, differentiating their own well-being from that of the deceased, or be disoriented or distressed…” (Poland & Poland, 2004, p.11). Specialized personnel should expect this and work to make the environment safe and offer support. Cultural and religious differences can also be expected. Staff should make every attempt to understand the differences and assist when necessary.

While staff and students in the school are grieving together, parents of students and the media are also in need or want of information. The superintendent and principal should be working together to handle all correspondence from the school. A letter or calling tree update similar to that of the information given to students is most frequently used (ASCA, 2006-2012). When dealing with the media, the school should designate one specific individual who will handle all media requests. That individual must set clear expectations as to when and what information is released, while protecting the family’s privacy. It is also important to limit the media’s access to student and staff members. Often it is best to advise students and staff on how to handle media questions, and control access on school grounds. However, it is beneficial to use the media as another way to get information out to parents on how to help grieving students and its’ ability to send a positive message about the school community (Poland & Poland, 2004). The superintendent, or another designated crisis response team member, is assigned to handle the media, while another member of the crisis response team, such as the principal or school counselor, should continue to be in contact with the family of the deceased. Not only offering support in time of tragedy, communication about the school’s involvement in memorials and funeral services should be discussed.

Family preference as to the openness of the memorial and funeral service should be respected while sharing the student and staff’s wishes to attend (ASCA, 2006-2012). This can be
a very sensitive area. If the school community is invited to attend, announcements should be made clearly to both students and parents as to the expectations. A funeral is often the way individuals say good-bye to the deceased and can help in the healing process. Members of the crisis response team as well as faculty members should be in attendance at both the funeral services and in the school building to help with the grieving student body. For any spontaneous memorial sites, there should be planned and announced rules as to what is proper and as to when the memorial will be taken down. Any memorial that will be given to the family should be screened by members of staff or the crisis response team to make sure only suitable messages are sent. Permanent memorials are often a way for people to help recover from the loss and can be done in a variety of ways (ASCA, 2006-2012). Planting trees and donations to a scholarship are examples of appropriate memorials. Once again, understanding that all deaths should be treated similarly should be in the minds of the crisis response team. When the death is by way of suicide, it is often encouraged to do a memorial activity in the near future, such as a blood drive or donation to a charity, instead of a permanent structure (Poland & Poland, 2004). This suggestion is once again based on the need to avoid idolizing suicide as an act.

While the initial interventions are taking place, transitions should already be in place for long-term care. Continued individual and group counseling, contact with the deceased’s family, and media relations are of the utmost of importance in the beginning. Long-term care will start to move to the front. Ongoing support to students and staff, especially those who were close friends, are recommended (Poland & Poland, 2004). For some, a delayed response of grief, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder may manifest. It is important that the line of communication is kept open among all parties involved as to assist those students who are struggling. Counseling groups, with an ideal size of six to eight members, can be beneficial in
helping students by providing support and understanding (ASCA, 2006-2012). Although difficult for some, encouragement of teachers to resume regular classroom activities after the funeral will help students move forward. It should also be noted that even as the school community heals, certain anniversaries will cause emotional increases (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). Events such as birthdays, prom, graduation and other highly anticipated activities will remind students that one of their own is not in attendance. During these times, it is important that all staff, especially school counselors, pay special attention to the needs of those students who were highly impacted. Slowly over time, the school will resume to normal function.

At this point, counseling support has been primarily focused on the students and staff. The crisis response team must also process the events that have occurred for themselves. Continued support for all involved is imperative to a healthy healing process. After a short period, the crisis response team should plan to meet and debrief over the events that have passed (ASCA, 2006-2012). It will encourage those crisis response members to spend time in self-reflection regarding one’s own emotions, and will assist in reviewing the crisis response plan so that additions or changes can be made for future events.

**Role of the School Counselor**

A primary member of the crisis response plan team is that of the school counselor. Mentioned several times in the above information, the school counselor role is one of great magnitude. According to ASCA, the school counselor “is to facilitate planning, coordinate response to and advocate for the emotional needs of all persons affected by the crisis/critical incident by providing direct counseling service during and after the incident” (Studer & Salter, 2010, p.3). School counselors often are asked or expected to take leadership roles during crises.
even when the proper training was not given. Yet because of the training school counselors do receive, a better understanding of basic human needs makes them an effective tool (Fein, Carlisle & Isaacson, 2008). It is encouraged that school counselors, as well as members of the crisis response team, receive additional training. Although a magnitude of models and materials exist, Chibbaro and Jackson (2006) list the American Red Cross “Facing Fear” curriculum and the Crisis Management Institute programs to be of special interest.

In the event of a student death, the school counselor role should be primarily devoted to that of the emotional well-being of students and staff. Many tasks can be associated with the school counselor, but high on the priority list would be providing handouts and discussion help for staff, assisting with the deceased’s family, and meeting with the high risk students and staff (ASCA, 2006-2012). Open lines of communication from the administration and crisis response team members will allow the school counselor to successfully handle the job. After the initial period of time, continued contact with the high-risk students will be important. This may be done in individual or group settings run by the school counselor or through referrals to other mental health facilities (ASCA, 2006-2012). Communication with parents of these high-risk students will also assist in providing the extra support needed.

School counselors are key individuals who can provide care for students and staff in a student death crisis. The demands during crises of all types are high, and school counselors are expected to respond to the needs of all members of the school community (Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008).
Case Study

In the appendix, a case study has been included by Donna Poland (Poland & Poland, 2004). Narrated by the writer, it describes in brief an overview of a specific student’s death. Although lacking some detail, it portrays the trial and tribulations a school community must endure when faced with a death of a student, in this case, a suicide.
Conclusion

The death of a student is a tragic event that requires an immediate and carefully thought out response by the school community. In order to be prepared, a crisis response plan should be developed, reviewed and revised frequently to meet the needs of those impacted. It should contain specific information for a variety of crises as well as designated roles of the crisis response team, which will allow for smooth execution when a crisis arises. When focusing on a student death, this plan should include all information that would be beneficial. Key areas that need to be addressed are: verification of facts, notification of staff, students, and other members of the school community, initial interventions to deal with grieving students, how to handle media relations, and long term follow up care (Poland & Poland, 2004). Although a crisis response plan cannot always prevent a crisis, its purpose should be to assist in renewing the safety and stability of the school community (Studer & Salter, 2010).
Author’s Note

A thorough crisis response plan would cover every imaginable emergency or crises a school could possibly go through. I chose to focus this paper on the death of a student.

Personally, I have experienced a student death as a faculty member of the high school in which I teach. Each time, I was impressed by how our administration, counseling staff, and faculty pulled together in order to help all those who grieved and felt loss. It was in that; I found the inspiration to focus my Capstone paper on this topic. As I move into the counseling field, I knew I wanted to have a set plan in place so that in times of need, I had something to reference. I found the ASCA Coping with the Sudden Death of a Student crisis book to be especially helpful.

I would be amiss not to mention that all crises carry the threat of a grief experience and each should be handled accordingly. In light of recent tragedies such as the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, I felt like a few paragraphs could not do justice to cover the trauma and grief that one would experience and need to deal with as a member of school fallen victim to a terroristic act. Although many of the steps would be similar, the scale of the effect would be so grand it is difficult to comprehend. Instead, I hope that this paper would serve as a starting point for all counselors or staff members to begin the discussions of starting, refining, or if nothing else, reviewing of their school’s crisis response plan.
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Appendix

Case Study by Donna Poland

The Morning Before

It was the last day of summer, the day before the teachers returned. As a new principal, I had worked closely with staff members to finalize the master schedule, plan a meaningful staff development week, and ensure an efficient registration and orientation process.

I felt ready. Then, the phone call came. A teacher called to tell me that a student from last year’s eighth-grade class, the brother of a current student, had committed suicide the night before. Although I believed I was trained to deal with the unexpected, disorganizing thoughts and questions flew around in my head. Why would this boy do such a thing? What does this have to do with me? How can I help? How can I help my teachers deal with this?

Abandoning notions of a smooth beginning to the year, I shifted into managing a campus in crisis. After verifying the facts—and having a brief, painful conversation with the deceased boy’s mother—I convened my crisis team. Thankfully, everyone had been given an updated phone tree at the end of the previous year. We informed staff members of the student’s death and of our plans to provide follow-up information the next morning on staff development day.

Three needs became obvious. We needed to take care of the grieving teachers and coaches. The deceased boy had attended our middle school for three years, was an extremely popular athlete, and attended a church where many of our staff members and students were active. His death was sure to cause a wave of grief and confusion among his peers, and we needed to take care of the students who attended school with him and his sister, which involved both the middle and the high school. We also needed to support his sister.

The Morning Of

Clearly, the planned training was no longer appropriate for the staff meeting. Our revised schedule included time to discuss the facts and support for the family, plan for attendance at the service, share the schedule of the surviving sister to enable her teachers to coordinate, prepare counselors and school psychologists at both schools, and provide teachers with immediately usable information. The revised plan also included training on building better relationship and suicide prevention and postvention.

I also worked to ensure that we were providing adequate support for the family and students. I met with the boy’s mother, the district’s director of psychological services, and the school psychologist assigned to both schools. We referred the mother to community-based services for
her family. We reviewed our plan for monitoring the boy’s sister and friends and discussed strategies to use when talking with students about suicide. The director of psychological services worked with the family’s minister to develop a message that, in the minster’s words, would ensure that no child or adult in attendance would “think that suicide is an expressway to Heaven.” The minister also emphasized that there are many safe and healthy ways to deal with adversity in our lives.

*The Mornings That Follow*

Although we are a large school community, we solicited the help of the deceased student’s former teachers and made a list of his closest friends who would arrive for their first day of high school without their friend. We called the friend’s parents (and those of the boy’s sister) to inform them of the support we would be providing for their children. One of our counselors spent the first day of school at the high school to provide a familiar face and source of support for students.

The first weeks of school gave me an opportunity to establish trust and credibility in a very different way than I had originally planned. The challenge remained to stay vigilant in our pledge to watch after the staff members and students as they moved through the school year.