

Strategic Inquiry: Analyzing Postvention Policy toward a Liberated Lens for School Suicide Postvention

Collaborative Exercise: May 11, 2023



Imagine the school is implementing the policy below. Consider what it will look like, sounds like, and feel like on the ground to consider potential gaps and how to remedy them.

GUIDING QUESTIONS to ask as we interrogate this postvention policy:

- Where do we see biased/coded language, and how might we revise for more inclusive/equitable language?
- Where might generalities lead to lack of clarity, and how might we clarify it? (Example: if we use the term "stakeholders" - who do we actually mean.)
- *What else might you add?*

PHASES OF ANALYSIS

Phase 1	Highlight in yellow parts of the policy that appear to hold a liberated view
Phase 2	Highlight in green parts of the policy that do not hold a liberated view
Phase 3	Add comments focusing on questions or edits you might make to the policy to shift closer toward a liberation focus

REVIEW POSTVENTION POLICY

Group 1

1. Development and Implementation of an Action Plan: The crisis team will develop an action plan to guide school response following a death by suicide. A meeting of the crisis team to implement the action plan should take place immediately following news of the suicide death. The action plan may include the following steps:
 - a. Verify the death. Staff will confirm the death and determine the cause of death through communication with a coroner's office, local hospital, the student's parent or guardian, or police department. Even when a case is perceived as

being an **obvious instance of suicide**, it should not be labeled as such until after a cause of death ruling has been made. If the cause of death has been confirmed as suicide but the parent or guardian will not permit the cause of death to be disclosed, the school will not share the cause of death but will use the opportunity to discuss suicide prevention with students.

- b. Assess the situation. The crisis team will meet to prepare the postvention response, to consider how severely the death is likely to affect other students, and to determine which students are most likely to be affected. The crisis team will also consider how recently other traumatic events have occurred within the school community and the time of year of the suicide. If the death occurred during a school vacation, the need for or scale of postvention activities may be reduced.

Group 2

- c. Share information. Before the death is officially classified as a suicide by the coroner's office, the death can and should be reported to staff, students, and parents/guardians with an acknowledgement that its cause is unknown. Inform the faculty that a sudden death has occurred, preferably in a staff meeting. Write a statement for staff members to share with students. The statement should include the basic facts of the death and known funeral arrangements (without providing details of the suicide method), recognition of the sorrow the news will cause, and information about the resources available to help students cope with their grief. Public address system announcements and school-wide assemblies should be avoided. The crisis team may prepare a letter (with the input and permission from the student's parent or guardian) to send home with students that includes facts about the death, information about what the school is doing to 8 DISTRICT LIABILITY Schools have been sued and found liable for failing to take proper action, particularly for failing to notify parents/guardians,

when a student was thought to be suicidal. The key issues in court cases have been foreseeability and negligence and have included cases in which schools did not warn parents/guardians about both verbal and written statements about suicide as well as cases in which the school failed to provide supervision and counseling for suicidal students. Schools have also been sued over more complex issues, such as school climate and failure to reduce bullying, that were claimed to contribute to the suicide of a student. As the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights has emphasized, schools have legal obligations under anti-discrimination laws. Once a school knows or reasonably should know of possible student harassment, it must take immediate action to investigate, take steps to end the harassment, eliminate a hostile environment, and prevent its recurrence. These duties are a school's responsibility even if the misconduct also is covered by an anti-bullying policy and regardless of whether the student makes a complaint.

Group 3

- d. Avoid suicide contagion. It should be explained in the staff meeting described above that one purpose of trying to identify and give services to other high risk students is to prevent another death. The crisis team will work with teachers to identify students who are most likely to be significantly affected by the death. In the staff meeting, the crisis team will review suicide warning signs and **procedures (considerations)** for reporting students who generate concern.
- e. Initiate support services. Students identified as being more likely to be affected by the death will be assessed by a school employed mental health professional to determine the level of support needed. The crisis team will coordinate support services for students and staff in need of individual and small group counseling as needed. In concert with parents or guardians, crisis team members will refer to community mental healthcare providers to ensure a smooth transition from

the crisis intervention phase to meeting underlying or ongoing mental health needs.

- f. Develop memorial plans. The school should not create on-campus physical memorials (e.g. photos, flowers), funeral services, or fly the flag at half-mast because it may sensationalize the death and encourage suicide contagion. School should not be canceled for the funeral. Any school-based memorials (e.g., small gatherings) will include a focus on how to prevent future suicides and prevention resources available.

Group 4

2. External Communication: The school principal or designee will be the sole media spokesperson. Staff will refer all inquiries from the media directly to the spokesperson. The spokesperson will:
 - a. Keep the district suicide prevention coordinator and superintendent informed of school actions relating to the death.
 - b. Prepare a statement for the media including the facts of the death, postvention plans, and available resources. The statement will not include confidential information, speculation about victim motivation, means of suicide, or personal family information.
 - c. Answer all media inquiries. If a suicide is to be reported by news media, the spokesperson should encourage reporters not to make it a front-page story, not to use pictures of the suicide victim, not to use the word suicide in the caption of the story, not to describe the method of suicide, and not to use the phrase "suicide epidemic" – as this may elevate the risk of suicide contagion. They should also be encouraged not to link bullying to suicide and not to speculate about the reason for suicide. Media should be asked to offer the community information on suicide risk factors, warning signs, and resources available.