



PAYING TRIBUTE TO DECEASED SCHOOL COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Three high school students are hit by a drunk driver and killed on their way home from prom. Should the school erect a permanent memorial to them? A fifth-grade student drowns in a lake during the summer. Should the school plan to release 100 balloons in remembrance? A senior takes her own life. Should the school place a plaque at the front of the school to remember her? A principal is killed in a school shooting. Should the school build a memorial garden to commemorate his life?

Memorials are deeply rooted in our culture and remind us of a person who has died or an event in which people died, and they provide a place for people to express emotions and be supported by the school community. They give witness to our grief and remind those who follow of the tragedy that was overcome. They can be celebratory or serene, but all are intended as a reminder of a significant event. They permanently remind us of the lives lost, often tragically.

Schools should consider carefully the decision to create permanent, physical memorials to deceased students or staff members. In many cases, an alternative memorial activity is preferable to a permanent, fixed memorial.

Considerations for Erecting Permanent School Memorials

There is little agreement on whether permanent school memorials are appropriate to commemorate the death of a student or staff member, or will have relevant meaning or impact 10 to 20 years after an event occurs.

Most mental health professionals advocate that memorials are not appropriate when associated with suicide. The American Association of Suicidology has clear recommendations based on well-documented research on the contagion effect; memorials following a suicide may glamorize death and may communicate that suicide is an appropriate or desired response to stress. Instead, the association recommends that schools direct the energies of students into projects that help the living, such as volunteering, tutoring, fundraising for a charity, or helping in the community.

A decision to erect permanent memorials requires thoughtful considerations for not only the school staff but also the families, including the siblings, of the victims. These considerations include, but are not limited to the following.

Retraumatization. Erecting memorials may have the potential for re-traumatizing both students and staff who knew the victim, as well as families and possibly the surrounding community depending on the scope of the event. Memorials erected at the school will be a constant physical reminder of the victim and may continue to trigger trauma responses in students and staff long after the event took place.

Design. When designing a memorial it is important to consider how students and staff will perceive the death of the individual(s) in the future. It may be difficult for those planning the memorial, those who are acutely impacted,

to see this perspective. Marilyn Copeland, a counselor in a district that constructed a garden in memory of deceased students, noted that: “Schools change. A memorial should not be spontaneous because of the intense emotions at the time. Our garden now does not have the meaning it did in the beginning.”

The memorial design and planning may need to respond to political, community, or parental pressures. In one district, the construction of a memorial was delayed for several years because the victims’ families and the planning committee had differing opinions regarding the design.

Maintenance resources. Once the memorial is constructed, it is important to identify resources to maintain the memorial. Permanent school memorials such as gardens, monuments, benches, plaques, a reading area, a sundial, special trees, walkways, walls, and engraved tiles or bricks will all require long-term ongoing maintenance. The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, a program of the Children’s Home of Detroit that provides direct services to traumatized children and families and trauma education, training, consultation, referral services, intervention programs, and resource materials to professionals who work with youths, recommends that “schools do not create permanent memorials of any kind, but do in fact look to the larger community to make the memorial a community memorial.” One example in tribute to the Columbine High School victims is a memorial being constructed at a park near the high school. The memorial will “serve to honor those innocent victims but also provide a historic record of this tragedy and deliver a message of hope for many

generations to come.”¹ Unlike some school-based memorials, a community memorial offers the choice to visit it.

Memorial policy. A school district policy with guidelines regarding memorials should be part of the school’s emergency management plan. The policy should include guidance on who will be honored, when, where, and how. Marleen Wong, director of Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services, advises: “School memorials should be simple, meaningful and life affirming. Memorials set a precedent for the future and thus need to be equitable.” She adds that schools should avoid constructing a large memorial for one student, then a minimal one for another student.

Others’ input. Students, staff, families, and the community should be on the planning committee so that all may have input on the design of the memorial. Some of the families may choose not to participate; one school official noted that some families of the injured students did not attend the planning meetings. However, the planning team solicited their opinions individually for major decisions. The ultimate decision must rest with those responsible for the school district’s operations and maintenance tasks.

1 See <http://www.columbinememorial.org/Welcome.asp>.



Cultural norms. It is important that the planning committee consider cultural norms in planning and designing the memorial. For example, Native Americans have specific cultural ceremonies and rituals that are observed when someone dies. Latino students often set up a table with candles and pictures of the deceased. School officials should be sensitive to these traditions and confer with the family to honor any cultural and ethnic traditions.

Time commitment. The planning process may take several years. The planning and construction of the memorial in Oklahoma City for the victims of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building took five years. Planning and construction of the Columbine memorial has taken eight years and has involved the families of the victims, the injured students and their families, past and present students and staff, and community members. Steve Barrett, deputy superintendent in Springfield, Oregon, suggests that districts take advantage of existing community partnerships. “Within months of the (school) shooting, we brought in experts from outside and that was perceived negatively by a number of community residents,” said Barrett. This caused the project to be delayed; later “with a heavy emphasis on local student and parent volunteers (including the architect), and a lot of local investment in donations and time, the memorial planning and development process finally moved forward to completion.”

Location. Consider locating the memorial away from the main entrance of the school to avoid the triggering of traumatic reactions. The key is to locate the memorial so viewing it is a choice, not a daily occurrence.



Managing donations. Develop a donations management plan (DMP) that will track and manage all donations made to the families, victims, or school. The DMP should include procedures for: (1) establishing a database to manage all donations and offers of support; (2) creating and maintaining a phone bank and a Web site; (3) processing and matching the goods and services donated with those who need them the most; and (4) identifying community organizations and places that can serve as points of distribution for the donations. The district also may choose to direct the funds through a neutral agency such as United Way or a local bank so that the district does not get involved in decisions about distributing donations.

Long-term implications. Consider future students and staff when designing the memorial because future generations will view the event differently than those who experienced it. The memorial should reflect remembrance, but should not overly dramatize the circumstances and should be appropriate in scale and scope.

Costs. Allocate resources for maintaining the memorial and resorting it in the event of vandalism. Copeland recommends establishing an endowment for maintaining the memorial to avoid a financial burden for the district.

Memorial Activities: An Alternative to Permanent Memorials

Memorial activities provide an opportunity for people to express emotions and to be supported by the school community. Activities symbolize that every student and staff member is important, and help to unite and strengthen those impacted by the death(s). The activities provide a forum for a collective grief and bring people together to reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability and illustrate the universality of grief. Memorial activities can serve a larger purpose as well—to promote positive action toward a cause, such as tolerance, mental health services, or safety. Planning a variety of activities offers people options for remembering the victims. Options for memorial activities include but are not limited to:

- Establishing a scholarship fund for graduating seniors or a foundation in the name of the deceased;
- Gifts of library books or equipment;
- Planting of a tree or shrub, with a plaque identifying the student and funds earmarked for adequate care;
- Cards, letters, and memory books written by students for the family of the deceased (school counseling staff should review students' written material or art work before giving them to the family to ensure that all content is sensitive and appropriate);
- Spontaneous memorials such as flowers at the site;
- A moment of silence marking the event;
- A temporary display honoring the deceased at school;

- A memorial service or candlelight vigil; and
- A temporary plaque at the school, given to the family.

Students often feel the need to do something following a death, for example, soliciting donations for an existing foundation or helpful cause supported by the deceased, or one that is in relation to the cause of the death (Mothers Against Drunk Driving—MADD, American Cancer Society, etc.); organizing participation in a community-wide positive effort such as helping the homeless, cleaning up a park, or volunteering at a school; or creating a tribute page to the deceased in the school yearbook or newspaper. Tribute pages should not glorify the cause of the death, thus making the death itself seem appealing to others. This is particularly true in the case of a suicide, or a death due to risky behavior such as speeding or drinking and driving.

Some planning considerations are similar when preparing for permanent memorials or organizing memorial activities, including: forming a planning committee; establishing a donations management plan; and being sensitive to culturally specific rituals, traditions, beliefs, activities, and practices.

Holding a Memorial Service

It can be appropriate to hold a memorial service at the school to commemorate the loss of a student or staff member. For example, in some communities the school is the only venue large enough to accommodate the memorial attendees. In other circumstances, such as when a teacher or administrator dies, the staff, students, and community may want to sponsor a memorial service at the school because that is where the deceased is most remembered.

It is recommended that the service be held after school hours; if held during the school day, attendance at such a service should be voluntary. The National Association of School Psychologists offers these guidelines when a memorial service is held at school:²

- Involve students in the planning of the service, particularly those who were close to the deceased.
- Include music, particularly student performances. Playing soothing music as people enter sets the mood and maintains calm.
- Preview the service with students beforehand.
- Remove anyone from the service who is acting inappropriately.
- Limit the memorial service to thirty minutes for secondary students.
- Include several speakers or if students have written poems or other tributes, students themselves or staff members can read them. It is useful for students to practice their readings before the actual event.
- Invite family members; however, recognize that they may choose not to attend.
- Use symbols of life and hope. Balloons or candles can be used very effectively to promote a positive, uplifting message that acknowledges the sadness yet is hopeful for the future.
- Provide a quiet activity for students who do not attend or allow students whose parents do not want them to attend to be picked up from school prior to the service.

- Have students return to their classrooms for a short time after the service. This allows them the opportunity to talk with one another or talk with their teacher or a counselor, if available.
- Limit media coverage on the campus during a service. One way to manage the media coverage is to have a comprehensive plan for working with the media in the school's emergency management plan. These partnerships should be developed in advance of an incident.

Spontaneous Memorials

Spontaneous or temporary memorials will most likely be established following a death on a school campus because the community is looking for solace. The fence in front of Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, was filled with flowers, posters, balloons, plants, teddy bears, candles, photos, poems, crosses, and other mementos on the chain link fence in front of the school following a campus shooting. Steve Barrett, who was directly involved in the recovery process, advised, "A memorial can be a healing place for many. However, staff members need to monitor messages left at a spontaneous memorial, and be ready for unusual or unexpected circumstances." In addition, due to the throngs of people at the fence, daily trash removal was an unexpected chore.

Those in charge must determine how and when to manage, and ultimately, remove the items. Wong proposes that, "School superintendents and school boards should not be afraid to provide guidance about spontaneous memorials." It is best to do this with planning, involving both staff members and students in the decisions. Schools should avoid removing the items in a sudden or unexpected way, as this can create feelings of

² See www.Nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/memorials_general.aspx.

anger and resentment, in addition to the grief already being experienced. When possible, a positive atmosphere should be created through a celebration of life or other ritual that honors the deceased, while removing the items. The timing of the removal should be considered carefully, for example, a natural break in the school calendar if possible, such as a weekend, vacation, or holiday. In general, it is not recommended that temporary memorials be left up past the school year in which the death occurred.

Handling Anniversaries

An anniversary provides the community an occasion to honor the survivors and recognize organizations and community members who helped during the tragedy. For example, upon the first anniversary of a shooting in one school, the school district, in conjunction with the city, the parks and recreation department, and a faith-based organization, sponsored a memorial gathering at the high school. Although anniversary activities must be tailored for each community, general guidelines include but are not limited to the following:

- Involve students, faculty, and community members in the planning.
- Hold an open house to provide community members the opportunity to remember the event individually.

- Plan an organized program in collaboration with community partners.
- Work with the media to establish guidelines for interviewing selected school and community personnel, and for limiting access to students or families.
- Work with partners such as law enforcement to provide security during the day.
- Conduct school on the anniversary date, and possibly acknowledge the event through a moment of silence.
- Provide additional counseling support for a few days surrounding the anniversary since the date may trigger reactions for some students and staff members.

Conclusion

Memorials can serve an important function in the grieving and healing process. They recognize and honor the deceased, the injured, the survivors, and the community members who supported them. Although there is little research on the long-term effects of permanent school memorials, anecdotal information from those who have been involved in their construction suggests schools should consider carefully the decision to create permanent, physical memorials to deceased students or staff members. Whenever possible, schools should provide a variety of memorial activities.

RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology

The goal of the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) is to understand and prevent suicide. Founded in 1968, AAS promotes research, public awareness programs, public education, and training for professionals and volunteers and serves as a national

clearinghouse for information on suicide. AAS membership includes mental health and public health professionals, researchers, suicide prevention and crisis intervention centers, school districts, crisis center volunteers, survivors of suicide, and a variety of laypersons who have an interest in suicide prevention.

<http://www.suicidology.org>

RESOURCES (con't)

Center for Mental Health Services

The Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) is the federal agency within the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) that leads national efforts to improve prevention and mental health treatment services for all Americans. CMHS pursues its mission by helping states improve and increase the quality and range of treatment, rehabilitation, and support services for people with mental health problems, their families, and communities.

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/>

National Association of School Psychologists

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) represents over 23,500 school psychologists from across the United States and other countries. The mission of NASP is to represent and support school psychology with leadership to enhance the mental health and educational competence of all children.

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/memorials_general.aspx

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network is a joint center of Duke University Medical Center and UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute. This unique Congressional initiative was established as part of the *Children's Health Act of 2000*. The mission of the center is to raise the standard of care and improve access to services for traumatized children, their families, and communities across the United States.

<http://www.netsnet.org>

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

It is the mission of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence to increase the capacity of individuals and communities to reduce the incidence and impact of violence on children and families; to train and support the professionals who provide intervention and treatment to children and families affected by violence; and, to increase professional and public awareness of the effects of violence on children, families, communities, and society.

<http://www.ncccev.org>

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement was established in December 2005 with funding from the September 11th Children's Fund and the National Philanthropic Trust. The center is located at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The center was created to: link efforts to provide trauma-related and bereavement support services within school settings; collaborate with professional organizations, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and community groups to further help students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss; and serve as a resource for information, training materials, consultation, and technical assistance in the areas of crisis and loss.

<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis/>

RESOURCES (con't)

National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children

The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children is a program of the Children's Home of Detroit. Its mission is to provide direct services to traumatized children and families and to provide school professionals, crisis intervention teams, medical and mental health professionals, child care professionals and clinicians with trauma education, training, consultation, referral services, and trauma-specific intervention programs and resource materials.

<http://www.tlcinst.org/Memorials.html>



The White House Conference on School Safety, Oct. 10, 2006

The White House convened a conference on school safety following a series of tragic shootings that had taken place in our nation's schools. The conference was designed to provide an opportunity for educators, law enforcement officials, mental health providers, representatives of community-based organizations, parents, and students to come together to share successful strategies for preventing violence and learn from one another. Panelists and participants discussed a wide range of topics, including: research about the nature and extent of school violence; ways law enforcement, schools, and others can partner to establish safe environments and prevent school shootings; emergency management planning activities that help schools prepare to respond to violent acts and other crises; and strategies to help school communities heal and recover if and when a violent incident occurs.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/education/schoolsafety/>

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For information about the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant (formerly the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant) program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov), or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov). Suggestions for newsletter topics should be sent to the ERCM TA Center Suggestion Box at <http://ercm.ed.gov/>

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