

# The High School, Rathgar, Dublin 6

## CRISIS RESPONSE POLICY

The following policy is being proposed, based on guidelines developed by the Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education and the advice pack “Responding to Critical Incidents” by the National Educational Psychological Service. It is designed to assist the school in responding in an effective way to a serious crisis within the school. There may be many kinds of serious crisis but some examples are death or suicide of a student or teacher, serious accident in the school or on a trip, severe violence associated with the school, the disappearance of a student. The Principal will decide what constitutes a serious crisis necessitating the implementation of this policy. It is anticipated that the more detailed advice contained in the NEPS pack will guide the detail of the school’s response.

The Principal and Guidance Counsellor are instituting a small network of schools which will implement similar policies and the Guidance Counsellor of each of these schools will be released by the Principal to attend at the affected school for a period of three days (if necessary). The advantage of such a network is the immediate presence in the school of an additional three trained counsellors. The visiting counsellors will work under the direction of the counsellor of the school affected, who will consult with the Principal and then arrange their most effective deployment.

The crisis response team will usually consist of the Principal, the Deputy Principal, The Guidance Counsellor, the Year Head and the Form Teachers of the pupil or pupils involved. The team will be convened by the Principal. According to the type of incident which has occurred, the composition of the team may need to be varied. Visiting counsellors may be invited to attend team meetings, which will usually take place immediately an incident has occurred and then before and after school for the next few days. The Principal may also decide to involve the NEPS psychologist for the school.

It is particularly important that the work to be done is facilitated by good organisational policies, so lists of telephone numbers will be made available immediately by office staff to those involved. Organisers of school trips and outings will ensure that a list of all pupils and teachers involved, including the mobile telephone numbers of teachers, will be left with the Administrator prior to a trip or outing.

### **1. Establish Facts**

It is crucial that the school has the correct information regarding the crisis. Therefore it is important that the first action taken by the crisis response team is to assemble to establish the facts - this may involve contacting others such as hospitals, Garda, parents. It is particularly important that the word “suicide” is not used unless the facts incontrovertibly support that description.

### **2. An Outline Immediate Response**

The team will agree an immediate plan of action which may involve:

- informing students and remaining staff, teaching and non teaching
- contacting parents
- visiting the home of the bereaved
- organising a school assembly or service
- deploying the remainder of the pastoral care team (other Year Heads and Form Teachers)
- alerting outside agencies
- liaising with those at an accident site (e.g. in the case of an out of school crisis)
- agreeing a common statement with regard to the crisis
- establishing a policy for liaising with the press
- assigning tasks within the group
- providing rooms for debriefing, meetings, counseling etc
- all staff involved will log telephone calls made and received, meetings held, letters sent and received, important information gathered and will contribute these logs to a central confidential file which will ultimately be held by the Principal in case of follow up after a long time has passed

### **3. Inform**

It is vital that all those needing information receive it as soon as is practicable. It is helpful if a common statement is agreed when informing students and others. Such a statement will reduce the spread of rumour. Staff will be informed in the first instance. If at all possible, the students should be told at the same time or soon after in no larger than normal class size. The statement should seek to:

- be communicated in a sensitive manner

- give the facts as they are known
- highlight the supports that will be available
- indicate the actions that are planned

In the case where an accident has occurred on a school trip, a similar statement is needed to assist those who will be telephoning relatives. It is preferable to have a group of people involved so that all concerned are informed in or around the same time. Some further considerations in contacting parents:

- offer any practical help needed - transport, phone numbers, contact names
- enquire if the parent is alone or has someone to offer support
- carefully review with the parent that the information given has been fully understood
- alerting parents to the trauma will help them when they subsequently make contact with their child

Liaising with the Press: If there are to be enquiries from the press, it is important that only one person acts as a liaison – this will usually be the Principal. All staff and pupils are to be told that all press enquiries are to be referred to the Principal. No other discussion with the press should take place and no interviews should be given without the approval of the Principal and usually in his presence. In contact with the press:

- priority will be given to the sensitivities and needs of those affected directly by the crisis
- names, addresses and telephone numbers of those affected will not be released
- facts will be relayed and speculation avoided
- likely questions will be considered and a response to them prepared
- a time and place for briefings will be agreed with the press if this is necessary in an on-going situation – the Board room would be a suitable venue

Others to be Informed: When possible, the chairperson of the Board of Governors will be informed immediately and he/she will decide whether an emergency meeting of the Management Committee is necessary. If appropriate, the Principal will instruct the Administrator to inform the school's insurance company and other concerned agencies immediately.

## **4. Short-term Action**

The action that is needed in the short term will obviously be very dependent on the nature of the crisis. Actions will come under a number of headings:

### **Students**

- sustain an atmosphere where it is okay to talk about the experience. This will require the availability of staff and others. It will entail sensitivity to the time needed for such sharing. Care should be taken to balance the need to continue with the normal routine and the accessibility of support personnel for students.
- the most essential quality in adults needed by students is that of listening. In addition to the visiting counsellors such a system may involve those staff who are willing and able to offer support, outside professionals where required, time and resources to carry out their role, a method of supporting each other, and a review of their effectiveness.
- encourage contact with home in the initial stages of a crisis. Parents need to be able to contact the school if they have information that will help the school in any way in caring for their child.
- involvement of students in any funeral or other services. This requires invitation, planning and review. The
- families involved need to be consulted, the students invited to take part, time given to prepare for this participation and finally a debriefing of those concerned.
- some form of ritual (assembly, service etc) is likely to take place. Students should be carefully consulted as to the nature of such a ritual. Such an experience may also be of great benefit to staff and parents. This may take place in a local church in consultation with local clergy and the co-ordinator of Religious Education.
- attention needs to be given to the possible signs of distress being exhibited by students. In noticing possible signs, it is important to say that these are not necessarily indicative of stress in relation to a trauma. Rather they are merely prompts to staff as they 'watch out' for the students in their care. Such signs will be related to uncharacteristic behaviour for example, being unusually quiet. It is important that staff discuss signs with others before drawing conclusions.
- students need to be asked their 'permission' regarding discussing their feelings and reactions to a crisis. The guidance counsellor is a key person in addressing the needs of individual students.
- freedom to be upset is important for anyone responding to a trauma. The school needs to ask itself how it

creates a safe atmosphere for this to occur. There must be an empathic approach from members of staff and a place for students to retreat to for a short time might be appropriate, e.g. the Nurse's surgery.

- students not directly involved with the trauma may also be affected. Allowing students to express their sympathy can be a catalyst for such students - writing a card, attending a service.
- constant reminders will need to be given in relation to the supports that are available, that students will react in different ways and at different times.
- focus on the friends of a bereaved student as they can be the best source of support. Often the bereaved student may not wish to speak to an adult and may rely heavily on friends. These friends may need support as they attempt to find ways to be of help.

## **Staff**

Many staff, following a trauma, may need to air their feelings and reactions. It will be helpful to consider a number of possibilities such as: availability of the pastoral team; contacts for professional help; a staff ritual; a de-briefing meeting of the staff; a simple confidential questionnaire to determine the needs of the staff.

- care needs to be taken of those staff directly involved with a trauma that they receive support, are not overworked, are able to de-brief.
- staff who feel, for whatever reason, that they are unable to be involved in the school's direct response to the trauma should be able to readily opt out.
- those staff having any concerns about students or others in relation to the trauma should have easy access to personnel who can assist them.
- the guidance counsellor, and other members of the pastoral team will be the key resource in short and medium term response. They need to be facilitated, resourced and supported in their task. It is vital that they regularly meet with the principal in reviewing progress. It will be this group who can liaise with and support the staff.
- the Principal will also need to ensure (s)he is receiving support. The weight of responsibility surrounding a crisis may be enormous. Principals are often people who are very competent in practically responding to a crisis. Nonetheless, the Principal needs to have a care for their own well-being and seek whatever support is appropriate within and without the school community. Other staff should be aware of the need to support senior staff who are dealing directly with the crisis. They will be acting to the best of their ability and the least helpful approach will be criticism. Constructive suggestions should be given to the Principal, Deputy Principal or Guidance Counsellor.

## **Parents**

- the school will have some role to play in supporting parents concerned with a trauma. This will vary depending on the nature of the crisis and the resources available to the school.
- provide contact people for parents to liaise with, particularly in regard to monitoring the progress of their children.
- put parents in contact with each other if it is appropriate.
- discuss with involved parents and/or the Parents' Association representatives what action can be taken to support those concerned.
- If appropriate, involve parents in a school service or assembly following a tragedy.

## **Funeral Services – if applicable**

- decide what form of representation is appropriate. It is essential, where possible, to consult the family concerned. Do not presume that the bereaved family will appreciate a very public presence of the school.
- prepare students ahead of the funeral. For some this may be the first occasion they have been exposed to a major grief. Take time after the event to de-brief students.
- for those students who wish, encourage and assist them to write a personal message of sympathy. Consider also a common expression from students and/or staff.
- check out, perhaps with the funeral directors, the arrangements concerning floral tributes. Any accompanying message should be handwritten.

- if possible, representatives of the school should visit the home of the bereaved. If students request to visit the home, phone ahead to check that this is appropriate. Visiting the bereaved may be distressing - support those involved.

## **5. *Medium and Long-term Action.***

The following are merely a selection of the possibilities worthy of consideration

- students returning to school after a major accident or bereavement cannot easily be categorised in terms of their needs. The pastoral team will be a useful resource in seeking to support each student appropriately. Care should be taken to monitor: the relationships with peers and teachers; falling behind in academic and other work; involvement in extra-curricular activities.
- consider if a special day of reflection would benefit the class affected by a tragedy.
- consider whether a bereavement programme from an outside agency would be of assistance.
- review of curricular provision, specialist staff training and links with outside agencies in the area of change, loss, death and crisis issues.
- when a subsequent bereavement occurs in the school setting, take care to support those who were bereaved previously as this subsequent trauma may trigger deep emotional reactions.
- an annual remembrance service for all those connected to the school community who have died. Students, staff and parents can be encouraged to record the names of those they would like remembered.
- the dedication of a tree, special garden, piece of artwork, notice board to recall those who have died.

## **6. *NEPS “Responding to Critical Incidents” Pack***

The Principal will arrange for copies of this excellent pack of advice to be available immediately a crisis occurs.

## **7. *Evaluation and review***

This policy will be reviewed after an incident, should there ever be one, or every five years in the absence of an incident.

Promulgated by the Management Committee of the Board of Governors

Network of schools which will cooperate in the event of a crisis: The High School, Wesley College, St Columba’s College, Sandford Park School.