

Jeffco Public Schools

Memorializations and Special Considerations

As a school district, we recognize the far-reaching impact that a student or staff member's death may have on other students, staff, families and the community. We believe that remembrance of a student or staff member whose life ended during their years in the school district should be consistent and equitable from case to case, and considerate of the grief process of family, friends, and coworkers. Memorials, decisions about yearbooks and graduation, and all other decisions that need to be made regarding remembrance of a death set a precedent for the future and need to be equitable. Having established guidelines that address memorials and remembrance can serve to educate students, staff, and parents, and can help alleviate potential hard feelings and resentment by those who may not understand the reasoning for specific approaches to decisions that are made by a school. Addressing the requests of grieving parents, students, staff or community members is easier when administrators can refer to district guidelines. Decision makers need to remember that their primary concern should be about the surviving students and staff that are left in their care. Otherwise, saying no to a memorial can be misinterpreted as the school not caring or being insensitive.

Memorialization Guidelines

When a tragedy occurs at a school, there often is a call for the creation of a memorial to remember or commemorate the loss or tragic event. Many recommendations, special considerations, and decisions will need to be made in this emotional aftermath. As places designed primarily to support learning, school sites should not serve as the main venue for the memorializing of students or staff. However, recognizing that loss of a member of the school community is deeply felt; schools will support staff, students, and families who feel the loss and will assist them in making connections to appropriate community resources.

Equitable policies: School communities often wish to memorialize a student who has died, reflecting a basic human desire to remember those we have lost. It can be challenging for schools to strike a balance between compassionately meeting the needs of distraught students while preserving the ability of the school to fulfill its primary purpose of education.

- **It is very important that schools strive to treat all deaths in the same way.** Having one approach for memorializing a student who died of cancer or in a car accident and a different approach for a student who died by suicide reinforces stigma and may be deeply and unfairly painful to the student's family and friends. In the same way, failing to memorialize a less popular student or staff member in the same way as a more popular student or staff member can raise equity questions. Wherever possible, schools should both meet with the student's friends, school staff, and coordinate with the family and community, in the interest of identifying a meaningful, safe approach to acknowledging the loss.
- **It is appropriate to be intentional and to slow down during this early process, as the focus is on the immediate support and recovery of staff and students and respecting the privacy and needs of the family.** It is also important to consider developmental differences in our students' stages of growth in the grieving process.

Types of Memorials:

1. Permanent memorials (**NOT recommended**) may include things like awards established in the deceased's name, ongoing scholarships, plantings, statuary or markers, or items of historical or educational significance. Permanent memorials require careful planning and discussion before any final decisions are made. Things to consider: Is there potential for re-traumatization? Are there design, perception, and/or political implications? What are the ongoing maintenance costs, time commitment, location, management of initial donations, long-term implications, etc.
All conversations regarding permanent memorials MUST include the school's community superintendent and a representative from Student Services.
2. Temporary memorials (**recommended**) are short term, can be given away as a gift or donation, or will expire or come to an end within a year. In most school-related deaths, it is most appropriate to create temporary memorials allowing students, staff, and families to express their grief in a positive and constructive manner. Temporary memorials may include a non-renewable scholarship, a temporary website, a one-time monetary donation to charity, a memory book or poster, cards or letters, an off-site candlelight vigil or impromptu memorial site. Temporary memorials may also include plaques or other displays that are removed within one calendar year.
3. Spontaneous memorials are often created by student's on school grounds following a death. This could include things like items being placed/left on a student's desk or next to a student's locker, messages written in chalk on the pavement, etc. When a memorial is spontaneously created on school grounds, schools are advised to monitor it regularly for messages that may be inappropriate (hostile or inflammatory) or that indicate students who may themselves be at risk. **Schools can leave such memorials in place until after the funeral (or other amount of time deemed appropriate)**, after which the tribute objects may be thoughtfully removed when no classes are in session. Best practice is to let students know how long the items will be allowed to remain at school- and what will be done with items when they are removed (e.g. memorabilia offered to the family, stuffed animals donated to a hospital or day care center, etc.) Straightforward communication around time limits and removal plans regarding the memorials can help to restore equilibrium in times of stress and crisis. Since the emptiness of the deceased's desk can be unsettling, seat assignments may be re-arranged to create a new environment. Teachers should explain in advance that the intention is to strike a compassionate balance between honoring the student who has died while at the same time returning the focus back to the classroom curriculum. Teachers may or may not decide to involve students in planning how to respectfully remove the desk.
4. Remembrance or commemoration T-shirts, ribbons, and/or pins with a student's name on them have gained in popularity, but can present potential problems. It may be helpful to explain to students and community members that, while these items may be comforting to some people, they may be quite upsetting to others. Schools should ask themselves the following questions: Will items be allowed? If yes, what about items for students who died by suicide? What about students who were involved in illegal or gang activity? If yes, how long will students be permitted to wear items? More than a week, more than a month, the rest of a school year? If not, how will staff handle any violation (remove or cover the item, send students home)? When does the item become a disruption to the learning environment? It is recommended that schools consult their community superintendent and/or Student Services to problem solve if needed.

Unacceptable School Memorials/Activities:

- Those that require the use of public funds to purchase, develop, or maintain (such as plantings of trees, shrubs or perennials)
- A monument, statuary or marker on school property
- Memorials permanently attached to a wall or in a trophy case
- Memorials that require the altering of school property
- Memorials that may alter the routine of a regular school day and memorials that require the altering of school activities or the activity schedule.
- All school assemblies- often, the parents of the deceased or an outside community agency or group express an interest in holding an assembly or other event to address the student body and describe the intense pain the suicide has caused to the family in the hopes it will dissuade other students from taking their own lives. Schools should note that this strategy is NOT an effective approach to suicide prevention, or mourning any other death, and may in fact even be risky for students who may already be vulnerable. Students who are suffering from depression or other mental health conditions may hear the message very differently from the way it is intended and may even become more likely to act on thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Instead, one suggestion would be that the parents and the school can work together to bring an appropriate educational program to the school.

Special Considerations-Memorials after a Suicide:

Thinking through how to honor the life of a student who has died by suicide can be a difficult process. Staff, students, and the family of the deceased may have different ideas of what is appropriate, inappropriate, or helpful. It is important to be prepared to channel the needs of people to grieve into activities that will not raise the suicidal risk of vulnerable students or escalate the emotional crisis. Because it may help prevent the death of another student, every decision made regarding memorials after a suicide will be extremely important. The American Association of Suicidology has documented tremendous research that states that permanent memorials contribute negatively to the contagion effect. Permanent memorials following suicide may glamorize death and may communicate that suicide is an appropriate or desired response to distress.

Some schools may resist any kind of memorialization at all for fear of glamorizing suicide and risking suicide contagion. Simply prohibiting any and all memorialization can be problematic in its own right—it can be stigmatizing to the student’s family and friends; it can generate intense negative reactions and derision among community and school systems. Instead, **schools can play an important role in channeling the energy and passion of students and the greater community in a positive direction.** It can be helpful for schools to proactively suggest a meeting with the student’s close friends, family, faith community, or other community organizations, to talk about the type and timing of memorialization. This can serve as an opportunity for people to be heard and for the school to sensitively explain their rationale for permitting certain kinds of activities and not others. It can be helpful for schools to come equipped with specific, constructive suggestions for safe (temporary) memorialization.

Consider the following when planning how to support your school community to grieve in a healthy, safe, and helpful manner:

- **DO NOT** make a permanent memorial following a suicide.
- **DO NOT** glorify, highlight, or accentuate the event in any way.
- **DO** Choose memorials that are temporary, nonrenewable, or in the form of a “living” memorial. These memorials will positively affect surviving students as opposed to glorifying the students that died by suicide, which increases the risk that others will copy the act.

Creative Suggestions for Acknowledging a Death by Suicide: Consult with the family before implementing any of the following ideas (not an exhaustive list):

- Make poster board and markers available in a place that does not require participation and can be monitored by adults
- Hold a day of community service or create a school-based community service program in honor of the deceased
- Hold a fundraiser to sponsor/support a local national suicide prevention organization or crisis hotline
- Invite students and community members to contribute donations to a local charity, a one-time scholarship fund, a school beautification fund, etc.
- Sponsor a mental health awareness day
- Purchase books on mental health for the school or local library
- Volunteer at a community crisis hotline
- Invite students to write personal notes and lasting remembrances which can then be transferred to a memory book (see next bullet)
- Consider making a book available in the school’s office or counseling center for several weeks in which students can write messages to the family, share memories or offer condolences; the book can then be presented to the family on behalf of the school community
- Be prepared to use the opportunity to educate students, families and the community about suicide.

*(Suicide Prevention Resource Center/American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Best Practices Registry—
http://www.sprc.org)*

<p>Memorials should do no harm. They should not be a source of re-traumatization. Decision makers need to remember that their primary concern should be about the surviving students that are left in their care. A combination of time limits and straightforward communication can maintain building equilibrium. The necessary setting of limits for students and the community should be done with compassion and sensitivity. This list can serve as a quick guide for school officials who will ultimately be making decisions to best support students.</p>	
DOs	DON'Ts
DO educate students about memorial behavior and expectations (e.g., people may express their emotions openly at a memorial).	DO NOT pathologize normal grief reactions (consider handing out information about “common grief reactions”).
Do provide students and staff with additional options (counseling, talking to a trusted adult) should they become overwhelmed with emotions and need additional support.	DO NOT mandate that students attend or participate in any memorial events or funeral services.

DO disseminate facts and provide information to parents and staff about crisis reactions and adaptive and maladaptive coping responses.	DO NOT designate permanent memorials, plaques, or pages in a yearbook for students that die by suicide.
DO provide a variety of age-appropriate temporary memorial activities that reflect the student's developmental stage.	DO NOT glorify or accentuate any temporary memorials for a student that dies by suicide (e.g. buttons, t-shirts, shrines, pins, emblems, etc.)
DO give permission for students to participate in alternative activities if they do not feel comfortable participating in remembrance activities.	DO NOT hold an assembly after the death of a student who died by suicide (to minimize glorification of the student's death).
DO promote remembrance activities that foster a sense of hope, recovery, and positive action.	DO NOT close school or dismiss early to allow students and staff to attend a funeral (students and staff should be permitted to attend on an individual basis).
DO demonstrate awareness and sensitivity toward culturally related expressions, practices, and activities.	DO NOT allow any form of subtle or obvious gang representation such as symbols or colors.
DO closely supervise all temporary memorial events to make sure they are appropriate, safe, and follow the maxim of "do no harm."	DO NOT announce the death of a student over the intercom system (classroom announcements are more personal).
DO promote "living" memorials that benefit others (e.g., donations for a suicide prevention program).	DO NOT underestimate people's intense emotions, such as anger, sadness, or the resurfacing of past losses or traumas at memorial events.

Yearbooks:

The school yearbook is a lasting record in which the experiences of the graduating class are memorialized. The guiding principle is that all deaths should be treated the same way. Provided that an adult make final editorial decisions, if there is a history of dedicating the yearbook (or a page of the yearbook) to students who have died, that policy is equally applicable to all students, including those whose deaths we may not want to glorify and/or those who have died by suicide. One suggestion is that a page in the yearbook, rather than a special tribute section, can be used to record the names of all students and other members of the school community who died during the time the student cohort was in the school or school system.

If a student or staff member died by suicide, whenever possible the focus should be on mental health awareness and/or suicide prevention. For example, underneath the student's picture it might say, "In your memory we will work to erase the stigma surrounding mental health conditions and suicide. For help, contact Colorado Crisis Services @ 1-844-493-8255 or Text "TALK" to 38255."

Photographs of the deceased students or staff members can be included in the yearbook if the pictures record events that the members of the class experienced while the student or member of the school community attended the school. Personal photographs are not part of the collective experience of the class and generally are better suited to be displayed in a different manner than the yearbook.

Graduation:

Graduation is a ceremony meant to commemorate the achievements of our students who have fulfilled graduation requirements. It is not meant to be a memorial service.

Diplomas: If the student does not fulfill our district policy of completing 23 graduation credits and meeting all other graduation requirements, then high schools do not award a diploma. Diplomas are a legal document.

This does not mean that some other form of acknowledgement cannot happen. An example of acknowledgement during graduation could include adding a brief statement recognizing and naming those students from the graduating class who have died and/or acknowledging all staff, students and community members who have died by asking for a moment of silence prior to commencement of calling names. After a high school determines the level of recognition they will adhere to (death of graduating class HS students only, death of any student who would have been in the graduating class through neighborhood feeders, acknowledgement of deceased staff members, acknowledgement of deceased community members, etc.), then the guiding principle for graduation is that if recognition is going to be done during graduation, then all recognition should be treated in the same way.

Deciding Whom to Acknowledge:

The following are examples of how Jeffco High Schools have addressed whom to acknowledge:

- **Will not allow acknowledgement:** Some high schools have determined that they will not allow acknowledgement for students who have not actually attended that school; they will not include elementary and middle school students during a ceremony in which that student would have been part of the graduating class.
- **Will allow acknowledgement:** Some high schools have determined that they will allow acknowledgement for students who have not actually attended that school; they will include elementary and middle school students during a ceremony in which that student would have been part of the graduating class.
 - Once a high school decides to honor a student who has died while attending a Jeffco elementary and/or middle school, there needs to be a consistent practice that all students are acknowledged the same way.
 - Once an individual high school makes this choice, that school is then obligated to continue the practice by keeping track of all K-8 students who are deceased and invite the families to attend the ceremony/acknowledgement when that student reaches the age of graduation.

Once a High School has determined who they will honor, a practice that some schools have used is to acknowledge that student at an awards ceremony prior to graduation. Working closely with families is key during this time.

Preparing for Anniversaries:

Don't underestimate the "anniversary effect." On or near the anniversary of a traumatic event or loss, schools may find that some of their students and/or staff experience an increase in distressing memories of the event. The intensity and nature of reactions will vary depending on an individual's personal history and relationship to the event or loss. It's important to recognize, however, that not all students will be affected by the anniversary date of a peer's or staff's death. Close friends, teammates, neighbors, and classmates would be expected to mark the anniversary of the death in a more personal way than students who had a more marginal relationship with the deceased. Students who seem committed to keeping the memory of the deceased alive through memorial activities or continued social media entries will also be more invested in the anniversary date. Schools that have experienced a violent death of a student or faculty member should be especially vigilant. The more immediate in time and in proximity to campus, the greater the likelihood that an anniversary will have an impact.

Be mindful of students' potential reactions. Many students will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior while others will re-experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, or grief.

Related symptoms may include:

- Decrease in energy levels
- Reduced concentration
- Difficulty sleeping
- Heightened volatility or sensitivity- feeling sad, fearful, angry or irritable
- Intrusive thoughts or memories
- Emotional numbness-withdrawal
- Headaches and vague physical complaints
- Spontaneous crying, sense of despair or hopelessness

In most cases, symptoms will subside with adult reassurance and support. Some students may demonstrate intense, persistent reactions that warrant professional mental health intervention. Refer these students to appropriate school or community mental health professionals.

Ways to help your school community deal the anniversary reactions.

- Be familiar with the anniversary dates/ birthdays of peers who are deceased
- Anticipate that some and staff students are going to have reactions
- Identify those students and staff well in advance of these specific dates
- Pay closer attention to their school performance. Do you notice any changes in behavior, attitude, and class attendance?
- Ask! It doesn't need to be anything more profound than: "I know your friend died last year at this time and I'm wondering how you're doing with the anniversary of the death?"
- Asking about the anniversary is not going to be the student's first heads up to the fact it's approaching- most likely, it's already a topic of peer conversation
- Listen to the answer you get. Pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication. Remember that some reaction is both expected and understandable.
- Validate the student's reaction and the importance of the loss. "I know you lost a really good friend when (name) died" is really sufficient.

- Sometimes we don't say anything because we feel like we should have a profound response, but in situations like this, a simple acknowledgement is absolutely sufficient.
- Remind the student that school mental health team is available and trained to help students deal with situations like this. If the student is concerned about his/her own reaction or the reaction of a peer, give them contact information on school resources.
- Consult with your school's mental health team if there is anything about a student that concerns you. If follow up with a student is necessary, they can take care of it.
- Review the class lessons you have planned around the anniversary dates for curriculum content that deals with death. Remember the circumstances of the death do not have to be similar to be emotionally challenging to students experiencing anniversary reactions. Consider substituting alternate assignments that focus on resilience, overcoming difficult life challenges, etc.

The bottom line is that anniversary reactions are normal reactions to extraordinarily upsetting events. While they dissipate on their own, it can really be helpful for students to feel that their loss – as well as the importance of their relationship to the deceased – are acknowledged. Your awareness of the dynamic of anniversary reactions and the fact that some students may need a little extra help to deal with them can go a long way in helping these kids get through a challenging emotional time.