Best Practices for Memorials and Memorialization

Student Services

Orange County Public Schools Florida

Overview

In order to fully support the mission and vision of Orange County Public Schools, most particularly the objectives of Student Social and Emotional Well-Being and a Positive Climate and Safe Environment, district schools and departments should make decisions related to memorials and memorialization with full consideration of the potential implications for students, staff, families, and community. This document, along with guidance from the Student Services, Communications, and Legal Services departments, will provide the parameters to educate staff on how to best guide decision-making regarding school-related memorials and to guide decision-making regarding school-related memorials and memorialization activities.

Memorials and Memorialization

It is recognized that a student's or staff member's death may have a far-reaching impact on other students, staff, families, and the community. Therefore, it is important for school memorials to be simple, meaningful, and life-affirming. Memorial activities symbolize that every student and staff member is important, and help to unite and strengthen those impacted by the death(s). Activities provide a forum for bringing people together, reducing feelings of isolation and vulnerability, and illustrating the universality of grief. Memorial activities can also serve to promote positive action toward a cause, such as safety, mental health services, or health and wellness.

District facilities are designed to support learning; therefore, changes to facilities that interfere with that purpose or detract from the district's educational mission are not endorsed. This means that the establishment of permanent memorials in schools is not recommended. Instead, temporary and timely memorial activities are suitable and encouraged alternatives.

A. **DO NO HARM**

A memorial should "do no harm." Memorial or gathering sites should be physically and emotionally safe. For example, if a student dies in a car crash, do not allow students to gather and grieve at the accident site if it is beside a busy street or highway. Keep candles at the memorial site separate from stuffed animals, flowers, letters, and poems. Let students' questions be the guide; do not force them to discuss or attend the memorial if they are not ready. Making students feel obligated to express themselves or grieve before they are ready may be doing more harm than good and probably suggests that the adults need to do their own grief work. Emotional numbing may be a protective factor for a child during the initial stages of grief.

B. **TEMPORARY MEMORIALS**

Temporary school memorials for deceased students and staff allow students and staff to express their grief in a positive and constructive manner. They should be approved by the school principal in consultation with the

Student Services Administration and School District leadership (Superintendent, Executive Principal Leaders, and Principal Leaders).

1) Temporary school memorials may be displayed within the school building until the day of the funeral but for no longer than one week following the death, and will then be given to the custodial family by designated school or district officials. Temporary memorials cannot alter or damage division furniture, fixtures, and/or equipment.
2) Allowable temporary memorials may only be placed in locations approved by and monitored by school officials.
3) Allowable temporary memorials include flower arrangements, banners, memory books, pictures, notes, cup signs, and collections of objects. Allowable temporary memorials may only be placed in locations approved by and monitored by school officials.
4) Informal events or gatherings, such as a candlelight vigil, which are not school-sponsored, must be approved by school and district administration in order to be held on school or district grounds. These should occur outside of school hours. See commemorative events below.
5) The school principal, in consultation with district leadership (Superintendent, Executive Principal Leaders, and/or Student Services Administration) has the discretion to remove inappropriate temporary memorials that are in violation of School Board policy and/or regulation, the student code of conduct, or are likely to cause a substantial disruption to the school environment.

C. COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

Commemorative events established and held in the name of a deceased student or staff member are not typically held by schools or the district. It is recommended that commemorative events utilize community partners. As a courtesy, the family of the deceased students should also provide consent before engaging in the activity. Examples could include putting together a team to participate in an awareness or fundraising event sponsored by a national health awareness organization, sponsoring awareness events specific to the nature of the loss, purchasing books related to the loss for the school library, and volunteering for a related cause.

In the instances when it is determined that such an event is appropriate the following is guidance.

1) Commemorative events are to be held clearly outside of the school day.
2) For rare commemorative events held on school or district property, requests to use district facilities for the event shall be made in accordance with the OCPS Facility Use Handbook and Special Events Rules. Commemorative events held at schools and facilities are limited to memorial services and candlelight vigils and are to be held outside of the school day.

D. GRADUATION

The graduation ceremony is a celebration of scholastic achievement and the anticipation of future opportunities available to graduates of the school. Deceased high school students can be acknowledged by placing their names in the graduation program with their graduating class.

1) **Ceremony**.
   a. In recognition of all students in a graduating class who have died during their high school career, a cap, gown, and tassel can be ordered by the school. These items along with a program and singular flower can be placed on the last chair(s) in the graduate seating area. This symbol can be acknowledged by a member of the school administration during their remarks with a general comment about loss during the year and not a specific mention of the student.
   b. During the ceremony, the student's name can be read, such as "In memory of XYZ Name." A short pause would occur before the next student's name is called. It is best to alert the student next in line to the need for the pause to ensure they are recognized appropriately.

2) **Diplomas**.
   a. Upon parent/guardian request, diplomas, posthumous diplomas, or certificates can be awarded to deceased students.
   b. A family member or representative can be invited to accept the diploma at a time outside of the graduation ceremony on behalf of the student.
   c. In some cases, a diploma plaque can be purchased by the school for the family.

E. PERMANENT SCHOOL MEMORIALS

1) Permanent school memorials for deceased students and staff are highly discouraged. The following factors pertaining to erecting permanent memorials should be considered and include, but are not limited to:
   a. 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.
   b. When designing a memorial, it is important to consider how students and staff will perceive the death of the individual(s) in the future.
   c. Permanent school memorials may require long-term, ongoing maintenance, and these resources need to be addressed prior to erecting a permanent memorial.
2) In rare cases where a permanent memorial is desired, it must be approved by district leadership (Superintendent and Cabinet) before being placed within a school building, on school grounds, within a district building or on district grounds.
   a. Permanent memorials may not include the retirement, alteration, or discontinued use of School District property.
   b. The naming of district grounds or facilities after the deceased is rare.
3) The School District reserves the right to accept or decline permanent memorials.
4) School Board Policy FF provides guidance on naming and renaming buildings and facilities.

F. OTHER MEMORIAL AND MEMORIALIZATION GUIDANCE:

1) **Flags.** The United States flag will only be lowered to half-staff in accordance with the laws and policies of the State of Florida.
2) **Funeral Service**. Students wishing to attend the funeral service may do so with parental permission. These students will be excused from class but will be required to make up any missing assignments. Special arrangements will be made for siblings or relatives of the deceased student.
3) **Yearbooks**. Upon request of the family, a student or staff member who has died may be acknowledged by the school in the yearbook of the year of their death, if prior to the final yearbook deadline. This acknowledgment can include information about the student or staff member, limited to the following: name, photo, dates of birth and death, and school activities in which the student or staff member participated.
4) **Donations, Fundraisers, Scholarship, and Endowment Memorial Activities**. It is recommended that any discussion related to donations, fundraisers, scholarships, and endowments in OCPS be handled with The Foundation for OCPS. Foundation staff can provide appropriate tools and guidance on best practices.
5) School-wide moments of silence are not typically held, however, Florida statute 1003.45 provides for a moment of silence during first-period classrooms in all grades. Time is set aside for at least 1 minute, but not more than 2 minutes, daily for a moment of silence, during which students may not interfere with other students' participation. Please remember that a teacher may not make suggestions as to the nature of any reflection that a student may engage in during the moment of silence. Students may independently decide to reflect on the loss of another student or staff member during this time. Teachers and other school employees may not require or encourage students to pray, or discourage them from praying, during such time periods.

G. PROHIBITED MEMORIALS AND ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

The following practices are prohibited due to conflicts with other district policies/regulations, state/federal requirements, and/or the risk of re-traumatization of surviving students and staff:

1) Use of school marquees to post messages about the deceased student or staff member.
2) Large memorial assemblies or formal, school-wide recognition of anniversary dates.
3) Memorials following a death from suicide that glamorize, romanticize, or stigmatize the act of suicide.
4) Permanent memorials are not permitted that require the use of public funds to purchase, develop, or maintain (such as plantings of trees, shrubs or perennials, a memory garden, etc.).
5) Permanent memorials are not permitted that require the altering of school property.
6) Permanent memorials in the form of monuments, statutes, or markers (including benches, tables, and other outdoor furnishings; sidewalks, stepping stones, photographs/pictures, etc.) are not permitted on school property.
7) Balloon releases are not permitted per CS/HB 321. Other similar activities are not endorsed.
8) The scattering or dispersal of cremains on division property.

H. **EXISTING MEMORIALS:**

It is recognized that some living or physical memorials exist that were established prior to this guidance document. Those memorials can remain intact as originally accepted. District staff and/or finances may only be used to maintain current memorials as part of the regular maintenance processes and/or to ensure safe conditions. The district and/or school administration has the right to move, relocate, replace or remove a memorial if it is not or cannot be maintained or is contrary to the overall educational needs of students.

Additional Information

The loss of a staff member or student can be far-reaching and impact a large number of individuals. It can be difficult to balance requests with what can be done in a school setting. For additional guidance, please reach out to one of the following Student Services Administrators

- Mary Bridges, Executive Director, Student Services, mary.bridges@ocps.net
- Carl Sousa, Director Psychological Services, carl.sousa@ocps.net
- Lisa Coffey, Director Social Services, lisa.coffey@ocps.net

References:
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, & Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2018). After a suicide: A toolkit for schools (2nd ed.). Waltham, MA: Education Development Center. https://sprc.org/online-library/after-suicide-toolkit-schools

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Coalition to Support Grieving Students Commemoration and Memorialization.
https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/commemoration-and-memorialization/

NASP "Special Considerations When Memorializing an Incident" ©2011, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.
http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis