Date: December 5, 2024
To: Principals
From: Mary Bridges, Senior Executive Director, Student Services
Lisa Coffey, Director, Social Services
Recipients: Principals, Assistant Principals, School Counselors, SAFE Coordinators, School Social Workers, School Psychologists and Licensed Mental Health Counselors
Subject: Psychological Support and Memorial Guidance Following a Tragedy

Psychological Support Following a Tragedy

Although it is hoped that a school will not experience a tragedy such as a student or staff member's death, it is critical to be prepared should such an event occur. School and district personnel play a crucial role in helping students manage their reactions after a crisis incident.

The OCPS Student Services Department district team members (school social workers, school psychologists, and district mental health counselors) serve as grief counselors when supporting students.

When a district team needs to be activated, it is important to contact Student Services administrators, specifically Carl Sousa (carl.sousa@ocps.net). As part of the request for support, it is helpful for the school administration to share as many details of the situation as possible with the Student Services administration so they can prepare district team members to plan and provide support. Here is a flowchart for crisis team activation and psychological support.

It is important to stress that not all crisis situations are the same, and not all situations need the same type of response. Not all students and staff will be equally affected by a crisis event, and different individuals will require different levels of intervention. Best practice indicates that crisis intervention assistance should only be offered in response to a demonstrated need.

Memorial and Memorialization Guidance

The loss of a member of the school community can significantly impact students, staff, and families. Memorials are a way for students, staff, and the community to express grief and serve an important role in the grieving and healing process. Memorials recognize and honor the deceased, the survivors, and the community members who supported them.

It is crucial for schools to follow practices that can be applied under any circumstances, as deaths can occur in various ways. Memorials set a precedent for the future and need to be equitable from case to case, considerate of the grief process of family and friends, and aligned with best practices and research.

Our guiding document has been updated to include guidelines for decision-making regarding memorials and memorialized activities for staff, students, and families impacted by a death.

School leaders are encouraged to contact Student Services for guidance, support, and planning related to memorials and memorialization. The Best Practices for Memorials and Memorialization Guidance document is also available.

For additional information or questions, please contact Carl Sousa, Director, Psychological Services, at carl.sousa@ocps.net or Lisa Coffey, Director, Social Services, at lisa.coffey@ocps.net.