Grief Support Is on the Way

Training and support can reduce barriers to educators reaching out to grieving students

By David J. Schonfeld and Thomas Demaria
When a child loses a loved one, what can a school community do to provide support? During a period of grief, a child needs strong, caring support, but adults may feel uncomfortable or unsure of what to say. An educator’s first step is to understand what that child may be experiencing. Students who are grieving a significant personal loss generally find it difficult to concentrate in class or to learn new information. They may arrive to school exhausted because of difficulty with sleeping or eating. They may be distracted by thoughts about the person who died; guilt, anger, or other strong feelings associated with the loss; or worries that surviving family members or friends may also die. On top of this, they may struggle to communicate their feelings to peers or adults.

Unfortunately, educators may be among those who ignore the loss. Principals should ensure that the schools they lead proactively offer support to grieving students to help minimize academic challenges, rather than waiting for academic challenges to result in academic failure. Ideally, school should be a support for grieving students.

Barriers to Support
Principals and other school personnel report that they appreciate the unique role that schools can play in supporting a grieving student, but cite lack of training as the primary barrier keeping them from reaching out to students after a loss. They worry that they will say the wrong thing and add to a student’s distress, start a conversation that they won’t know how to continue or end, or identify issues or concerns for which they can’t find appropriate referral resources and are unprepared to address themselves. As a result, they often say nothing when a grieving student returns to school. But saying nothing communicates a great deal. It tells students that:

- Educators are either unaware or unconcerned about a devastating event in their lives;
- Educators are unprepared to address the challenge and provide them with support; and
- At a time when they most need competent, compassionate, and trusted adults to help them through a personal crisis, there are none to be found in their school.

These are obviously not messages that schools want to deliver.

Misconceptions
Society often holds an unrealistic expectation that children and youth “get over” death in a fixed period of time, such as six months to a year. But for many, the second year is harder than the first. The first birthday, holiday, or other special event without a loved one is difficult—but expectations are generally low and friends and family typically provide support.

When these events remain sad the second year, children may wonder if they will ever feel happy again. The support and concern they receive shortly after a death from extended family, peers, coaches, teachers, and other adults at school and in the community may have virtually disappeared by the second year. Principals should encourage staff to monitor students’ adjustment over time and share insights about strategies to provide ongoing support among team members.

Another common misconception is that children in communities that are characterized by high rates of violence and death have somehow become accustomed to loss. Adults fail to see many acute expressions of grief and therefore conclude that children fail to grieve additional losses. Students attending schools within neighborhoods characterized by high rates of violence, poverty, and loss generally lack sufficient support to cope effectively with these deaths and emerge more vulnerable to the impact of future loss after each death.

Students in these communities may appear to show no reactions after a death because they perceive that there is little value in seeking assistance. They have found that adults in their lives are not generally forthcoming with supportive services after a death has occurred or are unable to establish a safe environment and are unprepared to provide assistance. They may turn instead to their peers for support or engage in behaviors that only serve to put them at further risk.

Children who are fearful of their own mortality may engage in risky
behaviors. They may, for example, join a gang if they perceive that membership is the sole option for protection from community violence. They might also engage in dangerous behaviors to challenge their fears, proving to themselves that they will survive. In this setting, it becomes even more critical for principals to make sure that school staff members proactively provide support.

Training
With a modest amount of training and preparation, school personnel can develop the skills to provide support and comfort to grieving students. Most school staff members (except perhaps some school mental health professionals) are not expected to provide bereavement counseling, but they can create a supportive environment and minimize additional distress. Providing training to school professionals on this topic establishes norms about what school professionals can—and should—do to support grieving students.

When principals make arrangements for such training, it delivers a clear message that supporting grieving students is important, that these are valued skills among educators and other school professionals, and that the school administration is sensitive to teachers’ needs in this area and likely to provide support to assist them in this important role.

Getting Started
Schools can help meet this need by ensuring that in-service training addresses the topic of student grief, and is offered as a component of ongoing professional development. It is best to plan and offer training prior to a school incident or crisis so

Social Media Tips
Social media is a powerful influence in young people’s lives. Grieving students can use it to gain support from peers and the school community. It is important for school professionals to consider how to optimally use social media when a death occurs. Here are a few areas of consideration.

Notifications
While the immediacy of information sharing on social media channels can seem intrusive, it is a simple reality of today’s world. Teachers may not have advance preparation and may find themselves responding to student reactions without having a chance to confirm the accuracy of information or receive guidance on messaging. The school’s mental health staff may not be immediately available to provide support. Educators should prepare to proactively deal with the role that social media can play in notifying students and their families about a death in the school community.

School Community
Social media can offer a way to reach out to grieving families or students in the initial period after a death, especially if the family is not yet ready to accept calls or visitors. Information that is shared among students and staff through social media can offer insight into how families are responding to a death.

Suitability
Any information posted through social media can easily be forwarded and re-posted repeatedly. Therefore it is essential that all content be suitable for public distribution. Audiences may include individuals and groups well beyond the school community, including the media. Potentially sensitive messages sent by schools should be reviewed, not only by an administrator and/or someone overseeing public relations, but also by a mental health professional in the school who may be attuned to the sensitivities of those who are grieving.

Policy Audit
Social media is a powerful tool to share accurate and timely information as well as socially appropriate messages after a death has occurred. Schools should review policies related to the use of social media with an eye to how these might best support grieving students and the broader school community. Maintaining a strong social media presence helps schools stay prepared to support students, staff, and families.

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that school staff will be better able to respond. Training should address the following categories:

1. Communication and Support: Schools should be prepared to provide bereavement support to students and their families over time. Training should include elements such as how to talk with students who have recently experienced a death of a family member or loved one, including advice on what not to say. Such training could also address how to prepare peers to support grieving students.

2. Cultural Considerations: While it is helpful to understand the cultural differences in traditions, rituals, and practices related to death, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. A general sensitivity to the unique needs of each child and family should be the driving consideration.

3. Practical Considerations: Grief training should explain the differences between primary loss, secondary loss, and cumulative loss. Training can also provide suggestions on how to support children attending funerals as well as funeral attendance by school personnel. It should also address guidelines for using social media to provide information and support.

4. Impact on Learning: Educators will need to know strategies for minimizing a student’s academic challenges after a death has occurred. For example, educators should not only understand common reactions such as guilt and shame, anger, and risky behavior, but also grief triggers and how to handle them in a school setting.

5. Self-Care: Supporting grieving children can trigger a range of reactions in adults. This is especially true if the adult has a close relationship with the student or if a child’s loss is somehow similar to an adult’s personal experience. In addition to strategies for grief triggers for students, educators should understand their own grief triggers.

New resources are available to help principals facilitate this training, developed by the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. The Coalition, of which NAESP is a founding member, is a unique collaboration of the leading professional organizations representing school leaders, classroom educators, student support personnel, and other school professionals. In collaboration with the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and with generous support from the New York Life Foundation, the coalition has developed a practitioner-oriented website—grievingstudents.org—that can help educators address these issues and train their school communities.

The website provides free, practical, accessible information for classroom educators, principals, administrators, and student support personnel. The modules and supporting material can form the foundation for more structured presentations, or facilitate self-directed professional development. School staff can also access free technical assistance and consultation from members of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement about the operational components and application of school bereavement practices in their school or district.

Principal’s Role
With professional training and the critical support and leadership of school principals, educators can together form a team that will support grieving students. However, helping grieving children can be distressing, even to professionals. Therefore, principals must signal to all members of the school community that educators, including school administrators, are there to support each other in fulfilling this important role.

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