

## RESPONSE TO DEATH / MEMORIALS IN SCHOOLS

### Background

St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Separate School Division recognizes that the loss of a student or staff member deeply impacts students, staff and families. The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that the Division supports staff, students and families impacted from a death.

Memorial decisions made immediately in the aftermath of a crisis or death may be made without full consideration of the potential implications for students, staff, families and the community. Therefore, the Division has outlined a process for memorial decision-making and activities. This procedure also recognizes that memorials after suicide may glamorize death and communicate suicide as an appropriate or desired response to stress; therefore, careful and deliberate consideration was given in determining approved memorial activities.

### Procedures

1. Response to Death
  - 1.1 The school administrator shall notify the Superintendent or Designate immediately upon learning of the death of a student or staff member in order to develop a response plan.
  - 1.2 The site administrator or designate will contact the immediate family members of the deceased to express sympathy and to obtain accurate information/details.
  - 1.3 In most instances sites will not be closed and arrangements will be made to address student and staff needs.
  - 1.4 A staff meeting will be held as soon as possible to inform staff of known facts that can be disclosed and to communicate the school's response plan.
  - 1.5 To best support staff, students and parents, the school may request to involve the Crisis Response Team and other outside agencies as necessary.
  - 1.6 When appropriate the principal or designate will inform the student body and follow up with a letter, via SchoolMessenger, home to parents.
  - 1.7 Flags may be flown at half-mast from the time of notification of the death up to and including the day of the funeral.
  - 1.8 When appropriate the Superintendent or Designate will be responsible for communication with Trustees and staff of the Division as a whole and may involve the Manager of Communications.
  - 1.9 When a former staff member or student dies and there is a desire to notify the entire staff of the Division, the principal or designate will notify the Manager of

Communications. The Manager of Communications, in consultation with the Superintendent, will craft and distribute an appropriate message.

## 2. Memorial Services

- 2.1 As schools are places designed to support learning, school buildings should not serve as the main venue for the memorializing of students or staff. Although some students and/or community members have contributed greatly to the school, trauma and loss research confirms that vulnerable people may be inadvertently placed at risk by either "glorifying death" or by having students and staff faced with a constant reminder.
- 2.2 On rare occasions, situations may arise in which a school site may be considered an appropriate venue for a memorial service. The following criteria should be considered when determining if a request for a memorial service in a school facility is appropriate:
  - 2.2.1 Learning - There can be no interruption of student learning. Therefore, memorial events held in a school building must take place on an evening, weekend or during an extended school break.
  - 2.2.2 Necessity - The potential number of people who wish to attend the event creates the necessity of holding the event in a large gym-like space. The facility booking would be treated as a special form of rental and, therefore, require reasonable attention to fire regulations.
  - 2.2.3 Nature of event -A Celebration of Life - The nature of the memorial service should be that of a Celebration of Life. Symbols of life and positive messages of hope should be major components of such services.
  - 2.2.4 This is a memorial event, not a funeral. Therefore, no bodily remains are permitted for this type of memorial. Memorials may not be appropriate in certain types of situations. Each situation will be studied at the time and decisions will be made by the Superintendent or designate.
  - 2.2.5 The Individual - The person being memorialized must be a member of the school community - a student, staff member or member of the learning community directly related to the school.

## 3. Spontaneous/Temporary Memorials

- 3.1 Spontaneous or temporary memorials can be established following a death on a school campus because the community is looking for solace. A memorial can be a healing place for many.
- 3.2 Staff members need to monitor messages left at a spontaneous memorial, and be ready for unusual or unexpected circumstances.
- 3.3 The establishment of school memorials must be temporary and are to be removed immediately after the funeral or memorial service or within two weeks of the loss. The timing of the removal should be considered carefully, for example, a natural break in the school calendar if possible, such as a weekend, vacation, or holiday.

4. Permanent Memorials

- 4.1 Permanent memorials in schools or on school property are not allowed. Schools should not initiate permanent memorials such as pictures, benches, plaques or trees.
- 4.2 The deceased student or staff member should not receive greater mention in graduation ceremonies, yearbooks or awards ceremonies, than would be given to any other student or staff member.
- 4.3 Permanent memorials may be pursued by the community but should be placed where they can be easily accessed by those who need their comfort and benefits, while also easily avoided by those who are activated by the "reminders".

Reference: National Association of School Psychologist  
National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children  
North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response