

POLICY

FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION

File Code: 5141.5

PUPIL SUICIDE PREVENTION

The Board of Education recognizes that depression and self-destruction are problems of increasing severity among children and adolescents. A pupil under severe stress cannot benefit fully from the educational program and may pose a threat to himself or herself or others.

The Board directs all school personnel to be alert to the pupil who exhibits signs of potential self-destruction or who threatens or attempts suicide. Any such signs or the report of such signs from another pupil or staff member should be taken with the utmost seriousness and reported immediately to the chief school administrator or designee and guidance counselor, who shall notify the pupil's parent or legal guardian and other professional staff members in accordance with administrative regulations.

A potentially suicidal pupil shall be referred to one of the crisis team members (guidance counselor, school nurse, child study team member, supervisor or chief school administrator) for appropriate evaluation and/or recommendation for independent medical or psychiatric services. In the event that the parent or legal guardian objects to the recommended evaluation or indicates an unwillingness to cooperate in the best interests of the pupil, the team member may contact the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services to request that agency's intervention on the pupil's behalf.

The chief school administrator along with the guidance staff shall prepare and disseminate regulations for the assistance of staff members in recognizing the pupil who contemplates suicide, in responding to threatened or attempted suicide, and in preventing contagion when a pupil commits suicide. To promote this goal, students shall participate in suicide prevention education as part of the curriculum for health and physical education in accordance with law. The teaching staff shall complete 2 hours of instruction in suicide prevention in accordance with law.

Date adopted: 9/27/04

Date revised: 6/22/09

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| Legal References: NJSA 18A:6-111 | Findings, declarations relative to instruction in suicide prevention in public schools |
| NJSA 18A:6-112 | Instruction in suicide prevention for public school teaching staff |
| NJSA 18A:6-113 | Provision for instruction in suicide prevention in school curriculum |

REGULATION

FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION

File Code: 5141.5R

SUICIDE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION PROGRAM

Student Suicide and Prevention Procedures

The district shall maintain a policy and procedures for dealing with student suicide and prevention.

Establishing these procedures is part of the district's efforts to have all school personnel alert to the potential of suicide among youths and recognition that all suggestions, demonstrations or communications of suicide must be taken seriously. All school personnel must know what to do when faced with life-threatening behavior or ideation. Commitment to student confidentiality on the part of the staff must be superseded by the obligation to initiate possible life-saving intervention.

A. Response to suicide ideation—suspected tendency.

1. The staff member who has reason to believe that a student has self-destructive tendencies shall initially notify one or more of the following crisis team members:
 - a. Guidance counselor
 - b. School nurse
 - c. A Child study team member
 - d. Chief school administrator and/or Supervisor

Any suspicion should be treated seriously. It is important that one of the contact people be informed before the reporting staff member leaves the building.

2. The initial contact person will determine who is the most appropriate person to investigate the seriousness of the case.
3. The designated school staff member should investigate the case by one or more of the following methods:
 - a. Meet with the student
 - b. Meet with parents/guardians
 - c. Consult with any other people who may have information (students, staff members, therapists, clergy, police, etc.)
4. If the suicide ideation is determined to be serious, the designated staff member(s) shall:
 - a. Notify parents/guardians and make appropriate recommendations;
 - b. Provide to the parents/guardians the names and phone number of mental health resources (agencies, private therapists,

- hospitals, suicide hotlines, etc.);
- c. If the parent/guardian is unavailable or uncooperative, the designated school staff member(s) shall contact the division of youth and family services to intervene on behalf of the student;
 - d. Notify any crisis team member who has not yet been informed;
 - e. Notify appropriate staff members to monitor school performance and behavior;
 - f. Conduct a follow-up check with the family and student.

The above procedures should also be followed if a staff member learns of a student who has made a suicidal gesture. A suicidal gesture is defined as a risk-taking behavior that is life-threatening but not a completed action. Examples would include actually taking pills or a superficial cutting of the wrists.

B. Response to suicidal threat—imminent danger

A crisis team member will investigate the potential of imminent danger due to a suicidal threat. The following characteristics should be considered:

- a. Student talks about suicide
- b. Student writes about suicide
- c. Student acts in a dangerous manner (ex. Runs in front of a bus, jumps off a low bridge, etc.)
- d. Student demonstrates signs and symptoms about not caring for life.
- e. Student has access to the means to readily take his or her life. (ex. Availability of a gun, pills, drugs)

If, after preliminary assessment of the student, the crisis team member determines the student to be in imminent danger, that crisis team member shall:

1. Ensure the short-term physical safety of the student.
 - a. The school nurse shall secure immediate medical treatment, using either first aid techniques or telephoning the local rescue squad.
 - b. The student will be kept under close observation at all times.
2. Immediate contact with the parent will be established by a member of the crisis team.
3. The crisis team will meet with the chief school administrator to establish interim plans of action.
4. The student and parents will be immediately referred to a local helping agency such as Hunterdon Medical Center for further screening. In addition, parents will be strongly encouraged to seek additional counseling for their child.
5. Following immediate intervention with the student and parent or guardian, the chief school administrator shall inform the Board President of the incident.

C. Response to suicide attempts on school premises.

1. Ensure the short-term physical safety of the student.

- a. The school nurse shall secure immediate medical treatment, using either first aid techniques or telephoning the local rescue squad.
 - b. The student will be kept under close observation at all times.
2. Immediate contact with the parent/guardian will be established by a member of the crisis team.
3. A crisis team member will meet to establish interim plans of action.
4. The student and parents will be immediately referred to a local helping agency such as Hunterdon Medical Center.
5. Following immediate intervention with the student and parent or guardian, the chief school administrator shall inform the Board President of the incident.
6. The pupil shall not resume attendance until parents/guardians submit to the chief school administrator a written report certifying that the pupil is physically and mentally able to return. The report shall be prepared by a certified professional.

D. Off School Premises

1. The crisis team will meet and designate a member to engage the student in supportive interaction to determine exactly what happened in the suicide attempt.
2. A designated crisis team member will establish communication with parent/guardian which focuses on:
 - a. Recognition of serious problem;
 - b. Need for professional help.

E. Returning to school after a suicide attempt.

Upon the student's return to school following a suicide attempt:

1. A designated crisis team member will meet with teachers of the student to review the case.
2. The crisis team will be responsible for maintaining all follow-up activities.
3. The returning student should not be treated any differently than any other student who has been absent due to illness. Suicideologists have stressed that, as much as possible, a student should be returned to his/her normal routine within the school.
4. Contact with the student, parents/guardians and treating therapist (if one is involved) by a crisis team member, to discuss ways of helping the student to cope more effectively with school-related stress, and to extend support.
5. Teachers and other school personnel should be encouraged to discuss their concerns, no matter how minimal, with appropriate

staff. It is very understandable that school staff may have concerns about how they should respond.

6. Periodic checks will be made by the designated crisis team member with the student's parents/guardians, teachers and other appropriate school staff to assess and evaluate the student's overall adjustment.

F. Procedures in the event of a completed suicide

1. Purpose

If news of a death by suicide is received, it can have profound effects on the student body and the faculty of a school. It should not be ignored nor should it be romanticized or sensationalized. Adolescents have a tendency to respond emotionally to the event so there must be a carefully devised crisis plan that diffuses the excitement while at the same time is sensitive to the grief that is present.

While this may cast the school administrator in a less than sensitive mold, it is the living who should become the chief concern of the school. The more quickly follow-up activities are implemented, the less time some students will have to dwell on, fantasize or even glorify the suicide of a peer. All activity should be undertaken in as "matter a fact" a manner as possible so as not to create undue anxiety. This means that key personnel who are trained to deal with suicidal phenomena need to convey to the students, parents/guardians, and school staff that this situation can be handled, is manageable and that there is no need to panic. Such a crisis plan serves to responsibly deal with the emotional reactions within the school community (students, teachers, administration, parents/guardians, etc.) and to decrease the potential of the so-called contagion effect ("copy cat behavior"). All school staff should be in-serviced on this aspect of the plan at the beginning of each school year. The process of staff notification should be familiar to everyone.

2. Process

Research indicates that most adolescent suicides occur between the hours of 3 p.m. and midnight or on weekends. In this case:

- a. The chief school administrator, after the verification with the police, should notify the crisis team and plan a meeting in order to discuss the crisis, and decide on the plan to follow.
- b. The chief school administrator will call the Board President.
- c. The Traumatic Loss Coalition (County Crisis Management Team) will be notified and asked to assist as needed. (908)788-6401 x3029 - Elaine Howe or x3235 - Cindy Iarussi)

- d. The chief school administrator will call an emergency faculty meeting early in the morning on the first school day following the suicide. The meeting can be initiated by the school phone chain and should begin at least one hour before the first bell of the day. The overall purpose of such a meeting would be to make teachers participants in the resolution rather than part of the problem.
 - e. The notification of the crisis and the before-school meeting should be very brief. It should include only:
 - An initial statement that you have some sad (or tragic) news to relay.
 - Basic specifics about the event (who died, mode of death if known, etc.)
 - f. Ask the person to get paper and pen to write down what is said if they are asked to telephone others. (Activate telephone chain).
 - g. State that there will be a before-school meeting: (This information should be transmitted by personal telephone contact and then left on voice mail as a reminder.)
 - When
 - Where
 - Attendance is required
 - Details of the death or tragedy/crisis will be discussed further.
 - Whether there will be crisis response team members coming in to lend a hand.
 - Remember to tell the next person to remind others that it is not helpful to speculate or say anything which may cause rumors to build over this process of notification—just pass on essential information.
3. At the emergency faculty meeting the following people should be in attendance:
- Members of Crisis Team
 - Teachers
 - If relevant, secretaries, custodians, aides, etc.
- a. The chief school administrator should:
 - Review facts of the crisis and any unique circumstances to dispel rumors including viewing hours if known.
 - Summarize the assignments and responsibilities of the team and the staff including identifying the crisis team members.
 - Review "Right-to-Privacy" Guidelines.
 - Go over specifics of Counseling services and how to send students.
 - Designate staff gathering place and counseling services.
 - b. The crisis team should describe how students may react to the news and suggest how teachers can handle the situation—teachers will want to know how to act knowledgeably and confidentially — teachers will be advised as to the appropriate way of announcing the tragedy to their students in class.

- c. Time should be allowed for teachers to ask questions and express their feelings – some staff may be particularly upset and may request and/or require support.
- d. A list of students who were especially close to the deceased should be compiled- these students should be offered the opportunity to meet at a selected location with a school psychologist or other appropriate person. Also, a list of other high-risk students should be compiled and trained staff members should be identified who will contact these students. When necessary the parents/guardians of these youngsters will be notified with appropriate advice and offers of assistance.
- e. Teachers are expected to:
 - 1) Share information with students or be in room when Crisis Response Team member does.
 - 2) Discuss/validate feelings, experiences.
 - 3) Keep assemblance of schedule, as much as possible, but make accommodations.
 - 4) Discuss impact of the event (suspend regular curriculum if appropriate).
 - 5) Send students to counseling as appropriate.
 - 6) Expect confusion, crying, disruptive behavior; act compassionately.
 - 7) Respect the wishes and privacy of the family.
 - 8) Be available as the situation demands.
 - 9) DO NOT talk to the press – refer to designated spokesperson (usually chief school administrator).
 - 10) Contact the office if you want support. Help can be provided if needed.
- f. Teachers are not expected to:
 - 1) Solve all problems; take the hurt away, become instant counselors
 - 2) Hide their feelings.
 - 3) Speculate or say anything which might cause rumors to build.
- g. Other details:
 - 1) Suggest possible beginning thoughts/phrases.
 - 2) Ask what school and Crisis Response Team members can do to be of greatest support to the staff?
 - 3) Set a time and place for an after school staff meeting to provide for the emotional support for all staff members after a full day of dealing with their own responses and those of their students; to show appreciation of staff efforts; to review the characteristics of high-risk students and compile additional list based on staff observations of reactions during the day.
 - 4) Even though the deceased student's family, friends, and fellow students may desire to remember the deceased individual, there shall be no memorialization after the student's death. There shall be no activities such as

an
student

tree or shrub planting, flying the flag at half mast, or holding a special memorial service within the school. These and other similar practices must be avoided so as not to glorify suicide in any way which might encourage "copy cat" behavior among other students.

4. If a Before School Meeting is Not Possible

a. How and from whom students receive difficult news greatly affects how they will respond to and grieve the loss. Students all need to receive the announcement in a tight time frame. Make sure there is no chance that students who know about the incident will be talking to those who don't know on the playground or in the hallway.

b. Teachers will be better able to support the students in their processing of this tragedy if they have some advance notice. Don't simply send people from class to class announcing the tragedy. If possible recruit several people who can go from room to room, and instruct them to ask teachers to step out into the hall and give them the information in a way that students won't observe. This gives the teachers a moment to adjust to the news. They will then be better able to focus on the students as they are given the news.

c. The reason not to give announcements in assemblies is that it is too difficult to watch all of the students' reactions, and those who may be having great difficulty with the news may slip into a restroom or locker room instead of returning to class. Often those students who need the most support may choose to leave campus or "get lost in a crowd." Giving the news in the classrooms allows the teacher to watch students, and then to lead a discussion about the tragedy with them. It is far healthier for students to have the opportunity to talk in a manageable and familiar group upon hearing the news than it is to have them sitting in bleachers, mulling over what this means in isolation.

d. Giving announcements over the PA also does not allow teachers to have the benefit of preparing themselves to support the students. Speaking to the students in smaller groups provides the staff the opportunity to assess and respond to student emotions, and to offer support in a compassionate and personalized manner.

5. During the After School Meeting:

a. Give staff a chance to unload, let off steam and process the events of the day. Take time to validate their feelings about the crisis.

b. Catch them up on details from the day.

c. Give staff updates or news such as funeral arrangements.

1. Time and Place

2. Procedure for staff who wish to attend.

3. Procedures for students (They should be accompanied by an adult, preferably a family member).

d. Determine next day's plan.

- e. Review emergency evacuation and/or protection plans if appropriate.
- f. Review responsibility to staff. Provide handouts if appropriate. Possibly go over signs of depression, difference between sadness and depression.
- g. Ask staff "what type of on-going support is needed."
- h. Make a list of students of concern or describe referral process.
- i. Remind all school staff to keep an eye on at-risk students and report concerns to the school counselors.
- j. Remind staff of the support services available, and encourage the staff to take care of their own emotional needs as well.
- k. Share your appreciation of some things which went well and the efforts of staff.

the Possible Questions to get staff started in unloading some of stress of the day:

- 1. What events or services were available for you and your students today?
- 2. What kinds of reactions have you had?
- 3. What part worked well? Which could be improved?
- 4. How could you have felt more supported during the day?
- 5. What could we do to provide support to you right now?
- 6. What additional resources do we need in the near future?

6. Working with the media

The only means to inform the general public is by mass media or the Telephone Messaging System; therefore it is important to ensure that the media receive prompt, accurate information. Isolated quotes from individuals can be incomplete or misleading and should be avoided. No students or staff should talk to media. They should refer media contacts to the chief school administrator's office. Office staff should be informed of the situation and how to handle phone inquiries.

A single spokesperson, the Chief school administrator, should be designated to speak for the entire school during a crisis. Separate spokespersons making contradictory statements can be counterproductive. The spokesperson must be well informed, able to express himself/herself well, have credibility and authority, have access to the most accurate and up to date information and completely understand what he/she is and isn't authorized to say. As soon as is reasonably possible, the spokesperson should meet the media as a group and;

- a. Indicate that school officials are effectively dealing with the situation and give specific examples;
- b. Assure all present that all appropriate information that will not injure the right to privacy of the deceased and his/her family will be shared. When the spokesperson cannot share something he/she should explain why.
- c. The school must be prepared to react to visitors, particularly those from the media, in a cooperative yet forceful manner. Media personnel should not be allowed in the building. Above all, care must be exercised to

maintain the focus of the school as an educational center.

Additional Tips for Media Interviews

In the event that it is determined to be appropriate and/or necessary for you to speak with the media:

1. Be honest; if you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Tell the reporter that you will get back to him/her with the answer as soon as you can. If you make a mistake in an interview, say so.
2. If you are in a room with a microphone or a camera, always assume they are turned on.
3. Try to have a goal for the interview. What do you want to accomplish?
4. Prepare for the interview. If you need more time ask for it.
5. Understand what you are going to say so you can talk about the topic knowledgeably.
6. Anticipate the worst question you may have to answer and prepare for it in advance.
7. Bridge a question from where you are in the interview to where you want to be.

Things to Avoid

1. Don't over-react or exaggerate the situation, but don't refuse to acknowledge its gravity either.
2. Don't try to avoid blame by using a scapegoat.
3. Don't argue with media representatives.
4. Don't deviate from communications policy and agreed-upon statements.
5. Don't bluff, ad-lib, or talk "off the record".
6. Never say "no comment." It makes it sound as if you have something to hide.
7. Don't delay sharing what information you have, but make sure you are sharing facts.
8. Don't project a primary interest in protecting the school's reputation at all cost.

A crisis is unpredictable. The only safe course is to be adequately prepared. Effective communications crisis planning is essential and will determine how well you survive the crisis.

This procedure was developed in the hope that we will never have to use it!! Procedure was adapted from the following information sources:

Adolescent Suicide Awareness Training Manual. New Jersey State Department of Education

Franklin Township School Crisis Response Clipboard, Quick Reference Guide

Managing Sudden Traumatic Loss in the Schools. Maureen M. Underwood & Karen Dunne Maxim 1997. University of Behavioral Health.

Teenage Suicide Prevention in the School, NJASA Administrative Guide

Westfield Public Schools, Crisis Plan for a Sudden Tragic Death

* What Not to Do" – written by Walter D. St. John, Principal at Hull (Mass.) High School and a communications consultant.

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