

# Responding to Critical Incidents Guidelines for Schools





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# Foreword

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In 2003 the National Educational Psychological Service produced a resource pack to help school staff in responding to unexpected and traumatic events. I am delighted to have this opportunity to welcome a second edition of this publication *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* and the accompanying *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Materials for Schools* and to emphasise their importance for school staff. The advice and information contained in these publications is based on research in the area of critical incidents and is further enriched by the experience of psychologists and schools with experience of this difficult work.

The number of critical incidents experienced by schools appears to have increased in recent years. Such incidents include suicide or suspected suicide, death due to violence, accidental death including road traffic accidents and drowning, and death through illness of members of the school community.

The key to managing critical incidents is forward planning. *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* outlines how schools can plan for crises and also considers preventive approaches that schools can adopt in creating a safe and supportive environment.

In times of tragedy, young people need support from the adults who know them best. Their teachers have invaluable experience, competence and skills in dealing with children and young people and, in partnership with parents, are the best people to provide this support. The publication provides practical step-by-step guidelines for teachers and Principals on how to respond when a tragedy occurs. It offers support to schools at a potentially overwhelming time.

I would like to express my appreciation of the work of NEPS on the publication of these Guidelines. I know that schools will benefit greatly from this highly accessible advice and information. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the other agencies who have worked jointly with NEPS psychologists in responding to a number of incidents.

Finally, I wish to extend my sympathy to the many schools that have experienced tragic events over the years and to acknowledge the strength and courage displayed by students and school staff during these difficult times.

Minister for Education and Science

# Acknowledgements

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Much of the information in *Responding to Critical Incident: Guidelines for Schools* is based on the direct experience of psychologists' in NEPS in the provision of support to schools in the aftermath of critical incidents.

This difficult work is undertaken jointly with school staffs who display exceptional coping skills when the unimaginable happens. Many schools now have a critical incident management plan and a team in place and this helps a great deal in coping when an incident happens. NEPS colleagues have provided feedback on their experience in schools and this has informed changes as well as the development of new material. Suggestions from colleagues in school management bodies, unions and parent groups has also been incorporated into this new publication. Thanks are due to all for their contribution.

The practical experience of working with schools and other agencies over the years has resulted in the accumulation of a significant body of expertise in NEPS. The commitment of NEPS staff and school staff members to working together in difficult circumstances is outstanding. Thanks to all members of the school community for this work.

A number of complex incidents requiring more effective interagency liaison has helped us to develop our practices and has provided pointers to areas needing further development. We would like to acknowledge the value of working jointly with our colleagues in other agencies. Thanks to those agencies with whom we have worked and who have offered us feedback on particular events as well as on this new publication.

# Acronyms

<b>CAMH:</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
<b>CIMT:</b>	Critical Incident Management Team
<b>CIMP:</b>	Critical Incident Management Plan
<b>EAS:</b>	Employee Assistance Service
<b>EAM:</b>	Examination and Assessment Manager
<b>HEA:</b>	Health Education Agency
<b>HSE:</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>LHO:</b>	Local Health Office
<b>NCCA:</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NEPS:</b>	National Educational Psychological Service
<b>NOSP:</b>	National Office for Suicide Prevention
<b>RTA:</b>	Road traffic accident
<b>SEC:</b>	State Examinations Commission
<b>SPHE:</b>	Social, Personal and Health Education
<b>WHO:</b>	World Health Organisation

# Introduction:

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The aim of these guidelines is to outline the role of the school

- In promoting mental health and in creating effective care systems
- In being proactive in preparing for critical incidents
- In responding to critical incidents

The guidelines are divided into the following sections covering the broad areas of prevention, planning and intervention

- A general description of the role of NEPS
- Prevention
- Preparation and planning
- Intervention – set out under short-term, medium-term and follow-up actions
- Issues around suicide, road traffic accidents and violent death
- Dealing with the media
- Critical incidents during certificate exams

Resource materials are contained in the accompanying book *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resources Materials for Schools* to facilitate photocopying. These resource documents will be referred to throughout this publication as **R1, R2, R3** etc.

## PREVENTION

This section briefly describes elements of schools' policies and practises that promote mental health and well being. It highlights the need for staff training and awareness as well as procedures for responding to vulnerable students. Further information on how schools can support students with mental health difficulties is included in section 7, which focuses on suicide.

## PREPARATION AND PLANNING

This section gives detailed information on how to prepare for critical incidents. It covers:

- What is a critical incident?
- The establishment of a Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)
- Key administrative tasks
- A checklist for reviewing policy and plans

Advice on the development of a critical incident policy and a planning template can be found in *Responding to Critical Incidents: Resource Materials for Schools* **R21** and **R22**



## INTERVENTION

The next three sections set out a recommended action plan for schools. It offers a step by step guide through the various stages of the response:

- **Short term actions – Day 1**
- **Medium term actions – Days 2 or 3**
- **Follow-up actions**

Information and advice is also given in dealing with particular types of incidents and issues that may arise.

### **Suicide, road traffic accidents and violent death**

Guidelines on some of the issues arising in relation to death by suicide/ suspected suicide, road traffic accidents and violent deaths are addressed in these two sections.

**The media section** contains guidelines on how schools can best deal with media interest.

**NEPS' role during certification exams** is addressed in the final section.

# Section 1

## The role of NEPS in critical incidents

### What is a critical incident?

In a school context, NEPS suggests the following definition:

**A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school.**

### 1.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE (NEPS)

Since the establishment of the Schools Psychological Service in 1965, psychologists have been involved in helping school communities to respond to critical incidents. This continued to be a core element of the work following the establishment of NEPS in 1999. This work continues to be a key area of service as NEPS experiences an increase in the number of requests from schools for intervention in the aftermath of critical incidents. During the development phase of NEPS services, even though some schools do not yet have access to NEPS, a response is still provided to all schools usually at the request of a school.

As well as working specifically in the area of school policy and planning for critical incidents, NEPS also has an important role in the promotion of mental health and well being in schools and in prevention and early intervention. This role is complementary to that of the SPHE support service, and includes supporting schools in the development of early intervention for students showing early signs of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

### When a tragic event happens, NEPS response generally involves:

- **PLANNING** - helping school management to assess the significance and impact of the event, to draw up a plan, to mobilise the schools resources and to access other support systems.
- **INFORMATION & ADVICE** – providing information and advice to management and staff as they come to terms with the situation.
- **SUPPORT** – being available for consultation to school staff as they support the students. This may involve support meetings at the beginning and end of the school day.
- **SCREENING** – working with teachers to identify students who are most in need of support, and developing procedures for reviewing their needs and for onward referral, if necessary.

The primary role of NEPS is to advise and support the teachers and other adults who work daily with students and who know them well. Best practise indicates that students need to be with people they know and trust. It is, therefore, better if school staff provide most of the support for students as they will be around in the longer term and will be in a better position to monitor their students over the days and weeks following an incident.

However, this does not exclude the possibility of NEPS working directly with individuals or groups. NEPS does not provide counselling, but rather immediate, short term support, information and advice. The psychologist may see a student about whom there are particular concerns and may advise the school and the student's parents as to whether an onward referral is necessary. It is envisaged that the number of individual students seen by a NEPS psychologist will be minimal. The psychologist may also meet with a class group or other group of students to support them in talking about what has happened and to give them information about the normal reactions to such an event.

School management may decide to host a parent meeting in order to support parents and to disseminate information. The psychologist may attend this meeting to outline the role of NEPS, answer questions on the psychological impact of the event and offer advice on how parents can best support their children, (see Section 8.5).

In a very limited number of cases a decision may be made by NEPS and external agencies, in consultation with the school, to provide a drop-in-service for parents. NEPS psychologists may be available at such a drop-in facility as part of an interagency response, (see Section 8.6).

## **1.2 NEPS AS A SCHOOL SERVICE AGENCY**

NEPS is a school service agency and is in a unique position as an agency that delivers almost all of its services in the school setting. The assigned school psychologist will usually be involved in responding to the incident and will generally be known to the school staff. At times of tragedy a person who is familiar with the school, the staff and the students is well placed to offer support in the school. Prior knowledge of the normal running of the school can be invaluable at a time when all normality seems to disappear. This familiarity offers comfort to the Principal and other school staff. Even where the assigned school psychologist is not involved, NEPS' experience in dealing with incidents in school settings, the psychologists' immediate access to advice and support from within the service and their relationships with other local support agencies is very useful.

NEPS psychologists will take their lead from the Principal of the school and will be available to give advice on how to proceed. There are times when school management greatly welcomes clear advice as they come to terms with the immediate shock as most schools will not have much experience of such events.

## **1.3 CONSENT**

The practice in NEPS is that signed parental consent is an essential pre-requisite for any individual interview between a student and a NEPS psychologist. If such consent is not forthcoming, then NEPS psychologists do not meet the student. This is also the usual procedure advised in the event of a critical incident. In the event of an incident, affected schools are advised to send a letter immediately to all parents informing them that NEPS psychologists

are available in the school and seeking their written permission for their child/children to be seen, (see Sample Consent Letter **R2**).

However, it is sometimes difficult for the school to issue letters at once, and the school authorities may wish a student to meet the psychologist immediately. This may be because staff with appropriate training may not be available, because they feel overwhelmed by the situation, or do not feel equipped to do this work themselves. It can also be the case that the numbers of students needing support requires all the available professionals to be involved.

It is suggested that, as part of the Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP), the school should send a general letter to all parents stating that, in the event of a critical incident, support may be available from NEPS, and that the school may decide that individual or group support would be helpful to certain students. If parents do not wish to avail of this, they must notify the school in writing. Even if this procedure has been followed, the school should undertake to telephone the parent/guardian to seek verbal consent in all cases where a child is to have an individual meeting with a psychologist. If there is difficulty in contacting a parent/guardian, the school, in consultation with the psychologist, may take the decision to proceed while continuing to make every effort to contact the parent/guardian. This will be a rare occurrence as parents are generally contactable and willing to take the advice of the school. This will be done on the basis that the school is seeking to look after the best interests of the student. Distressed students should not be denied access to psychological support because of the lack of written parental consent. The over-riding principle is the need to promote the safety and well-being of students and to prevent further distress (this will be a supportive interview rather than exploratory).

Schools may wish to send a letter to parents of all current students following consideration of this advice. It would subsequently need to be sent to parents on enrolment of new students. The text of a sample letter is provided in **R3**.

Three options are outlined below. The decision about how a school will deal with this issue and whether to apply A, B, C, or another approach, rests with school management.

- A.** Send a letter requesting parents to complete a slip stating that the letter has been read, and to indicate whether they do, or do not, wish to have their child seen by a NEPS psychologist in the event of an incident.  
or
- B.** Send a letter which states that the school will assume agreement unless parents return a slip stating that they don't want to have their child seen.  
or
- C.** Send a letter which says that the school will seek verbal consent, to be followed by written parental consent, in every instance.

#### 1.4 Interagency liaison

Where a number of external agencies are involved in the response, experience has shown that a co-ordinating role is necessary. Schools can be overwhelmed by the many offers of help from individuals and agencies, especially when a major incident occurs. NEPS can support the school in coordinating offers and advising on how best to avail of and manage the various resources available. Procedures for recording meetings with students and for onward referral also need to be clear and agreed.

## Section 2

### Prevention

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Schools can attend to prevention by having systems in place which help to promote emotional health and well-being and which build resilience in both staff and students, thus preparing them to cope with a range of life events.

Mental health promotion is a vital element of this work. Mental health has been defined in the following ways:

*“A state of emotional and social well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can manage the normal stresses of life, can work effectively, and is able to play a role in his or her community” (WHO, 1999).*

*“The emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness” (HEA, 1997).*

One of the key means available to schools in their work of supporting healthy development for all students is Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

#### **Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)**

SPHE is a key element of a school’s prevention work. It is a required element of the curriculum at Primary School level and of the Junior Cycle programme for all Post Primary schools. Work on Senior Cycle provision is nearing completion at the time of publication, and is expected to make an important contribution to SPHE at Senior Cycle.

Many schools use Transition Year as an opportunity to do more in-depth work on such areas as personal development and mental health.

SPHE supports the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual development and well-being of all members of the school community. There are 10 modules that comprise the SPHE curriculum:

- **Belonging and integrating**
- **Self Management: A sense of purpose**
- **Communication skills**
- **Physical health**
- **Friendships**
- **Relationships and sexuality**
- **Emotional health**
- **Influences and decisions**
- **Substance use**
- **Physical safety**

SPHE, where well implemented, has a significant role to play in the creation of healthy, nurturing and safe environments. It is a ‘universal’ intervention, targeting all pupils, and thus enhancing the health of the whole school population. It should be integrated with the academic, social, emotional, recreational and artistic life of the school. It is critical to a whole school strategy that encourages students to develop their values and attitudes and

helps provide the life skills they need to live healthy lives in the wider community.

Teachers, parents and agencies in the wider community should all be encouraged to participate in and contribute to this process. Inputs by Health Service Executive services and other community groups need to be carefully integrated into the work of the SPHE team so as to support the overall work of the school in health promotion. A guide to schools with regard to the integration of external programmes is provided in Section 7.2. Some of the elements which contribute to creating a healthy and safe school include:

- The creation of a **psychologically safe environment**, including good SPHE provision, effective pastoral and care systems, procedures for identifying vulnerable students and use of school resources such as guidance and counselling to respond to the needs of such vulnerable students. Young people face many challenges in their lives. Not being accepted for who they are and what they are can often cause difficulties. Children who feel different because of their sexuality, their interests, their talents, their family, the way they look etc may experience difficulties in the school environment. Safe and inclusive schools are alert to potential problems and have clear policies and procedures in place for dealing with such issues, including an anti bullying policy
- **The integration of SPHE programmes** in the curriculum in a broad based way addressing issues such as grief and loss; communication skills; stress and anger management; resilience; conflict management; problem solving; help-seeking; bullying; decision making and use and the misuse of alcohol and other drugs
- **The incorporation of mental health issues into the regular SPHE provision.** Programmes offered by external agencies in the promotion of positive mental health are integrated into an overall SPHE and care plan for the school. Note: Please refer to Section 7 for additional advice on mental health and suicide. Guidelines on the use of external programmes can be found in that section. Resources are listed in the reference section
- The creation of a **physically safe environment**, evacuation plan formulated, regular fire-drills occur, fire exits and extinguishers are regularly checked
- The provision of **staff training and resources** on issues affecting young people, (see resources section of *Resource Material for Schools*)
- **The creation of systems and procedures for the identification of students at risk**, and for referral to school personnel for screening and support
- The **development of links with external agencies**, together with clear procedures for appropriate onward referral, are in place for those with more serious difficulties
- Staff are familiar with the **Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures** and how to proceed with suspicions or disclosures
- **The provision of support** for school staff members and clear information on how to access the Employee Assistance Service (**Free phone 1800 411057**)

Attention to these areas will contribute to the creation of a safe school, will de-stigmatise mental health problems and will foster the development of young people who are healthy in mind, body and spirit. Students, teachers and parents will be encouraged and enabled to talk openly about their problems and seek help when necessary.

## Section 3

### Preparation and planning

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#### 3.1 CREATING A PLAN

A traumatic situations such as the sudden death of a student or teacher. The first three weeks following an incident is a time of vulnerability for staff and students. This can be a challenging time for the school community and may call on all its resources to deal with the event.

The key to managing a critical incident is planning. NEPS psychologists report that schools that have developed school policy and a **Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP)** are able to cope more effectively in the aftermath of an incident. Having a plan enables staff to react quickly and effectively and to maintain a sense of control. It may also ensure that normality returns as soon as possible and that the effects on students and staff are limited.

Research suggests that an effective response by the school during the first 48 hours is crucial. It is therefore important for all schools to prepare a Critical Incident Management Plan. Templates for a critical incident policy and for a CIMP are provided in **R21** and **R22**. The school should develop these with regard to its own particular circumstances and needs.

#### 3.2 DEFINING A CRITICAL INCIDENT

In a school context, NEPS suggests the following definition:

**A critical incident is any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school.**

#### 3.3 THE ROLE OF THE NEPS PSYCHOLOGIST IN CRITICAL INCIDENT PLANNING

The school psychologist may support schools in planning in a number of ways

- a. By making a **presentation** to a school or a cluster of schools on the development of a CIMP and/or on how to respond to a critical incident.
- b. By encouraging schools to set up a **Critical Incident Management Team (CIMT)**.
- c. By attending one of the early meetings to offer advice to a **school planning team**.
- d. By offering to attend a **follow up meeting** with the team to discuss the draft policy/ plan and to offer feedback before it is finalised.

Policy and planning templates are provided in **R21** and **R22**. The school should develop these with regard to its own particular circumstances and needs.

#### 3.4 SETTING UP A CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM (CIMT)

At the time of a crisis there are a large number of tasks to be carried out. By identifying key roles in advance of an incident there is a clear statement of **who will do what, when and how**. A good plan also ensures that no individual is overburdened and that important



elements in the response are not forgotten. Generally the Principal will play a key role, being responsible for many of the tasks. Staff members such as the guidance counsellor, chaplain, home school liaison co-ordinator and members of the SEN or care teams will have an important contribution to make when an incident occurs because of their particular training and expertise. Their role should, therefore, be carefully considered.

The following points may help in ensuring that an effective team is established:

- Members should be suited to the role. They should have an interest in this type of work and some particular skills (e.g. good interpersonal skills, organisational skills, a calm approach). It is suggested that someone who is recently bereaved may not be a suitable candidate for the team
- Each member should be willing to contribute a number of hours to the work
- Responsibilities attached to the various roles should be clearly outlined
- The size of a team should be appropriate to the size of the school
- The team should meet annually to update and review the plan
- The members should usually remain on the team for at least one full school year

Some possible roles are:

- **Team Leader**
- **Garda Contact**
- **Staff Contact**
- **Student Contact**
- **Parent Contact**
- **Community/Agency Contact**
- **Media Contact**
- **Administrator**

A detailed outline of these roles can be found in the template for the critical incident plan **R21**.

### **3.5 KEY ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS**

Certain administrative tasks need to be carried out in advance and list/contact details are regularly updated so that communication is speedy and effective in the event of a critical incident. This role is often carried out by the school secretary. In the event of an incident, the normal school business will also have to be dealt with at the same time as all of these tasks.

#### **Maintaining an up-to-date list of contact telephone numbers**

Telephone numbers should be available for:

- Students
- Parents/guardians
- Staff members
- Emergency Contact List (see **R23**). This should be displayed in the staff room, the school office and the Principal's office.

Agreement should be reached about where lists will be kept. **All lists should be dated** and responsibility for **updating at agreed intervals** should be clearly assigned.



### **Compiling emergency information for school trips**

This should include:

- A list of all the students/staff involved and the teacher in charge
- A list of mobile phone numbers for the teacher in charge and other accompanying staff members
- Up to date medical information on students with allergies, epilepsy etc

### **Preparing templates**

- Prepare templates for letters to parents and templates for press releases. These should be 'ready-to-go' and on the school computer system so that they can be adapted quickly when an incident occurs

### **Emergency packs**

- Put together a small number of key documents for members of the CIMT. These should be readily accessible in the event of an emergency e.g. emergency contact lists, checklist for first 24 hours, layout of school buildings

### **Administration in the course of an incident**

- Identify a dedicated telephone line, which will be kept free for important outgoing and incoming calls
- Identify rooms which may be used for various purposes - individual and group support sessions; meeting parents; a quiet room; a waiting room etc.
- Designate a point where a log of events and telephone calls made and received will be kept
- All offers of help should be logged – the name of agency, what they are offering, a contact name and number. These agencies may be contacted later if appropriate.
- Agree arrangements for dealing with normal school business

## **3.6 COMMUNICATION OF THE PLAN**

### **All staff should be consulted during the planning stage.**

- If there are a significant number of students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, some consultation with parents about their beliefs and rituals is advisable so that the school is aware of issues that may arise, (see section 4.5 ).
- Once prepared, all staff should be made aware of the school's critical incident policies and procedures
- The CIMP should be instantly accessible to the personnel who will have the key roles in putting the plan into action
- School management may also decide to give a copy of the final plan to each staff member. Alternatively, they may have copies readily available in the school office and on the computer system
- Students and parent should be informed
- All new and temporary staff should also be informed of the details of the plan.

**A copy of the layout of the school building should be displayed in key places, with exits highlighted - this is already required under Health and Safety regulations.**

### 3.7 CHECKLIST FOR REVIEWING THE POLICY AND PLAN

- Has serious consideration been given to the schools approach to prevention?
- Has the school defined a critical incident and given examples?
- Have key roles been clearly identified and the tasks clearly outlined?
- Have staff members been nominated to each of the roles/tasks?
- Are the personnel suitable?
- Has each member of the team compiled their emergency pack (photocopies of relevant handouts)?
- Has contact been made with external agencies?
- Is the Emergency Contact List (**R22**) appropriate and complete?
- Are letters and press releases readily available on school headed paper, for adaptation to suit the particular circumstances?
- Are telephone numbers on contact lists up-to-date?
- Has all the staff been consulted about the plan/policy?
- Has a date been set for a review of the plan?
- Who will be given copies of the plan?
- Where will copies of the plan be kept?

# Section 4

## Action Plan for Principal/Team Leader

### Short term actions: Day 1

This section of the guidelines outlines short term action plans for schools.

Medium term and follow-up actions are addressed in Sections 5 and 6.

### 4.1 INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INCIDENT

With the increase in the number of critical incidents, there is a need to clarify the kind of response a NEPS psychologist might be expected to offer in different types of situations. To assist in this, a classification of response levels is proposed, which is linked to a number of factors impacting on the situation. This classification in no way diminishes the seriousness of any particular event. It is intended to help schools and psychologists assess what level of intervention is needed, including the additional supports a psychologist may need to request from colleagues and other agencies.

#### Step 1: What type of response is needed?

- **Response Level 1:** the death of a student or staff member who was terminally ill; the death of parent/sibling; a fire in school not resulting in serious injury; serious damage to school property
- **Response Level 2:** the sudden death of a student or staff member
- **Response Level 3:** incident: an accident/event involving a number of students; a violent death; an incident with a high media profile or involving a number of schools

#### Step 2: Should a psychologist be involved?

- Consider the nature of the event and how your school is coping. What support do you need from NEPS and/or other agencies?

#### Step 3: How do I assess the needs of the school?

- Is there a feeling of being overwhelmed by this event?
- Has there been a previous incident? How recent, what kind of incident? If more than one, how many? (If the school has experienced a recent incident or a number of incidents staff may be exhausted or distressed. On the other hand, they may feel more experienced and better able to deal with the situation).
- Is there a critical incident plan/team in place?
- Is there a good pastoral care system in the school?
- Is there significant media interest in the incident?
- Are other agencies already involved?

#### Step 4: What action do I take?

- For an incident requiring a **Level 1 response** it may be sufficient to talk to the psychologist on the phone. Locate your *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* and the accompanying *Resource Materials for Schools*. The psychologist will refer to these and talk you through relevant sections. A copy of these has been made available to all schools. It is also available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) by following the links to NEPS.
- In the case of an incident requiring a **Level 2 & Level 3 response**, make contact with NEPS. Depending on the incident at least one psychologist will visit the school.

Exchange mobile numbers with the psychologist so that immediate contact will be possible at all times.

A checklist is provided at the end of this section. The procedures to be followed will depend on the particular incident that has occurred and the particular arrangements in place in your school.

## 4.2 INITIAL ACTION PLAN

- Gather accurate information: **It is important to obtain accurate information about the incident; otherwise rumours may take over and add to the distress of those involved**
- Establish the facts: **What** has happened; **when** it happened; **how** it happened; the **number and names of students and staff** involved; are there other schools involved; the extent of the injuries; and the location of those injured
- Locate the NEPS publications *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* and the accompanying *Resource Materials for Schools* (available on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie))
- Contact appropriate agencies (see school's Emergency Contact List: **R23**)
  - Emergency services
  - Medical services
  - Board of Management
  - National Educational Psychological Service
  - Health Service Executive
  - Teacher Unions
  - State Examinations Commission
  - Parish Priest/Clergy
- Convene a meeting with key staff/Critical Incident Management Team. Depending on the incident it is advisable to arrange an evening or early morning meeting to ensure that the team is well prepared and has a plan in place for the school day ahead.

## 4.3 AGENDA FOR MEETING WITH CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM/KEY STAFF

- Share full details of the event
- Agree on the facts. These will need to be relayed in a clear, appropriate and consistent manner by all staff to the students
- Discuss what agencies have been contacted and whether there are additional ones that should be informed (check Emergency Contact List for Schools **R23**)
- During major incidents phone lines may become jammed. Agree on which phone line is to be kept open for outgoing and incoming emergency calls
- When a number of external agencies is involved in a response, co-ordination will be needed and procedures will need to be agreed. An agency such as NEPS may take on this role

- Plan procedures for the day
- Discuss issues relating to school routine, including school closure. **Remember it is important to maintain a normal routine when at all possible.** It is recommended that the school timetable runs as normal. This will provide a sense of safety and structure which is comforting for many students. Teachers should give students the opportunity to talk about what has happened and temporarily shelve all academic activities if necessary. See **R7** for further information
- You may wish to consult students about what to do if there is an event scheduled such as a trip, concert, match. This should reduce the likelihood of students being angry later on as a result of any school action or in-action
- Discuss **how to break the news to relatives and close friends and who should do this (Remember that they must always be told separately)**
- Discuss how to break the news to the rest of the students. Class groups are often best, rather than large assemblies, (see **R7**)
- Discuss how to identify vulnerable students (see page 24)
- If there are students of various nationalities and religions in the school, this needs to be taken into consideration in organising prayer services, attendance at the funeral etc. Parents of different religious or national groups may need to be consulted
- Plan a whole staff briefing (including ancillary staff). This may need to be done in two groups depending on the arrangements for the supervision of students
- Agree the text of a letter to be sent to parents, (see **R4** and **R5**)
- Discuss how to deal with the media. Prepare a media statement, if appropriate (see **R6** and Section 9). This can be faxed or emailed to media representatives who make contact with the school. It may also be used if an interview is requested
- Delegate responsibilities to the appropriate critical incident team member or key personnel
- Discuss which room(s) will be available to external agencies
- Decide whether a quiet room should be made available for students. This is a place that students can go if they are having difficulty remaining composed in the classroom. Depending on the age of the students it should have tissues, a few stuffed toys, cushions, drawing and writing materials and appropriate information leaflets from *Resource Materials for Schools*. It is generally recommended that this is available for the week following the incident and that its use is then reviewed. Students should sign out of their regular class and sign into the quiet room for a certain time. The room should be supervised to ensure student safety. A very distressed student may need individual support. This might be offered by the guidance counsellor, chaplain or other staff member. A similar room could be set up for staff
- Discuss the issue of consent for students who may need to be seen by the psychologist and arrange for the consent form to be photocopied and sent to parents (**R2**).
- If a general letter was sent out by the school to parents, check whether any parents sent a negative reply
- Where a request is made that a student be seen by the psychologist prior to having a signed consent form, telephone the parent or carer to obtain verbal consent. If it isn't possible to make immediate contact, the Principal, in consultation with the psychologist, should then make the decision in the best interest of the student. This should take precedence over procedural matters. If a student is seen without consent, parents should be contacted as soon as possible by the school
- A record should be kept of all students seen by school staff and agencies external to the schools, (see **R1**). One person should be appointed to collate the lists regularly

- Agree the next meeting time for the Critical Incident Management Team/key staff.
- Agree a time for a follow up staff meeting at the end of the day. This gives an opportunity for the Principal to update staff on any developments. It also allows time for preparation for the following day. Lastly, it gives staff a chance to share their experience and to wind down after the day.

**Note:** In the case of a major accident, meetings may be held in a location away from the school involving key personnel from schools and other agencies. Care should be taken that staff with appropriate experience and authority remain in place in the school to facilitate an effective response. The Principal might consider delegating someone to go to such meetings as, if they decide to go themselves, they may not be available for critical decisions in their own school.

#### 4.4 MEETING WITH A STAFF GROUP

The purpose of this meeting is to relay facts to staff and to plan the schedule for the day. It is generally the Principal who leads this meeting. On occasion, this duty may be delegated to another member of the team. **It is crucial that the teachers have accurate facts and are kept updated.** This will help to dispel rumours which may begin to circulate. It may be useful for NEPS to give a brief input.

**Reminder: The staff may need to be seen in two separate groups in order to facilitate supervision of students.**

##### 4.4.1 SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR PRINCIPAL

*You may have already heard that two of our students were involved in a car accident last night (give details of where). (Name of students) who were driving together, both died as a result of their injuries. As more information becomes available, including funeral arrangements, I will speak to you again. This is a terrible tragedy for the school and community and our thoughts are with the families.*

*It is important to make every effort to maintain regular classroom routines in accordance with the timetable. However, for many of the students this will be difficult. I understand that this may be a very difficult time for you also and we need to be here for each other. The psychologist is now going to talk to you about how we can support each other and the students in the coming days and weeks. Thank you.*

#### REMEMBER

**Students need to be with people they know and trust so, if at all possible, it is better that teachers and other school staff provide support for the students. The external “expert” should be primarily used to advise and support school staff.**

(The following is optional).

*I can see that a number of people are very upset and would like to give you a few moments to say a few words or to ask questions if you would like to.*

**Why routine is so important:**

*Routine is very important at a time of tragedy. It provides a sense of security, especially for younger students. It helps students to see that, despite these awful events, the world remains largely unchanged and that life goes on. They will learn this over the next hours, days, weeks. They learn this through seeing you cope with this event and seeing that the routine of life is continuing. It is important to maintain the normal routine as much as possible. So, after this meeting, it would be best if you could go to your classes and be with the students.*

**It is ok to be upset:**

*Remember this is an upsetting time for you as well as the students and it is ok that the students know and see that you are upset. In fact it may be reassuring for them.*

**How to share the facts with students:** *It is important that close friends of the deceased are told first and separately. Some of you may feel uncomfortable about relaying this information to the students. It is important to remember that the students know you and trust you and that it is better if they hear this tragic news from someone they know and that this happens in a safe and familiar environment. Remember also that you are here for the longer term. You will be the ones to whom the students will look for guidance and support in the next hours, days, weeks and months.*

**It is important to stick to known facts and to be alert to rumour.** *Rumour can proliferate at these times and can be very upsetting for students, so it is important to nip them in the bud.*

**For teachers who feel unable to meet with classes:**

If a teacher is particularly upset or feels unable to cope, (which could be for any number of reasons), make sure that they are offered support and that their class is covered.

*If any of you feel unable to address the students please stay behind at the end of the meeting. We will help you prepare what to say or it may be possible to make alternative arrangements.*

**Provide literature:**

*I am going to distribute some handouts that you may find useful over the next few days. These are all available in Resource Materials for Schools that accompany this publication.*

Select as appropriate from:

- R7** A classroom session following a critical incident
- R8** Children's understanding and reaction to death according to age
- R9** Stages of grief
- R10** How to cope when something terrible happens
- R11** Normal reactions to a critical incident
- R12** Grief after suicide (use only when it clear that the death was due to suicide and where parents have accepted this. This must be handled with the greatest care to avoid potential difficulties)
- R19** Frequently Asked Questions - Teachers

Go through these briefly and allow for questions.



### **Identifying vulnerable students:**

*A lot of the students will be very upset and will want and need to talk about what has happened. For the majority of students this can be done in the classroom or group setting. It is helpful for students to hear others talking about how they are feeling. This normalises their reaction. If a student or group of students are particularly distressed it may be advisable to have them talk to someone they know who will be available over the next days and weeks. If you are particularly concerned about a pupil, please alert me so I can make arrangements for them to be seen. This, however, should be for only a small number of students.*

### **Identifying vulnerable students**

Students who need to be closely monitored as they may be more vulnerable than others are:

- Close friends and relatives of the deceased
- Students who experienced a recent loss, death of a friend or relative, family divorce or separation, break-up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
- Students with a history of mental health difficulties
- Students with a history of substance abuse
- Students experiencing serious family difficulties, including serious mental or physical illness
- Students who have been bereaved by a suicide in the past
- Students with a history of sexual abuse
- Students with a history of suicide attempts/self harm
- Non-communicative students who have difficulty talking about their feelings
- Less able students

### **Quiet Room**

*It can be useful to have a designated room available for students for a period, perhaps a week, following a tragedy. It offers people a quiet space to be in if feeling overwhelmed.*

**Note: staff should be clearly informed about procedures for the running and monitoring of the quiet room.**

### **Advise of the availability of other literature and leave copies in the staff room**

I am going to leave additional information here which you may wish to read at break time or you may take a copy to bring home.

**R9** Stages of grief

**R11** Normal reactions to a critical incident

### **Support for each other and vulnerable staff members**

*Some of you may be particularly vulnerable due to a recent loss or previous experience of (suicide or road traffic accident etc) or you may have known the student well. It is important that you talk to each other and support each other during this difficult time. If you are aware that a colleague may need support available, arrange to meet them after school or give them a call.*

### **Restate the schedule for the day**

*I think that it would be useful to meet for about 30 minutes at the end of the day. This will give us an opportunity to update on how things have developed during the day. It will also*



*allow us to plan for tomorrow and will provide an opportunity to talk things through with others after a difficult day.*

#### 4.5 CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND AWARENESS

The school's response should be sensitive to different religious beliefs and different traditions amongst students and staff. For example, attendance at a Christian service may not be acceptable to parents whose children are of other religious beliefs, or of none. This may result in some students being excluded. It is also important to be mindful of different cultures, and of differing religious beliefs and rituals that exist around death. If students are to attend a funeral rite of a religion or denomination other than their own, it may be helpful to prepare them by exploring the rituals and beliefs particular to that religion. The school could ask the parents' advice in relation to these matters.

#### 4.6 STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Students with general learning difficulties will be at a different developmental level to their peers. Their understanding of death will be in accordance with their developmental age (see **R8**). They should be told the news separately so that the information can be given according to their level of understanding. The information should be given in short simple sentences. They may repeatedly ask the same questions and therefore teachers should be ready to go over the information a number of times. This will require patience and sensitivity.

Clear information should be given on the following topics:

- What happens when a person dies
- What a funeral is and what usually happens on the day of the funeral
- How they and other people might feel when someone dies
- How different people show their feelings in different ways

It is important that students are reintegrated with their peers as soon as possible.

The use of nonverbal approaches, such as picture books or artwork, may be helpful. Pictures may help them to explore their feelings and provide them with an opportunity to talk and to ask questions.

#### 4.7 END OF DAY SESSION WITH TEACHERS

##### **Sample script for Principal**

*Thank you all for staying. I know that it has been a difficult day and you may all be tired. I thought it was important for us just to take a bit of time to check in with each other and to make sure that we are all doing ok.*

Provide update on the latest facts as known and outline the schedule for tomorrow.

*Is anyone concerned about anything or anyone?* (Remind them about compiling a list of students about whom they have particular concerns).

*If you are feeling very distressed and would like to talk in confidence to someone, you can access support through the **Employee Assistance Service (EAS)**. The Department of Education and Science has contracted VHI to provide this service for teachers. A number*

of sessions may be availed of and it is confidential. It is staffed by a network of trained counsellors and therapists. You make the contact yourself. **The freephone number for the EAS is 1800 411 057.**

If the psychologist is offering an end-of-day support meeting, let staff know where it will take place and how soon.

*Thank you all for your great work and support today.*

#### 4.8 CONTACT WITH AFFECTED FAMILY OR FAMILIES

- Arrange a home visit by two staff representatives within 24 hours, if appropriate
- Plan visits to those who are injured - name key person(s) to visit home/hospital
- Liaise with the family regarding funeral arrangements/memorial service
- Designate a suitable staff member to liaise with the family, to extend sympathy and to clarify the family's wishes regarding the school's involvement in the funeral/ memorial service
- Decide on the school's role in the funeral service following consultation with parents, school management and close school friends
- Have regard for different religious traditions and faiths

#### 4.9 SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR PRINCIPALS: DAY 1

1. Gather the facts – what has happened, when, how, where, and who is injured or dead.
2. Consult *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* (available on the DES website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)). Go to NEPS link.
3. Is it an incident requiring a **NEPS Response at Level 1, 2 or 3?**
4. Who do I need to call (see Emergency Contact List – **R23**)
5. Meet with the Critical Incident Management Team.
6. Meet with other agencies, if involved, to agree on roles and procedures.
7. Have administration staff photocopy appropriate literature.
8. Arrange for the supervision of students.
9. Address the staff meeting.
10. Identify vulnerable students.
11. Inform students.
12. Draft a media statement (see **R6**).
13. Prepare for a media interview, (see Section 9).
14. Draft a letter to parents (see **R2, R4** and **R5**).
15. Meet with the CIMT to review the day and arrange an early morning meeting for the following day.
16. Meet with the staff group.
17. Make contact with the affected family/families.

**MAINTAIN THE NORMAL ROUTINE IF AT ALL POSSIBLE**

## Section 5

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### Action Plan for Principals : Medium-term actions

#### Day 2 and following days

It is sometimes the case that the first day following an incident is quite calm as people may be in shock. Day 2 may be a day when more support is needed as the news begins to sink in. It is advisable that the CIMT continues to meet each day until the school returns to normal functioning.

#### 5. 1. MEETING WITH THE CIMT AND OTHER AGENCIES

The Principal or critical incident team leader normally conducts the meeting.

##### Suggested agenda:

- Review what has been done to date
- Make a decision about school closure
- List tasks for the day and assign roles – media; contact with bereaved family; attendance and participation in the funeral service
- List items to be addressed by the Principal at the staff meeting
- Review the schedule for the day
- Go through the list of students and staff who may be vulnerable and review how they are doing
- Develop a plan for monitoring students over the next few weeks, especially those identified as vulnerable.

#### 5.2 MEETING WITH WHOLE STAFF

- The Principal outlines the schedule for the day and updates staff on any information from the family, funeral arrangements etc,
- A representative from another agency may address the staff if appropriate.

#### Sample script for a principal

*Yesterday was a difficult day for you, as well as for many of your students. You did really well in keeping the routine going as much as possible despite everything. Yesterday there was a sense of numbness and quietness in the school. Today people may begin to feel the reality and pain of the loss. It may be a difficult day for everyone but I'd like to just remind you again to give students and yourselves an opportunity to talk about (name of the deceased) and about what has happened.*

Update on any new information and outline schedule for the day

Give an opportunity for questions.

## Section 6

### Action Plan for Principals: Follow-up

Follow-up is the work carried out in the weeks, months and years following a critical incident. The goal of follow-up is to help the school community cope with the impact of the event in the longer term and to monitor those individuals with ongoing difficulties. The school may also decide to review the critical incident policy and plan memorials.

- Meet with appropriate staff to review the list of affected staff and students. Identify who will be responsible for follow-up
- Discuss referral procedures and when an onward referral may be indicated.

#### When is it necessary to refer a student on?

Following a critical incident it is expected that there will be 'normal' distress among a number of students, especially close friends or relatives. Within approximately 6 weeks most students will have returned to normal functioning. However, if students continue to show significant signs of distress a number of weeks after the incident, they may need to be referred on.

A student who has expressed suicidal intent should be further screened. Information on warning signs and a guide to steps the school should take is contained in Section 7. If it is a serious threat parents must be informed and the student referred on immediately to their GP or Child and Adolescent Services. Arrangements previously made with the relevant services for onward referral should now come into play.

- Prepare for the return of bereaved student(s), (see **R13**)
- Discuss what the school will do in memory of the student(s). A representative from the school should liaise with the deceased person's family/ies regarding the memorial. Remember that whatever policy or precedent the school sets at this time may need to apply to all future deaths
- Discuss what to do with respect to events that the deceased student would have been part of e.g. the Debs, award ceremonies, how to manage exam results, if applicable
- Discuss the management of exam results and the return of practical work submitted to the SEC. Notify the SEC of the need to attend to the issuing of results of the deceased
- Return personal belongings to the family or families. Bereaved parents often find it helpful to visit the school at a later date. This offers the school an opportunity to return the student's personal belongings and/or school work to the family. It may be an idea to put them in a 'memory folder' or 'memory box'.
- Mark the school's calendar in advance with the anniversary date. Anniversaries may trigger emotional responses in students or staff and they may need additional support

at this time. The school may decide to acknowledge the anniversary and should link with the family on any proposed commemoration

- Be sensitive to significant days like birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day
- Where the school does not have a Critical Incident Management Plan in place this is a good time to begin working on developing one
- Evaluate the school's response to the incident and amend the Critical Incident Management Plan appropriately - What went well? Where were the gaps? What was most/least helpful? Have all necessary onward referrals to support services been made? Is there any unfinished business?

## Section 7

### Suicide/suspected suicide

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More people die by suicide in Ireland each year than in road traffic accidents. Currently, youth suicide rates in Ireland are the fifth highest in the European Union (World Health Organisation, 2005, Reach Out, 2005).

#### **Note on use of the term 'suicide'**

NEPS strongly recommends to schools that great care should be taken in the use of the term 'suicide'. It should not be used until it has been established with a good degree of certainty that the death was as a result of suicide. Families may be very sensitive about the use of the term. A staff member should contact the family to establish the exact facts and the family's wishes about how the death should be described. The phrases 'tragic death' or 'sudden death' may be used instead.

Death by suicide is relatively uncommon in our schools. Where it does occur, it is usually in post-primary schools, but there have also been a small number of suicides/attempted suicides in primary schools. When a person dies through suicide, those who know the person experience a deep sense of shock. The unexpectedness of the death and the taboo associated with suicide can leave a school community feeling unsure of how to proceed. A wide range of reactions is experienced and close friends and relations may be especially upset. For some, it may bring back memories of other loss experiences. For a small number, especially those who may already be experiencing difficulties, it may raise the awareness of suicide as an option. There may also be a number of students who may not be impacted by the event.

#### **7.1 SUICIDE PREVENTION - WHAT SCHOOLS NEED TO DO**

Concerns about youth suicide have led to increasing demands for schools to assume a role and responsibility in the prevention and management of suicidal behaviour among students. While schools are key settings for reaching young people at a formative stage of development, careful consideration needs to be given as to the most appropriate approach to suicide prevention in the school setting.

Programmes focussed directly on raising student awareness of suicide may appear desirable, especially in the aftermath of a suicide when there is a heightened awareness of the need to do something, but they are controversial. It is thought that they may carry the risk of increasing suicidal behaviour among young people through normalising it as a legitimate response to adolescent stress. Suicide awareness programmes aimed at school staffs are more appropriate. The approach preferred by NEPS is the promotion of school policies and programmes that promote mental health and well-being; the development of school care systems that assist in the early identification of students at risk; the provision of targeted interventions for this group of students; and work at interagency level to support the promotion of mental health and to facilitate access to services that are responsive to the needs of young people.

This advice is based on research findings and a concern that programmes, which might have unintended negative outcomes, should not be implemented unless there is a strong evidence base for their effectiveness.

A recent update on the effectiveness of school programmes for mental health was presented to the Expert Advisory Group of the National Office for Suicide Prevention in September 2006, by Professor Margaret Barry of NUI Galway. This review of the research concluded that “schools are a key setting for mental health promotion. Mental health promotion in schools, when implemented effectively, can produce long-term benefits for young people, including emotional and social functioning and improved academic performance. Traditional topic based health education approaches are of limited value (knowledge only programmes have minimal effects on behaviour). Programmes adopting a whole school approach are more successful and the most promising.”

The characteristics of effective programmes, (based on a review by Green et al, 2005) were presented. They might usefully be referred to in helping schools review their work in relation to suicide prevention.

Effective programmes:

- Promote *mental health* rather than the prevention of mental health *problems* (Wells et al., 2001)
- Are implemented continuously and long-term in nature i.e. more than one year (Wells et al., 2001)
- Include changes to the school climate rather than brief class-based prevention programmes (Wells et al., 2001)
- Extend beyond the classroom and provide opportunities for applying the learned skills (CASEL, 2003)
- Adopt a health-promoting schools approach focusing on aspects of the social and physical environment of the school, family and community links with the school, the school curriculum and pupils' knowledge (Lister-Sharp et al., 1999)
- Focus on enhancing generic social competences - coping skills, good peer relationships, self-efficacy
- Involve interactive teaching methodologies - active learning, student participation.

NEPS supports this approach. NEPS psychologists will encourage schools to develop good practise on mental health that is in line with these research findings. Needs will vary from school to school and from area to area, but work may include a focus on:

- Implementation of school based **primary prevention programmes** for all students, including **mental health programmes**, within the context of the school's SPHE provision. The focus should be on building resilience and coping skills; problem solving; decision making and help seeking skills. (*Mental Health Matters: A Mental Health Resource Pack has been distributed to all post primary schools by Mental Health Ireland*)
- Development of **care structures and systems** aimed at recognising those young people experiencing emotional distress
- Awareness building amongst school staff and parents of the difficulties faced by some young people who have multiple problems of personal adjustment and life stress. Support for school staff and parents by **developing awareness** about the signs and symptoms of distress, anxiety, depression, substance misuse and suicidal behaviour. This may be done in liaison with other agencies



- Implementation of **targeted interventions for pupils who need help to overcome difficulties** and manage their distress. Include programmes and interventions that reduce risk in youth - alcohol and substance abuse, delinquency, violent behaviour etc
- **Increasing staff awareness of suicide** and how to intervene with suicidal students. **Building on the skills of guidance counsellors** by increasing their ability to recognise suicide risk, to make an initial assessment of the level of risk, and to develop and implement appropriate management plans. Staff with designated care roles such as the guidance counsellor, chaplains and year heads may consider attending ASIST training. (See *Resources* for contact details)
- Helping the school to develop **mechanisms for the referral** of distressed or at risk students, initially to the guidance counsellor, and where necessary to the local health services
- The development of procedures for ensuring the **coordinated, supportive return of students to school after hospitalisation for suicidal behaviour**. Such procedures should provide the necessary information and guidance to school personnel before the adolescent returns to school (only with parental permission and on a need-to-know basis)
- Helping schools to build **school/interagency/community systems** - through inter-school liaison, and encouraging community agencies to support SPHE in schools.

#### **Suicide Prevention Summary**

- Primary prevention, including mental health programmes for all
- Care structures and systems
- Awareness building for all school staff
- Information for parents
- Targeted programmes for more distressed students
- Training of guidance counsellors and other key staff in suicide awareness and intervention skills
- Referral procedures and linking mechanisms with agencies, by schools and by NEPS
- School/community/agency systems and involvement

## **7.2 CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THE SUITABILITY OF EXTERNAL PROGRAMMES**

Schools have an increasing concern with how to prevent suicide and may consider offering certain programmes, provided by external agencies, in the school setting. Individual speakers may also be available to do inputs. It is important that certain criteria are used to inform decision makers as to whether or not a particular programme or presentation should be made in their school. Some programmes that aim to reduce suicidal behaviour among young people may have positive outcomes for some students but unintended negative consequences for others. Safety for students is paramount, which suggests that great care should be taken in deciding whether a particular programme might be offered in a school.



The following advice is adapted for an Irish context from the *New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy: A practical guide (2003)*. The advice therein was drawn from the report 'Evidence for student focused school-based suicide prevention programmes'. Criteria for choosing and assessing external providers are listed below with regard to safety issues, then with regard to the programme itself and finally with regard to the providers.

### **Safety criteria**

- The programme does not directly or indirectly raise awareness around suicide.
- The programme does not encourage young people to take an unduly high degree of responsibility for the well-being of their peers.
- Programme providers have good, established and ongoing relationships with key people in the school and in the community, including NEPS, the SPHE support teams, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). They show a clear understanding of the support services available in the event of a suicide attempt or death occurring within schools.
- Parents/guardians are informed that the programme is being provided.

### **Programme criteria**

- The programme principles and content are congruent with the approach to SPHE promoted by the SPHE support services. It supports and assists schools with implementing a whole school approach to mental health and well being.
- The programme content is appropriate for the age, gender and cultural background of students.
- The programme has an appropriate and explicit theoretical or research base and the benefits claimed are being tested by ongoing evaluation.

### **Providers' criteria**

Programme providers ensure that:

- They provide comprehensive information about their organisation, programme content and programme methodology.
- They are able to document and demonstrate to schools that they have sufficient educational training and qualifications to demonstrate an understanding of SPHE and the general organisation and structure of schools, as well as in the delivery of the input and the facilitation and management of groups.
- They are able to demonstrate to schools that the programme is sustainable in the long run, including the likelihood that the school will be able to ultimately incorporate the programme within the school's programmes and care systems.

### 7.3 WARNING SIGNS

Below is a list of factors which indicate that a person is troubled or distressed. The list is not exhaustive, and there may be other signs which those familiar with a student may notice. There may be an increased likelihood of suicide or suicidal behaviour if a number of these signs are present, (see **R16**).

- An unexpected reduction in academic performance
- A change in mood and marked emotional instability, either more withdrawn, low energy or more boisterous, talkative, outgoing
- Withdrawal from relationships, separation from friends or break-up of a relationship
- Getting into trouble at school, discipline problems, suspension or expulsion, trouble with the law
- Loss of interest in usual pursuits, study, relationships
- Ideas and themes of depression, death or suicide
- Hopelessness and helplessness
- Giving away prized possessions
- Stressful life events, including significant grief
- Bullying or victimization
- A history of mental illness
- Alcohol/drug misuse
- A history of suicidal behaviour or deliberate self harm
- A family history of suicide/attempted suicide

Where a number of these signs exist, or when information about a student's expression of suicidal ideas is brought to staff attention, a plan needs to be put in place to explore what is going on and to offer help.

### 7.4 STEPS TO TAKE WHEN CONCERNS ARISE

School staff may hear of suicidal behaviour or become aware of young people who are emotionally distressed and could be at risk in a number of ways:

- Students may learn of a fellow student's intentions to harm him/herself and report this to a teacher
- A note may be found in which a desire for death or for an end to problems or to an 'impossible' situation is expressed. This might also be found on internet sites used by young people
- There may be changes in the young person's behaviour which are uncharacteristic and cause concern
- A student may begin to show an interest in issues of death or suicide, (see Checklist **R16**).
- The young person may share his/her thoughts about suicide with the staff member, directly or indirectly.

## REMEMBER

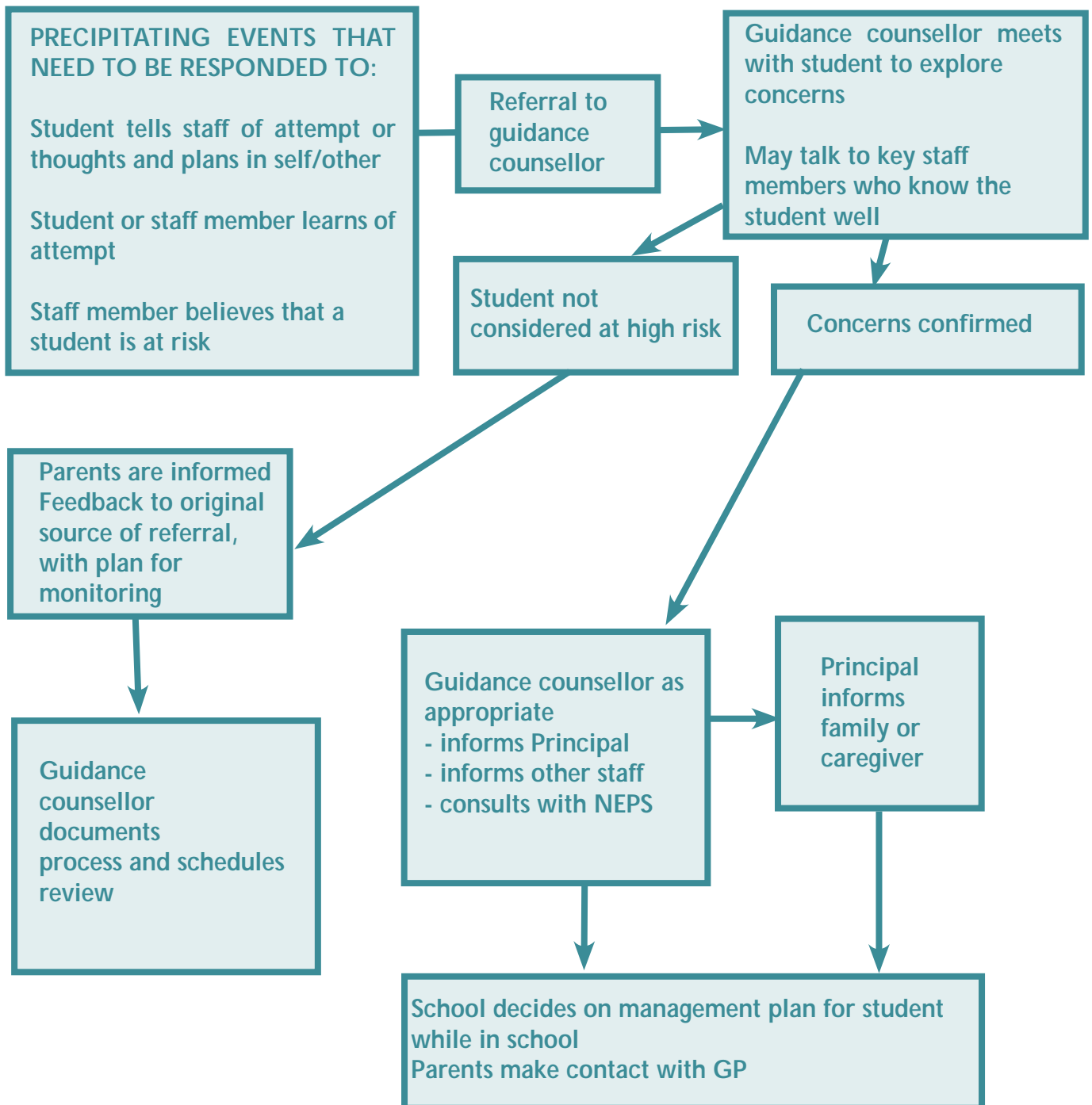
Concerns about suicidal behaviour should never be dismissed on the grounds that the student is merely seeking attention and will not make a suicide attempt.

Schools need to have in place a clear procedure for the care of students about whom such concerns arise.

### Suggested procedure:

- Concern is reported to guidance counsellor or other designated staff member
- A meeting takes place with the reporting staff member or student
- A meeting takes place with the student, (see **R15, R16 & R17**)
- A judgement is made of the seriousness of the situation
- Parents are informed of concerns, feedback is given to the original source of the referral, and a plan is drawn up for monitoring the student. The student should be checked in with after an agreed period in case there was some underlying issue which needs to be addressed
- Where a concern is confirmed, the GC reports to the Principal, and may seek a consultation with NEPS or with local Mental Health services
- The Principal informs parents or caregivers right away
- The Principal and guidance counsellor may seek a consultation with NEPS or with their local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- A management plan appropriate to the level of risk is put in place, including onward referral to the family GP.

## 7.4.1 FLOW CHART



## 7.5 ISSUES THAT MAY ARISE WHEN A STUDENT DIES BY SUICIDE/SUSPECTED SUICIDE

### Family

- Sympathise with them and acknowledge their grief and loss
- Organise a home visit by two staff members (checking first that the family would welcome such a visit)
- Consult with the family regarding the appropriate support from the school e.g. at the funeral service

### Students

- Give the facts as agreed with the bereaved family
- Inform close friends and relatives separately
- Create safe and supportive spaces for the students where they can share their reactions and feelings
- Advise them on their possible reactions over the next few days, (see **R11**)
- Avoid glorifying the victim and sensationalising the suicide. Carry out the same rituals or memorial services as you would for other student deaths such as those due to road traffic accidents
- Advise the students of the support that is available to them. Tell them that talking is positive and helpful
- Take any talk of suicide seriously. Follow school protocols for dealing with this. Provide support, inform parents immediately and discuss onward referral options
- Students may wish to seek support from each other rather than adults. Facilitate this if appropriate and if it is possible. However, information should be provided about how to get further help if they, or their friends, should need it
- Give handout **R12** - *Grief after Suicide or Suspected Suicide*.

Talking about the death helps people to make sense of what has happened. People can cope with the truth, but **suicide must never be represented as a valid option**. There should be no criticism of the person who has died. Separate the person from the behaviour. It is important to talk about how a person can get to the point where suicide may seem to be the only option but **emphasise that it is not a good option**. Feeling low is usually a temporary thing, whereas suicide is permanent. With suicide, the intention may have been to change life circumstances rather than end life. There is always help available if a person can take the step of reaching out for it. Encourage students to seek help if they need it.

A booklet 'You're not alone', designed to provide guidelines on managing the immediate aftermath of a death by suicide, both from an emotional and a practical point of view has been published by NOSP. A related publication entitled "Help and Advice on Coping with A Death by Suicide" is available on [www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie).

**Note on care of students following a funeral:**

It is important following the funeral of a student who has died by suicide that students and parents are encouraged to come back to the school for support. Schools often provide tea and coffee. This may be a particularly vulnerable time for students, especially if it is on a Friday. Parents may be working or there may be no one at home. Groups of students may congregate and consume alcohol which is not advisable. Encouraging them to come back to the school until the usual finishing time can help to prevent this.

Parents might also be advised to be particularly alert to their children's whereabouts over the following days. They might encourage their children to gather in each other's homes, rather than in the pub or street. The safety of all children is very important at this time.

## Section 8

### Road traffics accidents and violent deaths: Some issues

It is not possible to address every type of incident that will happen but experience has given some indications of issues that might arise in the case of road traffic accidents and violent deaths. The general advice contained in these guidelines will be applicable but some particular issues arise in these two instances which are addressed in this section.

#### 8.1 ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

##### Co-ordination with other agencies

In the case of a major accident, meetings may be held involving key personnel from schools and other agencies. These meetings may take place away from the school. If the Principal attends such a meeting, he/she should ensure that a staff member with appropriate experience and authority remains in the school. He/she should assign someone the task of making critical decisions and co-ordinating the response. It may be appropriate that the Principal delegates someone to go to such off-site meetings rather than themselves.

##### Communication

When a number of students is involved, or students from different schools are involved, additional communications systems need to be put in place in order to co-ordinate actions. Co-ordination of funeral arrangements, attendance at funerals, and arrangements for transport of students or representatives to funerals need to be made.

##### Managing information

If students are badly injured or on critical lists, this contributes to an ongoing sense of crisis. In such circumstances, the management of information becomes especially important. News about the condition and progress of people who are ill will need to be checked for accuracy so that unwarranted distress is not engendered. In particular, **news of a further death must be fully checked with the most reliable source available before any announcements are made.** If someone is on life-support, news that it is going to be switched off at a certain time should not be given. Such information can be incorrect.

It is very important that the family be given time to inform their own relatives of new information. Family members should not hear news through a network of rumour or gossip. It may not always be possible to control the spread of news, but inaccurate or untimely information should not be given out by the school or by NEPS.

##### Paying respects

Victims may be badly injured and students may be afraid to go to the house to pay their respects. They may hear that the person looks terrible. This is often not the case as, where injuries do result in serious disfigurement, the remains are laid out in such a way as to minimize distress. It may be useful to have a representative from the school visit the home. They will be able to feed back accurate information to colleagues and students and advise accordingly. Pupils who pay their respects have often reported back that the deceased looked peaceful or that the rumours were incorrect. This may be a comfort to others, may help to allay anxieties and may enable some students to go themselves if they feel the need to do this.

Some students may need support before, during or after viewing the remains. This may be their first experience of death and the presence of a supportive adult may be very important.

### **Funeral arrangements**

If such a large scale incident happens during State Exams, church services might be arranged to facilitate those doing the exams, e.g. by having services in the evening, if the family is in agreement with this.

## **8.2 VIOLENT DEATH**

The sudden death of a student or teacher is a tragic event and when the person has died as a result of violence it is even more traumatic. A violent death brings up concerns about personal safety. The perpetrator may be a member of the same community or come from the same family as the victim. If the death occurred as a result of family violence, children may worry that the same thing could happen in their own family. Parents may wonder what to say in response to these worries.

### **Some issues that may arise:**

- The idea that “it could never happen to us” or “it could never happen here” is shattered. Staff, parents and students may be afraid that it could happen again or that it could happen to them. It is important to reassure them that these events do not happen often
- Be sensitive to the fact that the alleged perpetrator may have relatives and friends within the school community. It may be necessary to take steps to diffuse tensions between students
- Some pupils may worry that they could have prevented what happened. It is important to stress that no one has control over another person’s actions
- It is important to give the facts in a way that is appropriate to the age of the child. Do not give graphic details and discourage the circulation of speculation about such details
- Advice should be offered to staff, parents and students about dealing with the media. It is better to leave this to a designated person, who has prepared for this element of the work
- There will be an ongoing Garda investigation, a trial, an inquest etc. This can prolong the trauma
- A member of the critical incident team should be identified as the Garda Liaison person
- It is the responsibility of parents to decide whether their children may be interviewed by Gardaí. Garda interviews of students should not generally take place on the school premises
- Although this is an intense event it is important to remind the school that any memorial should be the same as for other students who have died. The school should not get caught up in glamorising the event or the deceased person.

## **8.3 WITNESSING AN EVENT**

There may be some students/staff who were involved in an incident but were uninjured, or who witnessed an accident or a violent incident. Reactions to this may be immediate or



happen sometime after the event. Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts of the event, heightened body arousal causing the person to be jumpy and anxious, and a range of feelings from numbness to hysteria may occur. All of these are normal reactions to trauma. It may help them to talk through the events:

- What they saw
- What they heard
- How they felt
- What they thought
- What they did

Difficulties arise if these reactions are extreme or persist over a period of time. Onward referral should be made where needed. (See note on onward referral in Section 6).

## 8.4 BREAKING THE NEWS

The same principles that govern the breaking of news generally should apply here, (see **R7**). However, where the death has been violent, there are some additional factors that need to be remembered. The death may be a murder or manslaughter but this will not be determined until after the court case so **staff should be careful about the use of language**. It is important to give students accurate information about what has happened in an age appropriate manner. If we don't give students accurate information, rumours will start and the details of these are often more extreme than the reality. Accurate information does not require that graphic details are included. Such information may play on the fears of children and young people and is not helpful. Tell students that investigation of what exactly happened is the responsibility of the Gardaí and that the facts will emerge in due course.

### Sample script for the Principal

*Some students from our school have been involved in a road traffic accident. Some deaths have occurred and some are injured. Those who have died are\_\_\_\_\_. The injured are\_\_\_\_\_. The injured are being treated in \_\_\_\_\_. There are \_\_\_\_\_who are very seriously injured, and others are ok, but are being checked out by medical staff. We are getting information on an ongoing basis and will let you know if there is anything important you need to know. Please be careful to stick to the facts and not to engage in rumour about injuries or further deaths. This could be very distressing for others, especially if not accurate.*

or

*Sean was killed on Saturday night. It seems that he was walking home with two of his friends around midnight and was attacked. Someone living on the street called the Gardaí. Sean was brought to hospital, where he died at 3 a.m. The Gardaí are investigating the details of what happened. The full facts will not be known for some time and there is no point in putting stories about which may not be true and which can be hurtful and upsetting, or may even give rise to further problems. We will let you know of any facts that we have as the situation becomes clear.*

## 8.5 PARENT MEETINGS

It is sad to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to let them know that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it. Parents may seek assistance in knowing what to say to their children at this time. It is sometimes useful to hold a parent information meeting. This will allow parents to get information about how they can help their children through this difficult time. Meetings may be held during the day or in the evening or both. It may be useful to ask other agencies to be involved so that parents are informed about available services, how they work, and how to access support for their children.

### Large group meetings for parents: What to say

#### The Principal

- Outlines the plan for the meeting and introduces the speaker/s
- Gives an outline of the facts as known
- Outlines what the school has done to date and the plan for the next few days, weeks etc.
- Outlines the in-school support systems available to students and how parents can request help e.g. from the guidance counsellor, chaplain, other support staff available
- Offers advice to parents about dealing with the media, if appropriate. In general, the advice should be not to allow their children to be interviewed. Children do not have experience of dealing with the media and may regret what they say later
- Says that tea and coffee will be available at the end of the meeting, and that speakers and some school staff will be available to answer any questions

## 8.6 DROP-IN CENTRES

If there is a sense that parents and young people in the wider community are especially distressed or in need of more support than can be offered in the large group meeting, external agencies may decide to set up a drop-in centre on one or two evenings. This allows members of the community who may be traumatised by an event to access services in a user-friendly way. It also gives working parents a chance to get advice and support. Pupils may come from a dispersed area and an 'out-centre' in a town or village may make services easier to access.

Both statutory and voluntary agencies might be involved, e.g. adult services, childrens' services, adolescent counselling services and voluntary bereavement/support services, as well as school based services like NEPS. The involvement of a number of support services facilitates follow-up by the most appropriate agency. Support offered in this way can provide reassurance and information about normal reactions to trauma. If there are serious concerns or if parents or students are in need of additional help, they can be offered appropriate advice. Early appointments may be facilitated as a result of prior arrangements between the agencies.

If agreed, an announcement about the availability of such a drop-in service might be made at church services locally, as well as through the normal school channels.

# Section 9

## Dealing with the media

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Some events draw a great deal of media attention. Media interest can add to the complexity of the situation and it is therefore very important to agree a procedure for dealing with the media at an early stage in the intervention.

### 9.1 GUIDELINES FOR THE SCHOOL

The Principal should either elect to be the media spokesperson or delegate the task to another staff member. If the school has a CIMP this person will have previously been identified.

The primary concern at this time is to look after the school community and to protect the privacy of the people most affected. Provision of interviews or material for the media should not distract the school from these tasks. It is important to remember that the media can assist in dispelling rumour, providing information and giving the message to parents and children that the school is coping well with events. On the other hand, it can also add to the pain by sensationalising the story.

A press statement should be prepared. It should be brief and carefully considered. It is especially important that information reported be accurate. Sweeping statements or generalizations should be avoided. The privacy of the persons/family concerned should be respected. It can be read out, or given out to the media by fax, email or telephone.

Interviews may also be requested, especially if it is a high profile incident. If school personnel do not wish to be interviewed they should make this decision and request the media to respect this choice.

Schools may reduce pressure from the press by agreeing to give interviews and by doing so at designated times and in a specific “press” room. This will help to avoid having to deal with a constant stream of requests, a distraction from the school’s role of supporting students.

Some schools may have access to a manager, trustee or Board of Management member with experience or training in this field and should use this resource if available. Advice may also be available from such bodies as the teacher unions, management bodies, the State Examination Commission (if the incident is during exam time) and, in the case of major incidents, the Press Office of the Department of Education and Science.

Preparation is very important as this is not part of the normal work of principals. Statements should be written out but, ideally, not read to the camera. Some questions might be agreed in advance so that responses can be prepared and, if there is time, even rehearsed. At a time of distress, it may be difficult to find the right words so it is generally better to err on the side of brevity and caution.

Parents should be advised not to allow their children to be interviewed as they do not have the maturity or judgement needed to handle it. It can sometimes lead to regret at a later stage or may increase distress for various parties.

## Checklist

- Delegate a media spokesperson (as outlined in the CIMP)
- The Principal should advise students, parents and staff that only the nominated spokesperson will deal with the media
- Allow limited and controlled access to the media by providing a press room and by making statements only at specified times
- Prepare a media statement, (see **R6**)
- **Interviews should be short, factual and to the point**

## REMEMBER

The publication 'Media Guidelines for the Portrayal of Suicide' (Irish Association of Suicidology & the Samaritans, 2006) offers a specific guide to reporting suicide in the media. The guidelines suggest that the media can help prevent copy-cat suicides by

- not mentioning specific details of the suicide e.g. location and method used;
- not using colourful phrases to romanticise it;
- not citing causes of suicide and thereby indirectly suggesting suicide as an option.

**These guidelines should be adhered to by the school in any communication with the media.**

## 9.2 DO'S AND DON'TS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do write a press statement (<b>R6</b>)</li><li>• Do consider contacting the INTO, TUI, ASTI or other relevant body for advice and guidance</li><li>• Do use careful and sensitive language.</li><li>• Do keep it short</li><li>• Do regard everything as recorded and quotable (generally the media will)</li><li>• Do ask whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview</li><li>• Do ask in advance for an outline of the questions that you will be asked</li><li>• Do avoid sweeping statements and generalisations</li><li>• Do avoid being drawn into speculation</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't go into personal details of those involved</li><li>• Don't read the statement to the camera</li><li>• Don't engage in rambling discussions afterwards</li><li>• Don't use "No Comment"</li><li>• Don't respond to "quotes" from others</li><li>• Don't answer questions you don't know the answer to</li><li>• Don't make 'off-the-record' comments</li></ul>   |

### 9.3 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA - PRINCIPALS

***Q. I (the Principal) am being asked for an interview. How do I respond?***

**A.** If you do not feel comfortable being interviewed it is acceptable to refuse. If you are willing to be interviewed, you should rehearse what to say. Writing a media statement may be helpful. The language used should be careful and sensitive. It should state the facts about what has happened, and refer to the upset/distress/sorrow in the school. It should express the school's sympathy to the bereaved family. An outline of the supports that have been put in place for the students, staff and parents should be given. Ideally, this statement should not be read to camera.

***Q. What about the actual interview?***

**A.** Interviews should be kept short; avoid making sweeping statements and generalisations; avoid being drawn into rambling discussions afterwards or into speculation; don't use "no comment" as it can sound unhelpful and defensive. Don't respond to "quotes" from others. If asked a question you don't know the answer to, it is important that you say so. Make no 'off-the-record' comments and remember that everything is quotable. An unguarded remark may be broadcast many times and may cause distress. Ask the media for an outline of the questions that you will be asked and whether there will be the possibility of editing the interview. Media personnel can be very helpful about this if the underlying concern is clear.

***Q. How do I respond if the media are seeking to interview students?***

**A.** It is important that only **one person** from the school is nominated as the media spokesperson. In general the Principal takes this role. The Principal should advise school staff and students either in assembly or over the intercom system that there is one media spokesperson and only that person will liaise with the media. It will therefore not be necessary for any students or staff to give interviews. The Principal should mention in this announcement that students are not used to dealing with the press, radio or television and if interviewed may say something that they don't really intend to. This may cause unintentional hurt and they may regret something they said later.

***Q. How do I respond if the press ask me or students for pictures of the deceased/injured?***

**A.** The press may ask for pictures of the injured or deceased for publication. The provision of pictures is the sole decision of the bereaved/affected family. It is important to advise staff and students to respect this.

***Q. TV stations, radio programmes and newspapers are calling the school requesting interviews. How do I advise the school to handle this?***

**A.** Draft a media statement, (see **R6**). Advise the secretary that when calls are received from the media, their email address or fax number should be taken and a copy of the media statement should be sent to them. Advise them of the venue and timing of any media briefing if this has been arranged.

# Section 10

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## Critical incidents during certificate examinations

The examination period is a time when the staffing arrangements and the organisational arrangements in schools are different from those in place during the rest of the year. If a critical incident happens at this time, complexity is increased because of the extra pressures that exist and the need to enable as many students as possible to proceed with their exams.

### 10.1 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS DURING EXAM TIME

**Q. Who needs to know about the incident?**

**A.** If the public examinations are in progress contact the State Examinations Commission (0906- 442700) as soon as possible, so that they can alert the Examination and Assessment Manager (EAM) for the school. Alternatively you can contact the EAM in your area directly. Contact the NEPS psychologist who will, if necessary, visit the school.

**Q. What steps do I take if an incident occurs?**

**A.** You should identify those individuals who may need support or advice. You may want to discuss this with the guidance counsellor or other key staff who are available. These may include

- Relatives of the deceased
- Friends of the deceased
- Siblings
- Teaching and other staff

The main sources of help in the community should be identified and contacted as necessary.

**Q. What is the psychologist's role?**

**A.** The role remains that of supporting the school staff. However, because many staff will not be around and because of the importance of the Leaving Certificate to students, the psychologist may have more face to face involvement with students than in other situations. If at all possible, students should be encouraged to complete their exams. If a student needs to leave the exam hall due to distress, the psychologist may be able to help them settle down so that they can return to the exam. It is vital that they are accompanied at all times in order to preserve the integrity of the examination.

**Q. Will account be taken of the situation in marking the papers?**

**A.** The general principle is that marks can only be given for what is presented on the paper so the impression should never be given that adjustments are made. This is necessary to preserve the integrity of the exams. NEPS' role is in relation to supporting the staff and students and matters pertaining to marking etc. are a matter for the State Exams Commission (SEC). In critical incidents during the exams the EAM assigned to the county for the period of the exams usually visits the school. Queries regarding the exams should be referred to the EAM.

**Q. Can a re-sit be organised if students don't complete the exam?**

A. No

**Q. Can extra time be given to the students?**

A. If the EAM agrees to it, a student who comes out during the exam and goes back in can be allowed the time lost to be made up at the end of the exam. The school authorities must vouch that the candidate was accompanied by an appropriate person and accounted for at all times while absent from the exam. The student can be encouraged to refocus and techniques may be given to help to reduce their anxiety and distress. **No help may be given about the content of the paper. The integrity of the exam must never be breached.**

**Q. Can the supervisor/invigator help the student to settle down in the exam?**

A. The supervisor can go down quietly to a student who appears to be agitated or who is not writing – perhaps in a daze, and can help them to focus. They might, for example, suggest starting with Section A or B or encourage them to read the questions and decide which one to start with. If the student isn't responding, the supervisor might suggest that the student be given a separate centre. If someone is crying, it is important to encourage them out of the exam centre as this may disturb or upset other students. It may be necessary to arrange for a separate centre to be set up in such circumstances.

**Q. Can I authorise extra time and/or the setting up of a separate centre?**

A. No. It is within the EAM's remit to provide certain facilities for students who are distressed.

**Q. What should I do in relation to the media?**

A. You can contact the State Examination Commission in Athlone for advice.