

Recommended Guidelines on Commemoration of Students at the Time of Graduation

These guidelines outline considerations and recommendations related to the reading of names or leaving an empty chair at graduation ceremonies, awarding posthumous diplomas, and posting of photographs or tributes in school yearbooks of members of the school community who have died.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Graduation from a school is an occasion for students and their families as well as the school community to celebrate the achievements of the graduating class and the accomplishments of individual students as they embark on the next stage of their academic or vocational development.
- Milestones such as school graduations are often times when memories of those who died can be triggered.
- Commemorating those students and members of the school community who died may help members of the student cohort continue to process their loss and family members of those that died feel assured that their loved ones are not forgotten, but such commemoration should not become a significant focus of the graduation ceremony.
- The needs of those students and members of the school community who are either not emotionally ready to process their loss or choose not to have feelings of grief overshadow their time of personal celebration should be respected.

SUGGESTED POLICIES

Reading of Names During Graduation Ceremonies

Reading the names of students in the graduating class and other members of the school community who died during the period of time the student cohort was in the school may help many of those participating in the graduation ceremony honor the memory of those with whom they formed close attachments.

An inclusive list of those who died who will be acknowledged at the graduation ceremony can best be generated as a collaboration between school staff and the student class and should include students and school staff who died during the time the class was together regardless of the reason for the death (e.g., accident, suicide, medical illness). While the graduation ceremony is not a time to provide a tribute to those who died, since this will shift the focus away from the celebration of graduating students, it can be a time to briefly acknowledge those members of the school community who are unable to be present due to death. Their names can be read before or after the graduates are presented with their diplomas, perhaps followed by a moment of silent reflection. Families of those who died, as well as students and the school staff, should be informed beforehand. If family members of a student or staff member who died wish to attend the graduation ceremony, they should be welcomed personally by a representative of the school leadership to participate as an observer.

Leaving an Empty Chair

The use of an empty chair at the graduation ceremony is not recommended. While it has been promoted by some as a means of remembering students who died, it focuses solely on the absence without conveying anything about what the student had contributed when alive. The placement of an empty chair to represent a student who died by suicide may be viewed by some students as a special honor that elevates the student's death because of the means. This may suggest to some vulnerable students that suicide is a way to achieve greater recognition, which may contribute to a potential contagion effect. The use of an empty chair for a student who died because of a violent death may cause students to focus on the way the person died rather than how the person lived. As such, it can be an unwanted distraction for students during an event intended to be a celebration of the accomplishments of graduating students.

Awarding Posthumous Diplomas

Students who completed sufficient credit to graduate prior to their death may qualify for a posthumous diploma that may be presented, if desired by the family, to a designee (e.g., family member or other school representative such as a coach or teacher) at the ceremony. Students and staff should be aware ahead of time of the plans to do so. The granting of the posthumous diploma should be in a manner consistent with the granting of other diplomas so as not to overshadow the accomplishments of other students (such as by a footnote in the program stating that the diploma is awarded posthumously).

Posting of a Photograph or Tribute in the School Yearbook

The school yearbook is a lasting record in which the experiences of the graduating class are memorialized. As with the reading of the names at a graduation ceremony, a page in the yearbook, rather than a special tribute section, can be used to record the names of all students and other members of the school community who died during the time the student cohort was in the school or school system. Honoring one particular student or member of the school staff in the yearbook can be problematic as the families and friends of other individuals who died, who were less popular or who died from less dramatic causes, may resent that their family member or friend did not receive the same recognition.

Photographs of deceased students or school staff members can be included in the school yearbook if the pictures are part of routine portrait photos or record events that the members of the graduating class experienced during their time in the school. It is not appropriate to remove candid photographs that include a student or staff member who died that otherwise would have appeared in the yearbook (e.g., a sporting event or school play, or a candid picture of a group of students). Personal photographs, such as those taken at family events or with friends outside of the school setting, are not part of the collective experience of the class and generally are better suited to tributes outside of the school.

Students may wish to come together so they can personalize copies of the yearbook with tributes and comments to offer to the families of those that died. These tributes and comments should be reviewed by a school staff member to ensure the messages are appropriate before the family is contacted about receiving the personalized yearbook.