

After a Student has Died

Communicating with the Family

As soon as possible after the school is notified that a student has died, several important steps can be taken to offer support to the family and facilitate communication.

- » **Speak to the family to express condolences from the school community.** A phone call from the school principal is often a helpful first step. While it is important not to overwhelm the family, they may also appreciate a call from a favorite teacher or a school counselor. School teams can coordinate these contacts so they remain sensitive to the family's needs and circumstances.

The additional steps below may be a part of this first call, but this will depend on the family's readiness and state of mind. If the student had been ill for some time and the death was anticipated, for example, family members may appreciate the opportunity to talk about some of these other matters. If the death was sudden and unexpected, accepting condolences may be as much as they can manage in the immediate aftermath of the death.

- » **Inquire about any special requests the family may have.** How does the family feel about participation of students and staff in the funeral, viewing or other commemorative activities? Would they like to receive cards or other condolences? What information would they like shared (or not shared) about the circumstances of the death?

It is generally best to respect the family's wishes in these regards. Sometimes, however, a family wishes information withheld that students may feel the need to be able to discuss (for example, a death by suicide, or involving illegal activities or community violence). See [Guidelines for Schools Responding to a Death by Suicide](#) for some examples of ways to honor the family's wishes while providing students opportunities to discuss and understand what they might have heard about a death.

- » **Make sure the student's name is removed immediately from routine or automated contact lists.** The family should not be receiving text messages or email notices about upcoming parent-teacher meetings, student workshops about preparing for career and college, or other similar school events.
- » **Ask about any school-aged siblings of the deceased student.** Parents generally appreciate guidance on how to best support other children in the family. The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) has materials that can guide school professionals in this process.
- » **Ask what kind of contact families would like from the school in the future.** Families of deceased students generally wish to remain part of the school community in some way. Often, much of their social life has been built around the families of other children in the school and participation in school events. They may feel isolated and experience an additional loss when they are no longer part of that community. Some families are interested in concerts, athletic events, or school-sponsored activities where their child may be acknowledged.

Some families do not know at first what they might like. The school can offer to stay in touch and ask at a later time.

Families may ask for information or events involving students from their deceased child's class. They may wish to attend the graduation ceremony their child would have attended. They may ask to have their child acknowledged during the event. The requests of grieving families should be considered but school leadership should remember that the primary goal of graduation is to celebrate the success of students who are graduating. See [Recommended Guidelines on Commemoration of Students at Time of Graduation](#) for suggestions on how to best balance the wishes of a grieving family and the best interests of the students.