Virtual Memorials During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Updated June 29, 2020

These guidelines are designed to help school administrators and other educators respond to the needs of students and staff should a member of the school community die (from any cause) during the COVID-19 pandemic. At this unique time, many school facilities are closed, and physical distancing is affecting how communities engage. Hosting virtual memorials online is an option for schools in these circumstances. The suggestions in this document will assist schools in setting up appropriate standards and practices to maximize support and minimize potential complications from virtual memorials.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way individuals, families and communities express grief and share support after a death. Rituals and practices associated with mourning have shifted dramatically. This includes the ability of students and staff to gather in person for support after the death of a member of the school community and to commemorate and memorialize the individual. One route available to schools/districts is the use of virtual memorials. These internet-based options can help bring members of the school community closer together for support. They also provide a venue for the expression of feelings which might not otherwise be possible due to limitations on communal activities during the pandemic.

School districts should ensure policies are in place so virtual memorials are offered in a consistent and equitable manner. If school districts initiate practices related to the use of virtual memorials during the current pandemic, students, staff, and families may wish to continue the practice even after the pandemic is no longer a concern. Establish clear guidelines about when virtual memorials may be considered and the mechanisms that will be used to support them financially. For example, some schools may want to continue to offer virtual memorials as an alternative or supplemental activity, even when there are no longer limitations on in-person funeral attendance and memorial activities. Others may decide only to take on this extra cost, effort, and responsibility during times when in-person rituals are not available.

HOW LONG SHOULD THE VIRTUAL MEMORIAL BE MAINTAINED BY THE SCHOOL DISTRICT?

As with in-person memorial and commemorative processes following the death of a member of the school community, the length of time the virtual memorial will be maintained by the school district should be clearly specified before the process is initiated.

Often it is helpful for the virtual memorial be to be maintained until after the one-year mark of the death. This allows time for reflection about the lasting contributions of the deceased, which can be inspirational for other members of the school community. After this point, the district may choose to remove the content, or place a notice at the top of the page indicating the site is no longer maintained and submissions are no longer accepted. Arrangements can be made to have the content downloaded for family members of the deceased before the material is archived. Districts should also store a copy of the content in their own archives.

There are additional considerations in maintaining consistency and equity in the offering of virtual memorials. For example, virtual memorials should not be offered for one individual if financial resources will not be available to continue this process should there be a subsequent death in the school community. Virtual memorials should not be offered only for the deaths of popular students or staff, or for families that have the resources to personally support the site financially.

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WHO IS THE INTENDED AUDIENCE?

These types of memorials are intended for the use and viewing of members of the school community only. Schools can consider whether or not they wish to have the site password-protected. Even with passwords in place, individuals outside the school system may gain access if someone discloses the password to them. For this reason, a notice can be included for viewers who are not part of the school community asking them to respect the privacy of members of the school community who are using the site as part of their personal grieving process, and directing them not to submit content or re-use any of the content for any purpose. Visitors to the site from within the school community should also be instructed not to share content posted by others in any fashion (though they are permitted to re-post their own content elsewhere).

WHO CAN SUBMIT CONTENT TO THE VIRTUAL MEMORIAL?

The site is intended to support the school community. Encourage posting of material from family and friends of the deceased within the school community. The virtual memorial should not be viewed as a public site for friends or acquaintances of the deceased who are not part of that group. Therefore, content from these individuals, even if generally appropriate, may be restricted to maintain the intended focus of the memorial. All content should be reviewed and vetted by the school team overseeing the site to ensure that it comes from members of the school community and is appropriate for students and staff to view.

WHAT TYPE OF CONTENT WILL BE ENCOURAGED?

Members of the school community typically select a variety of ways to express their feelings for the individual who has died. These might include photos, videos, narratives, stories, or artistic expressions.

Provide guidelines about what content is appropriate for the virtual memorial. Encourage contributors to submit content that shares memories of direct, personal interactions with the deceased. Suggest contributors offer expressions that explain their experiences with and connection to the deceased, rather than focusing only on their pain about the absence of the deceased in their lives. Behaviors and actions of the deceased which were not witnessed or experienced directly (and which may be inaccurate or even fabricated) should not be included. This sort of content can fuel rumors and false information.

Some individuals will choose to post photographs or videos. Any materials submitted should include a statement by the contributors affirming they have obtained permission to post from those in the pictures/videos. In addition, school districts may wish to ask family members of the deceased if they wish to review and approve pictures or videos before they are posted publicly.

Others will post stories or narratives. These should also be reviewed for content. They may include content that is upsetting or even potentially damaging to site visitors. Individuals may express blame, anger, violent or self-destructive urges, or other strong negative feelings.

Some contributors may choose artistic or expressive ways of sharing their connection and feelings about the deceased. This may include poems, drawings, or other artistic creations. As with other materials submitted, these need to be reviewed for appropriateness of tone and content.

As time passes, individuals may wish to share tributes or legacy statements about the deceased, including descriptions of the person's achievements and lasting contributions. These tributes are sometimes seen in the immediate aftermath of the loss but are more common as time progresses and the loss has been further processed. For this reason, maintaining the website to allow time for these tributes to be posted will be helpful.

Prompts can be included on the site asking for perspectives that support a quality of forward movement as individuals and the school community continue to process grief about this death. For example:

» How did the life of the deceased inspire you? How might it inspire the school community for the future?

» What can we learn from the life of the person who died?

» What personal steps are you taking to honor the life of the person who died?

» What can the school community do as a tribute to the person who died?

The school district can play a valuable role in helping shape the meaning-making process of bereavement by encouraging symbolic remembrances rather than physical structures such as memorial trees or plaques.

WHAT ELSE CAN THE VIRTUAL MEMORIAL BE USED FOR?

The website can also be used to provide an opportunity for viewers to witness virtual memorial events, including speeches and presentations from invited guests. These events can be recorded and maintained on the site for future viewing. Consider posting information about available school, district, and community mental health resources for bereavement support and relevant mental health issues such as substance use and suicide prevention (as appropriate to the situation).

HOW SHOULD CONTENT SUBMITTED FOR INCLUSION BE EVALUATED?

Provide clear communication that all proposed content must be approved before being posted. The review process ensures that viewers of the site will not be distracted by comments that may be upsetting, inflammatory, or more self-serving for the individual who submitted the posting than of value to the general school community. Offer examples of helpful content. Have all those who post agree that by submitting content, they are giving the school district unrestricted rights to use the material on this site, for purposes of memorialization and commemoration only.

The responsibility for screening content should not fall to one individual. A committee to determine the appropriateness of content should be established and generally include at least one school mental health staff member, a school administrator, an educator and a student from the school with personal knowledge of the deceased (as appropriate). The committee should seek input from family members of the deceased about the plans for any virtual memorial and whenever they have concerns or questions about whether material being considered for posting may be viewed by the family as sensitive in nature.

Any submitted content that appears to pose threats of harm to self or others should be forwarded to school mental health staff and/or law-enforcement for immediate review. No anonymous submissions should be accepted and there should be no advertisement or solicitation of funds posted on the site.

For middle and high school students, a passive consent approach to content submission will often be most effective. With this approach, an email could be sent out to families notifying them of the virtual memorial, letting them know the school/district will be inviting submissions from students, and asking parents/guardians to send an email if they do NOT wish to have their children submit content without their explicit permission; otherwise, parent/guardian permission to include student content will be assumed and the content will be posted if found to be appropriate by the school/district team overseeing the site. The email would also ask parents/guardians to discuss the site with their children and review its purpose. Suggest parents/guardians ask to look over their children's comments and pictures before they are submitted.

If a virtual memorial is being planned at the elementary school level, it may be appropriate to require active consent for posting— this may be accomplished by either requiring parents/guardians to return a consent form saying they do give permission for their child to participate and/or having parents/guardians submit any material considered for posting. At elementary ages, it is a good idea to engage parents/guardians directly in the effort, asking them, for example, to help their children prepare the content and/or review and approve (or submit directly) children's content.

Set a mechanism in place for consideration of exceptions to these guidelines. For example, a school may choose to establish a virtual memorial after the death of a former principal who was well known to the current staff and students, or a well-known athlete, politician, or celebrity. Careful consideration should be made, however, about how these exceptions are evaluated. Otherwise some members of the community might be offended when, at a later time, someone they wish to commemorate is not allowed to be memorialized in this fashion.