

## Don't Do It Alone: A School System Rises to the Challenge of Three Student Suicides

*While any community or organization experiences a profound impact when there is a suicide in its midst, the death of a young person who is a student brings a special set of challenges to school staff. Riverside Community Care helps schools develop a postvention response that draws on community resources to meet both immediate and long-term needs.*



*We asked **Larry Berkowitz**, EdD, director of Riverside Trauma Center, to share an example of a planning process that had led to positive outcomes, and he told us about a large suburban school system whose postvention plan helped them respond with care and consistency to the deaths of three students in one school year.*

### **How did the school system get started on postvention planning?**

This system was planning responses to a range of situations, from snowstorms to medical emergencies. Independently, they were also working on developing policies related to students who might be suicidal, and on training school clinical staff, so these issues were already being discussed.

### **When the student deaths occurred, how did the school system's plan help?**

Administrators really communicated well. They reached out immediately and sensitively to the families of the kids who had died, with the school principal and a clinical staff member from the school or from Riverside going to offer condolences and learn how the parents wanted the school to share the news of their child's death. And as the crisis unfolded with the second and third student deaths, the school system did not shy away from holding more public meetings, even when this meant facing the anxiety, fear, and anger of parents. They let people give voice to their feelings.

### **Have you seen longer-term benefits from this school system's postvention response?**

Overall, the process brought people together, helped them to become tighter as a community and to learn what their resources were. For the school system itself, one of the biggest advantages of planning in advance was establishing consistency in its approach to student deaths, regardless of cause. This is important for being able to maintain policies that are safer from a suicide prevention perspective — such as not establishing permanent memorials or holding memorial services for a student on campus — without hurting the feelings of families.

### **Any advice for schools seeking to plan for postvention?**

Suicide response should be just one component of your school's broad crisis plan. Many protocols for dealing with other unexpected deaths will help you cope with a suicide as well. Make sure you review and revise the plan regularly — one school I know of does this by taking five or ten minutes at the beginning of regular staff meetings to review one section or aspect of the plan before they moved on to the meeting's main topic.

And don't do it alone! In the event of a suicide in your school, you will be dealing with a situation your staff has seldom or never experienced, and you will all be feeling the impact of the loss. These are good reasons to count on mental health providers and resources in your community. Try to meet and engage regularly with the community resources so that you are not meeting them for the first time during a crisis.

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**Suicide Prevention Resource Center**

**Web: <http://www.sprc.org> | E-mail: [info@sprc.org](mailto:info@sprc.org) | Phone: 877-GET-SPRC (438-7772)**