

# Outline for Letter to Parents

When your school suffers a loss, students are apt to talk about it when they get home. It is very helpful for parents to know basic information at times like these. Here are some items to cover in letters sent home:

- Begin with a statement of regret. "We had sad news at our school today."
- Tell basic facts about the tragedy. "We learned of the death of one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_, who was in \_\_\_\_\_'s \_\_\_\_\_ grade class. He/she died \_\_\_\_\_ (tell cause of death) \_\_\_\_\_ (when)."
- Give information about what the school did to help students process. "We had the help of additional counselors from our feeder schools, who helped teachers announce the sad news with the students. They also staffed a room for students to go if they needed a little extra time for talking or processing."
- If details of the family funeral or an in-school memory event are known, give information about that. "The family funeral is at \_\_\_\_\_ o'clock on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Students who wish to attend will need to bring a note of permission from a parent." Address transportation—will the school provide or do parents need to make those arrangements for their own children?
- Consider whether your students are young enough that adult supervision and support is advisable (which would always be through middle school). If so, make the suggestion to parents that students need an adult for every three or four students attending the funeral. This does not apply to the school memorial event.
- Let parents know who the school contact person is if they have questions.
- Include a section or print a flyer on the back of the letter on how to support their children:
  - This event might bring up questions, concerns, or fears for your child.
  - Be sensitive about whether he/she is needing/wanting to talk.
  - Bring it up in case he/she is reluctant to do so.
  - Ask about his/her reactions to this, and **accept those feelings as stated**. Resist the temptation to minimize the pain, deny the feelings, or give advice. **Simply listen!** Helpful responses on your part include:
    - "Tell me more about that."
    - "Have you ever felt that way before?"
    - "I wonder if there are other things that are worrying you?"
    - "What are other students saying or fearing about this?"
  - Be concrete and brief in your answers, especially with younger children. Allow some silence and processing time after a statement.
  - **Do not compare death with sleep or any other state of consciousness.** Sleep is a regenerative process necessary to health. Death is a loss of all life and regenerative processes. Some children may end up sleep deprived because of fear that they'll die, too, if we use this comparison.

- Allow for regressive behaviors. Children might need to sleep close to an adult for a while. Bedwetting, clinging to adults, or other regressive behaviors are not uncommon.
- Be especially emotionally available and non-judgmental.
- Realize that children move in and out of the grief process, but it is very intense for them when they're experiencing the sadness/anxiety/fear. Encourage them to go out and have fun, get noisy, be active, and celebrate life in whatever way they can. Those periods of reprieve are important in sustaining health and in recovery. Allow them to move in and out of grieving at their own pace.
- Remember the importance of humor, laughter, joking.
- Let parents know how they will get updated information, if needed.
- If you are going to have a parent meeting (which is especially helpful in cases of suicide, murder, missing kids, or other traumatic events) put in the time and place of the meeting and who will be presiding/presenting. Often parents attend in greater numbers when you describe this as a time to be educated rather than a meeting for parents who are concerned that their children aren't coping well.
- If there is something that parents are going to join in doing, such as a fundraiser to help the family, or organizing some effort on the family's behalf, give those details.